Scholars of Hellenistic Uruk

Data source: Database of religion history (DRH)
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The cuneiform scholars of the Hellenistic period attached to the temples in the city of Uruk in southern Mesopotamia.

Date Range: 330 BCE - 125 BCE
Region: Uruk
Region tags: Middle East, Mesopotamia

The city of Uruk under the Seleucid dynasty.

Status of Participants:
✓ Elite  ✓ Religious Specialists

Sources

Print sources for understanding this subject:

Online sources for understanding this subject:
— Source 1 URL: http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/cams/gkab/
— Source 1 Description: Geography of Knowledge - Corpus of Ancient Mesopotamian Scholarship

Relevant online primary textual corpora (original languages and/or translations):
— Source 1 URL: http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/cams/gkab/corpus/
— Source 1 Description: Geography of Knowledge - Corpus of Ancient Mesopotamian Scholarship

General Variables

Membership/Group Interactions
Are other religious groups in cultural contact with target religion:

– Yes

Notes: Hellenistic Babylonia is a melting pot of cultures and religions from around the wider Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean.

Is the cultural contact competitive:

– No

Notes: During the Neo-Babylonian period sources like the Book of Daniel might hint at competitive cultural contact, but during this period this is little evidence that the scholars were competing with another religious group.

Is the cultural contact accommodating/pluralistic:

– Yes

Notes: There is no evidence that belief in Greek gods competed with native deities in the minds of the scholars of Uruk.

Is the cultural contact neutral:

– Yes

Is there violent conflict (within sample region):

– No

Notes: During this period the scholars are not involved in any violent clashes with other religious groups.

Is there violent conflict (with groups outside the sample region):

– No

Notes: There is conflict on a polity level, but no violent conflict within the religious group.

Does the religious group have a general process/system for assigning religious affiliation:

– Field doesn’t know

Notes: Usage of dual names and mixed identity make understanding this process difficult in the Hellenistic period. There are certainly official titles within the temple which must preclude membership, but a general affiliation is more difficult to ascertain. The members of this group in Uruk would use the title “sons of Uruk”, but this title is not always present in the textual record (Clancier, 757).

Does the religious group actively proselytize and recruit new members:

– Field doesn’t know

Notes: Not sure what recruitment would look like in this period.
While it is not the belief of the Hellenistic rulers themselves, there seems to be some relation between the Seleucid kings and the temple officials (Clancier, 761). There certainly was patronage of the Mesopotamian scholars by the Seleucid kings.

Are the priests paid by polity:
- No

Is religious infrastructure paid for by the polity:
- Yes
  Notes: Antiochus I restores temples in Babylon and Borsippa

Are the head of the polity and the head of the religion the same figure:
- No

Are political officials equivalent to religious officials:
- No
  Notes: Although in some cases they might be related through familial ties.

Is religious observance enforced by the polity:
- No

Polity legal code is roughly coterminous with religious code:
- No

Polity provides preferential economic treatment (e.g. tax, exemption)
- Yes

Is there a conception of apostasy in the religious group:
- No
  Notes: The closest we have to abandonment of religion is the "Poem of the Righteous Sufferer" where the speaker talks of neglecting the gods.

Size and Structure

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (estimated population, numerical):
- Field doesn't know
  Notes: We can posit a small group of scholars working on tablets, but the size of their extended families is
unknown. Beaulieu (20) cites 14 astronomers working for the temple at one point in time, but we don’t know the number of their dependents and extended family, who presumably had some stake in the religious practice.

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (% of sample region population, numerical):
– Field doesn’t know

Nature of religious group [please select one]:
– Small religious group (one of many small religious groups in sample region)

Are there recognized leaders in the religious group:
– Yes

Is there a hierarchy among these leaders:
– Yes

A single leader of a local community:
– No

Are leaders believed to possess supernatural powers or qualities:
– No

Are religious leaders chosen:
– Yes

Notes: Leaders of the religious group are hired by the temple, often these roles are passed down through families. “… the position was hereditary, yet subject to some examination to evaluate the candidate’s competence…” (Beaulieu, 17)

A leader chooses his/her own replacement:
– Yes

A leader’s retinue or ministers chooses the new leader:
– Yes

Other leaders in the religious group choose that leader:
– Yes

Are leaders considered fallible:
Are close followers or disciples of a religious leader required to obediently and unquestionably accept the leader’s pronouncements on all matters:

– Field doesn’t know

Scripture

Does the religious group have scriptures:

Scripture is a generic term used to designate revered texts that are considered particularly authoritative and sacred relative to other texts. Strictly speaking, it refers to written texts, but there are also “oral scriptures” (e.g. the Vedas of India).

– Yes

Are they written:

– Yes

Are they oral:

– No

Are the scriptures alterable:

– Yes

Notes: Texts like the Epic of Creation were altered in the past, substituting one god for another.

Are there formal institutions (i.e. institutions that are authorized by the religious community or political leaders) for interpreting the scriptures:

– Yes

Can interpretation also take place outside these institutions:

– Yes

Interpretation is only allowed by officially sanctioned figures:

– Yes

Notes: There is a formal language around secrecy and those initiated into the cult having access to knowledge.

Is there a select group of people trained in transmitting the scriptures:

– Yes
Notes: The scribes of this period spent their lifetime learning how to read, interpret, and transmit the religious texts of their belief and profession.

Is there a codified canon of scriptures:
– No

**Architecture, Geography**

Is monumental religious architecture present:
– Yes

Are there different types of religious monumental architecture:
– Yes

**Notes:** There are many religious structures and compounds throughout Mesopotamian cities, these can be as small as wall niches in households to large complexes dominating the center of urban space.

- **Temples:**
  – Yes

- **Altars:**
  – Yes

- **Devotional markers:**
  – Yes

- **Mass gathering point [plazas, courtyard, square. Places permanently demarcated using visible objects or structures]:**
  – Yes

Is iconography present:
– Yes

- **Where is iconography present [select all that apply]:**
  – On persons
  – At home
  – All public spaces

Are there distinct features in the religious group’s iconography:
Are there specific sites dedicated to sacred practice or considered sacred:
   – Yes

   Are sacred site oriented to ecological features:
   – Yes

Are pilgrimages present:
   – Yes

Notes: Gods and priests will process to visit other gods.

Beliefs

Burial and Afterlife

Is a spirit-body distinction present:

Answer “no” only if personhood (or consciousness) is extinguished with death of the physical body. Answering yes does not necessarily imply the existence of Cartesian mind/body dualism, merely that some element of personhood (or consciousness) survives the death of the body.
   – Yes

   Spirit-mind is conceived of as having qualitatively different powers or properties than other body parts:
   – No
Belief in afterlife:
- Yes

Is the spatial location of the afterlife specified or described by the religious group:
- Yes

Afterlife in specified realm of space beyond this world:
- No

Afterlife in vaguely defined “below” space:
- Yes

Reincarnation in this world:
- No

Are there special treatments for adherents’ corpses:
- Yes

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:
- No

Notes: While there are examples from earlier in Mesopotamian history, during this period there is no such practice.

Are grave goods present:
- Yes

Valuable items:
- Yes

Are formal burials present:
- Field doesn't know

Supernatural Beings
Are supernatural beings present:
  – Yes

A supreme high god is present:
  – Yes

The supreme high god is anthropomorphic:
  – Yes

The supreme high god is a sky deity:
  – Yes

The supreme high god has knowledge of this world:
  – Yes

Notes: The gods in many cases can see everything, but care little about human affairs.

The supreme god's knowledge is restricted to particular domain of human affairs:
  – No

The supreme high god's knowledge is restricted to (a) specific area(s) within the sample region:
  – No

The supreme high god's knowledge is unrestricted within the sample region:
  – Yes

The supreme high god's knowledge is unrestricted outside of sample region:
  – Yes

The supreme high god can see you everywhere normally visible (in public):
  – Yes

The supreme high god has deliberate causal efficacy in the world:
  – Yes

The supreme high god can reward:
— Yes

The supreme high god can punish:
— Yes

The supreme high god has indirect causal efficacy in the world:
— Yes

The supreme high god exhibits positive emotion:
— Yes

The supreme high god exhibits negative emotion:
— Yes

The supreme high god possesses hunger:
— Yes

Is it permissible to worship supernatural beings other than the high god:
— Yes

The supreme high god communicates with the living:
— Yes

In dreams:
— Yes

Through divination practices:
— Yes

Only through religious specialists:
— No

Only through monarch
— No

Previously human spirits are present:
Non-human supernatural beings are present:
- Yes

- Human spirits can be seen:
  - Yes

- Human spirits can be physically felt:
  - Yes

- These supernatural beings can be seen:
  - Yes

- These supernatural beings can be physically felt:
  - Yes

- Non-human supernatural beings have knowledge of this world:
  - Yes

- Non-human supernatural beings have deliberate causal efficacy in the world:
  - Yes

- These supernatural beings have indirect causal efficacy in the world:
  - Yes

Does the religious group possess a pantheon of supernatural beings:
- Yes

- Organized by kinship based on a family model:
  - Yes

- Organized hierarchically:
  - Yes

- Power of beings is domain specific:
Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present:
This refers to surveillance by supernatural beings of humans’ behaviour and/or thought particularly as it relates to social norms or potential norm violations.

— Yes

Notes: I wouldn’t say that supernatural beings had a internal list of behaviors they monitor. Rather, they are invoked to care about something through an oath or ritual which then makes it their concern. What I have marked below are the most common items they are used to monitor.

There is supernatural monitoring of prosocial norm adherence in particular:
Prosocial norms are norms that enhance cooperation among members of the group, including obviously “moral” or “ethical” norms, but also extending to norms concerning honouring contracts and oaths, providing hospitality, coming to mutual aid in emergencies, etc.

— Yes

Supernatural beings care about taboos:
— Yes

Food:
— Yes

Sacred space(s):
— Yes

Sacred object(s):
— Yes

Supernatural beings care about murder of coreligionists:
— Field doesn’t know

Supernatural beings care about murder of members of other religions:
— Field doesn’t know

Supernatural beings care about murder of members of other polities:
— Field doesn’t know
Supernatural beings care about honouring oaths:
  – Yes

Supernatural beings care about sorcery:
  – Yes

Supernatural beings care about proper ritual observance:
  – Yes

Supernatural beings care about performance of rituals:
  – Yes

Supernatural beings care about conversion of non-religionists:
  – No

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment:
  – Yes

  Notes: Supernatural beings can punish members in anyway they see fit.

Is the cause or agent of supernatural punishment known:
  – Yes

  Done only by high god:
    – No

  Done by many supernatural beings:
    – Yes

  Done through impersonal cause-effect principle:
    – Yes

    Notes: There are times when you might associate a general negative event in your life potentially with the actions of a supernatural being.

  Done by other entities or through other means [specify]
    – Yes

    Notes: Demons and spirits have the power to pursue and punish humans.
Is the reason for supernatural punishment known:
– Yes

 Done to enforce religious ritual-devotional adherence:
– Yes

 Done to enforce group norms:
– Yes

 Done to inhibit selfishness:
– Yes

 Done randomly:
– Yes

Supernatural punishments are meted out in the afterlife:
– No

Supernatural punishments are meted out in this lifetime:
– Yes

 Supernatural punishments in this life are highly emphasized by the religious group:
– Yes

Punishment in this life consists of bad luck:
– Yes

Punishment in this life consists of political failure:
– Yes

 Notes: While members of this group are mostly not involved in politics they would understand punishment as being related to potential political failure.

Punishment in this life consists of defeat in battle:
– Yes

 Notes: See the above comment, these members are not involved in armed combat, but punishment could consist of defeat if they were.
Punishment in this life consists of crop failure or bad weather:
   – Yes

Punishment in this life consists of disaster on journeys.
   – Yes

Punishment in this life consists of mild sensory displeasure:
   – Yes

Punishment in this life consists of extreme sensory displeasure:
   – Yes

Punishment in this life consists of sickness or illness:
   – Yes

Punishment in this life consists of impaired reproduction:
   – Yes

Punishment in this life consists of bad luck visited on descendants:
   – Yes

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards:
   – Yes

   Notes: Supernatural beings can reward members in any way they see fit.

Is the cause/purpose of supernatural rewards known:
   – Yes

   Done by many supernatural beings:
   – Yes

Supernatural rewards are bestowed out in the afterlife:
   – No

   Notes: Generally rewards in the afterlife are provided by your descendants observance of funerary rights.

Supernatural rewards are bestowed out in this lifetime:
Yes

Reward in this life consists of good luck:

- Yes

Reward in this life consists of political success or power:

- Yes

Reward in this life consists of success in battle:

- Yes

Reward in this life consists of peace or social stability:

- Yes

Reward in this life consists of healthy crops or good weather:

- Yes

Reward in this life consists of success on journeys:

- Yes

Reward in this life consists of mild sensory pleasure:

- Yes

Reward in this life consists of extreme sensory pleasure:

- Yes

Reward in this life consists of enhanced health:

- Yes

Reward in this life consists of enhanced reproductive success:

- Yes

Reward in this life consists of fortune visited on descendants:

- Yes

Messianism/Eschatology
Are messianic beliefs present:
- No

Is an eschatology present:
- No

### Norms and Moral Realism

Are general social norms prescribed by the religious group:
- Field doesn't know

Is there a conventional vs. moral distinction in the religious group:
- Field doesn't know

Are there centrally important virtues advocated by the religious group:
- Yes

### Practices

#### Membership Costs and Practices

Does membership in this religious group require celibacy (full sexual abstinence):
- No

Does membership in this religious group require constraints on sexual activity (partial sexual abstinence):
- No

Does membership in this religious group require castration:
- No

Does membership in this religious group require fasting:
- No
  Notes: No form of ritualized regular fasting.

Does membership in this religious group require forgone food opportunities (taboos on desired foods):
- No
Does membership in this religious group require permanent scarring or painful bodily alterations:
- No

Does membership in this religious group require painful physical positions or transitory painful wounds:
- No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of adults:
"Adults" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition of a human who is 18-years-old or older and who is legally responsible for his/her actions, then please specify that difference in the Comments/Sources: box below.
- No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of children:
"Children" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition, please specify that different in the Comments/Sources: box below.
- No

Does membership in this religious group require self-sacrifice (suicide):
- No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of property/valuable items:
- No
  Notes: Occasionally donations of material are made to the gods of the temples, but not thought of as sacrifice.

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of time (e.g., attendance at meetings or services, regular prayer, etc.):
- No
  Notes: Members of this group serve roles within the temple but they are compensated for their time.

Does membership in this religious group require physical risk taking:
- No

Does membership in this religious group require accepting ethical precepts:
- Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require marginalization by out-group members:
- No
Does membership in this religious group require participation in small-scale rituals (private, household):

- Yes

What is the average interval of time between performances (in hours):
Performances here refers to large-scale rituals.

- Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require participation in large-scale rituals:
I.e. involving two or more households; includes large-scale “ceremonies” and “festivals.”

- Yes

On average, for large-scale rituals how many participants gather in one location:

- Field doesn't know

What is the average interval of time between performances (in hours):
Performances here refers to small-scale rituals.

- Field doesn't know

Are there orthodoxy checks:
Orthodoxy checks are mechanisms used to ensure that rituals are interpreted in a standardized way, e.g. through the supervisory prominence of a professionalized priesthood or other system of governance, appeal to texts detailing the proper interpretation, etc.

- No

Are there orthopraxy checks:
Orthopraxy checks are mechanisms used to ensure that rituals are performed in a standardized way, e.g. through the supervisory prominence of a professionalized priesthood or other system of governance, appeal to texts detailing the proper procedure, etc.

- No

Is there use of intoxicants:

- No

Are extra-ritual in-group markers present:
E.g. special changes to appearance such as circumcision, tattoos, scarification, etc.

- No
Does the group employ fictive kinship terminology:
– No

**Society and Institutions**

**Levels of Social Complexity**

The society to which the religious group belongs is best characterized as (please choose one):
– An empire

*Notes:* Uruk is a city within the Seleucid Empire.

**Welfare**

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized famine relief:
– Field doesn't know

Is famine relief available to the group’s adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
– Field doesn't know

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized poverty relief:
– Field doesn't know

Is poverty relief available to the group’s adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
– Field doesn't know

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized care for the elderly and infirm:
– Field doesn't know

Is institutionalized care for the elderly and infirm available to the group’s adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
– Field doesn't know

**Education**

Does the religious group provide formal education to its adherents:
– Yes

*Notes:* Scribes would start with a general education in reading and writing, specialist scholars would follow in
their fathers’ footsteps and learn their specialized craft from their family members or related scholars (see: Gesche, P.D. "Schulunterricht in Babylonien im ersten Jahrtausend v. Chr.").

Is formal education restricted to religious professionals:
- Yes

Is such education open to both males and females:
- Field doesn’t know

Is formal education available to the group’s adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group:
- Field doesn’t know

**Bureaucracy**

Do the group’s adherent’s interact with a formal bureaucracy within their group:
- Yes
  **Notes:** They serve within the temple hierarchy.

Do the group’s adherents interact with other institutional bureaucracies:
- Yes
  **Notes:** Some members interact with the authorities of the Seleucid Empire. Anu-uballit/Nikarchos was the governor of Uruk and decended from these temple officials (Clancier, 759)

**Public Works**

Does the religious group in question provide public food storage:
- No

Is public food storage provided to the group’s adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
- Field doesn’t know

Does the religious group in question provide water management (irrigation, flood control):
- No

Is water management provided to the group’s adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
- Yes
Notes: Mesopotamia has had water management since the beginnings of settlement in the region.

Does the religious group in question provide transportation infrastructure:

— No

Is transportation infrastructure provided for the group’s adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

— Yes

Notes: Maintenance of public infrastructure fell to the Seleucid rulers.

### Taxation

Does the religious group in question levy taxes or tithes:

— Field doesn’t know

Are taxes levied on the group’s adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

— Yes

Notes: They would have paid taxes to the Seleucid rulers.

### Enforcement

Does the religious group in question provide an institutionalized police force:

— No

Do the group’s adherents interact with an institutionalized police force provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

— Yes

Notes: The scholars were obliged to follow Greek law.

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized judges:

— Yes

Notes: The temples contained courts which could rule on issues beyond just religious matters (Clancier, 766-777).

Do the group’s adherents interact with an institutionalized judicial system provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

— Yes

Notes: There seem to have been Greek courts of justice as well.
Does the religious group in question enforce institutionalized punishment:
– Yes

Do the institutionalized punishments include execution:
– Yes
Notes: In one case a death penalty is handed out by a temple in Babylon (Clancier, 767).

Do the institutionalized punishments include seizure of property:
– Yes
Notes: Most of the temple cases involve legal recording of ownership, so presumably they also adjudicated disputes on that ownership.

Are the group’s adherents subject to institutionalized punishment enforced by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
– Yes
Notes: They were bound to follow Greek law as well.

Does the religious group in question have a formal legal code:
– Field doesn’t know
Notes: There are many law codes from Mesopotamia (See Roth, M. “Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor”), including one Neo-Babylonian law code from the 7th c. BCE.

**Warfare**

Does religious group in question possess an institutionalized military:
– No
Notes: At this point the military power is controlled by the governing Seleucid kings.

Do the group’s adherents participate in an institutionalized military provided by institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
– Field doesn’t know

Are the group’s adherents protected by or subject to an institutionalized military provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
– Yes
Notes: They are subjects under the Hellenistic rulers, and therefore protected by them.

**Written Language**
Does the religious group in question possess its own distinct written language:
— No
  *Notes:* The scholars write some of their texts in cuneiform, a script nearly 3,000 years old by this point.

Is a non-religion-specific written language available to the group’s adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
— Yes

Is a non-religion-specific written language used by the group’s adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
— Yes

**Calendar**

Does the religious group in question possess a formal calendar:
— Yes
  *Notes:* They use the Babylonian lunar calendar.

Is a formal calendar provided for the group’s adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:
— No

**Food Production**

Does the religious group in question provide food for themselves:
— No
  *Notes:* While some are involved in agriculture this is primarily a business venture rather than a subsistence practice.

  Please characterize the forms/level of food production [choose all that apply]:
  — Large-scale agriculture (e.g., monocropping, organized irrigation systems)

— Yes
  *Notes:* The temples themselves held large tracks of land and wages were generally paid in the form of volumes of barley.

  Please characterize the forms/level of food production [choose all that apply]:
  — Large-scale agriculture (e.g., monocropping, organized irrigation systems)
Is food provided to the group’s adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No