

McCorriston J. 2011: Pilgrimage and Household in the Ancient Near East.

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### **Introduction:**

Essentially McCorriston's book investigates the meta-structures of pilgrimage and household in the Near East, using Southern Arabia as a case-study for pilgrimage and Mesopotamia as a case study for household practices. These different meta-structures are dealt with separately with only a perfunctory section examining their differences. Whilst both sections were interesting, and it was easy to identify that they were different means of creating a social community, the reasons for choosing and comparing these still remained a little arbitrary to me.

One of the reasons for choosing these two structures was the continuity of practice over an extended period, and area. McCorriston emphasised that most studies of the region focus on change and evolution of practices rather than the continuation, and therefore because they do not change are dismissed by archaeologists. She believes the longevity of ancient civilisations such as Mesopotamia and Egypt could be studied, although generally it is not, through investigating the practices of pilgrimage and household.

She discusses in the introduction how these two structures are generally studied, emphasising that pilgrimage is normally categorised under "ritual" which has a somewhat ambiguous definition, which is often used as an umbrella term for things not fully understood. She displays that these meta-structures are in fact dominant elements of many ancient societies and needs further research. This book bridges the gap in this research.

### **Part one: Southern Arabia**

The first four chapters of the book investigate the practice of pilgrimage in South Arabia, starting with an analysis of the practice and its importance within the community. McCorriston draws on a combination of anthropological and archaeological evidence. She outlines her sources which include Islamic texts providing evidence about tribal relations in Arabia and ritual practice. Whereas the Islamic evidence looks back in time, the classical texts are contemporaneous, and include eye-witness and secondary accounts. They are not always accurate and are biased towards history, geography, economy and trade. The South Arabia Inscriptions are mostly dedicatory inscriptions in temples or large scale public works, and give information about man's relationship with their god, as well as evidence of commercial exchanges. She also uses archaeological evidence in the form of temple excavations which reveal votive stelae, inscriptions and pits for liquid (possibly blood), offerings and remains of banquets showing how these sites were used.

McCorriston discusses different anthropological approaches to pilgrimage, in the light of her own research. She criticises Turner's theory, based on Christian pilgrimage, which states it helps form new communities outside of normal society therefore breaking society norms. McCorriston does not

agree as it omits certain pilgrimage types, such as tourism, motivational or economic arrangements. One theory she does ascribe to is that of Durkheim which states that pilgrimage is mostly a social construction and is more important as a social than a religious element. The pilgrims whilst trying to be closer to god through this practice are in fact strengthening their position in society; ultimately society and community act as their “god”.

Through a series of modern pilgrimages in the Muslim and the ancient world, the author is able to show that pilgrimage is not solely about religion, but also an important element of the economy. There is a practical element to this economical aspect in the form of buying food and transportation along the way, but there is also the deeper aspect of international trade at the site itself. At modern Mecca, the Hajj is responsible for 16% of Saudi Arabia’s work force, and although the site has maintained its sacred status it is continually maintained because of the economic importance. Pilgrimage is and was in the past, a time for commerce, asserting social identity, trading prisoners, and conclusions of peace treaties. Quite often the pilgrimage sites were dictated by trade routes, and the temporary communities provided a safe passage along these routes. Archaeological evidence shows that agriculturalists and pastoralists used these pilgrimages for trade in food, textiles and amber.

Whilst the economic elements of pilgrimage are important, the building of temporary communities is also an essential element of this practice. Whilst it is difficult for non-members to join this temporary community, for those who are included it is an important social event that overcomes all hostilities and blood-feuds. Whilst these communities at the pilgrimage sites are temporary they are instrumental in making year-long connections between what were in the past, mobile communities.

The book has a lengthy discussion about the development of pilgrimage as a practice; and although it has a prolonged history it is a dynamic practice, which is passed down through the generations as learned culture (what Bourdieu in the 1970s called *habitus*). *Habitus* changes over time, according to the social changes within the community. Pilgrimage therefore is not an isolated practice and is closely associated with other aspects of social culture.

There are, however some elements which are consistent throughout time periods and location; essentially a gathering of people, a sacrifice, including blood offerings and a feast, alongside a specified ritual, whether dancing, or falling on one’s knees in front of a shrine, showing a common socio-political background. Although there are such similarities, there are local variants and gods and practices are local in nature with particular rules of practice for pilgrimages within a designated area. These local temples, rituals and pilgrimages were financed and maintained locally by donations and tithes of the community.

Whilst the communities in south Arabia were transitory, on the whole, during the first to fourth century AD the centre of the community was the *bayt* (house), a group of people comprising four hierarchies; male adults (father and sons), senior and junior generations (brothers and sons close to the male adults), unmarried sisters and wives and clients. This has led to some comparisons with Mesopotamia and their household culture, although evidence for similarities is conclusive. However this leads into the second section of the book, which investigates the household practices of Mesopotamia.

## Part two: Mesopotamia

McCorrison defines what she means by household, not as a physical building, or small family in a domestic sphere, but rather as a flexible structure which can involve kin groups, social groups or even temple of state groups.

She uses a combination of Assyriological textual sources which identify the social groups within a community divided according to ethnic identity, age, kin, religion and gender, as well as archaeological evidence which is different in north and south Mesopotamia. South Mesopotamian archaeology focuses primarily on large-scale religious structures and ziggurats, whereas Northern Mesopotamian archaeology focuses on rural communities and small sites due to a better survival rate of mud-brick and organic material in this region.

This chapter focuses on household which was key in Mesopotamia and could be private or public and McCorrison discusses the differences. Private households comprised kin groups or metaphorical kin groups, nuclear family or several nuclear families (especially in cities). Social ties within these private communities were not associated with ethnicity or neighbourhood but rather with particular household affiliation. Public households on the other hand comprised temples and palaces which were run like private households with agricultural land and food production. The temple was viewed as a household as was the state. Everyone belonged to different household in varying levels of participation. The public household practices was represented by the Ur III temple of Inanna at Nippur, which was viewed as the household for the god (p.14), involving household chores carried out for the gods, such as food preparation and ablutions, as well as the importance of the temple in the economy of the household culture. She does not believe that such mundane activities do not fall within the categorisation of "ritual". From the third millennium BC it is clear that temples dominated the local culture, particularly in the south.

The temple, as a supra-household was important to the economy but contrary to popular belief should the temple collapse, economically the state would survive as they were not as closely intertwined as first appearances would suggest. Although it was important, the economic role of the temple varied through time along with private and supra-households that controlled lots of agricultural land. The connection between the household culture and the temple is further emphasised in the structure of the temple, which in the Ubaid period (sixth and fifth millennium BC) prior to the written record, followed the same tripartite layout.

The public buildings were the same, just on a larger scale to the houses, and were normally in critical locations. Some of these public buildings indicate they were built, if not by the community then at least a large group of people, showing a community interest. However some of these buildings were clearly not designed for the entire community to use, as they had small rooms or awkward entrances indicating like the temporary communities of south Arabian pilgrimages these communal buildings were for a select group of people; a household. This further suggests that group rituals were therefore carried out in the homes with small household groups.

During the fourth millennium BC cemeteries and ritual burials are scarce, as it was common practice to bury the bodies within the houses, either under the floor or in the walls. At Çatalhöyük in Central Anatolia, the number of bodies in one house exceeds the number of people who could have lived in the house, indicating that it was communal for a number of households. The crossover of houses as

a domain of both the living and the dead was a means of showing the lineage of the household, further emphasising the importance of the household.

The settlements themselves are complex but reflect the importance of household groups, as well as how household practice changed over the years. Again, using Çatalhöyük as an example, a settlement which housed about 8000 people, but was constructed without streets or doors. Houses were entered via the roof and it was necessary to climb over other's roofs to reach these entrances. This type of construction would only work in a close-knit community.

Archaeological evidence from settlements from the Ubaid period documents the change in social structure through the study of communal granaries. During this period the communities were no longer dependant on these granaries, meaning there was an increase in household storage, and the distance between the houses also increased. There was a much stronger sense of belonging to a household which was self-sufficient. The growing importance of the home within the community is also reflected in the increased sizes and the change in building material from reed to mud-brick, which displayed wealth through the expense of the material and the labour needed for construction. Social groups are also displayed through the structure of houses, especially in the late Uruk period, when different styles of houses could be an indication of different ethnicities or language groups. However the evidence presented is not conclusive.

Pilgrimage and household practices form a social structure for each society. The Mesopotamian culture also participated in pilgrimages but with a very different approach. In south Arabia it was for trade purposes and to join people in temporary communities whereas in Mesopotamia it was to join heads of important households as well as showing their connection to the gods and the divine household. McCorrison looks at all of the contrasting evidence from the region which is divided into separate areas; North Levant and Euphrates, Urfa/Taurus, South Levant and Central Anatolia with detailed case-studies and evaluation of the archaeological evidence showing the importance of household practice across various places and over a long period of time showing the continuity of practice which is the main focus of McCorrison's research.

This book was an interesting read and a useful study in the Near Eastern area. It is well-researched, and the reference list at the rear of the book is extensive. However there are very few illustrations, which was slightly detrimental to the understanding of the research. Whilst the majority of the illustrations were in the first part of the book, in relation to the Arabian study, however what was missing was a comprehensive map of the southern Arabia region, which made it difficult to place the sites discussed in the text. The maps in this section were in regard to the minutiae of the research rather than an overall area. In the second section about Mesopotamia, whilst there is a map there are few photographs of the sites.