



Syria
Archéologie, art et histoire
Recensions | 2016

Peeter ESPAK, *The God Enki in Sumerian Royal Ideology and Mythology (Philippika 87)*

Maciej M. Wencel



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/syria/4399>

DOI: 10.4000/syria.4399

ISSN: 2076-8435

Publisher

IFPO - Institut français du Proche-Orient

Electronic reference

Maciej M. Wencel, « Peeter ESPAK, *The God Enki in Sumerian Royal Ideology and Mythology (Philippika 87)* », *Syria* [Online], Book reviews, Online since 01 January 2016, connection on 23 September 2020.

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/syria/4399> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/syria.4399>

This text was automatically generated on 23 September 2020.

© Presses IFPO

Peeter ESPAK, *The God Enki in Sumerian Royal Ideology and Mythology* (Philippika 87)

Maciej M. Wencel

REFERENCES

Peeter ESPAK, *The God Enki in Sumerian Royal Ideology and Mythology* (Philippika 87), Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2015, 24 x 17 cm, XVIII + 235 p., ISBN : 978-3-447-10412-8.

- 1 P. Espak's book *The God Enki* is a daring attempt to compile and interpret the available Sumerian sources pertaining to the all-important figure of the god Enki/Ea and related deities. The author focuses on two main bodies of evidence: royal inscriptions and mythological texts. References to other sources of information regarding ancient beliefs and worship, such as archaeology, onomastics, religious texts and wisdom literature, appear scattered across the volume where deemed relevant to the argument.
- 2 The book opens with a concise introduction which explains the work's structure and clearly states the author's goals, methodology and scope. Chap. I to VII are an exhaustive survey of royal inscriptions mentioning Enki/Ea from the successive historical periods (from the Early Dynastic to the First Dynasty of Babylon). An in-depth analysis and interpretation of this body of material allows the author to address and criticise some of the longstanding assumptions within Ancient Near Eastern Studies. For example, P. Espak fails to find evidence for seeing Enki as a patron of sweetwater and irrigation, rather highlighting the deity's connections to the chthonic cult and the Underworld. This diachronic structure of the argument also lets him trace the relationship between the Sumerian god Enki and the Semitic Ayya/Ea. Nonetheless, long discussions about the order of divine names in the invocations is where the book reveals its only major flaw. On the one hand, highly formulaic and often laconic, on the other seemingly susceptible to personal preferences of individual rulers, the royal

inscriptions allow for little but general statements regarding the ancient religion. Despite acknowledging the limitations of the material, P. Espak extensively uses the frequency and ordering of the divine names as a proxy for the changes in the hierarchy of the ancient pantheon and political history. Yet, for example, in his discussion of an inscription of Iahdun-Lim (p. 120), he notes that the still separate gods Ea and Ayya are mentioned together, probably due to similarities in their names. If the ordering of divine names in inscriptions can indeed be dictated by phonetics, one cannot help but wonder how valuable these sources can be for reconstructing past belief systems, let alone sociopolitical realities.

- 3 Chap. VIII and IX deal almost entirely with mythological texts. Sections 8.2 and 8.4 describe Enki's role as the creator of the natural world and mankind. Section 8.5 focuses on Enki the Engenderer, describing his relationship with different mother-goddess figures and copulation motifs. The author's analysis of the mythological texts allows him to discuss interesting connections between Mesopotamian literature and the later Biblical traditions. Section 8.3 is a more indepth discussion of the Sumerian concepts of abzu and engur, two mythical entities closely related to Enki. Despite the seemingly wide semantic range of the former and the dearth of sources for the latter, P. Espak is able to convincingly demonstrate that while abzu was originally fathomed as a terrestrial, underground realm, engur was more closely associated with marshes and sweetwater. Finally, chap. IX discusses the supposed conflict between the gods Enki and Enlil, often interpreted as an echo of a rivalry between the temples of Eridu and Nippur. The author provides a good overview of the long history of the scholarly discussion surrounding this theory. Having revisited the mythological accounts, the book posits that neither can one detect a true rivalry between Enki and Enlil in the earlier texts, nor can any one of these significant deities be identified as "intrusive" into the Sumerian religion. The discussion of the mythological texts concludes with cautious statements about the fluid nature of the Sumerian pantheon —it is impossible to identify a single deity as the uncontested head of the divine hierarchy, given that Early Mesopotamian religion emerged as a palimpsest of numerous local and tribal beliefs (p. 189). The prominence of Enlil in royal inscriptions would derive from his role as a patron of kingship rather than his unquestionable superiority, which would also explain his secondary role in other textual sources (onomastics, hymns, myths, etc.) where Enki's presence as a more caring, benevolent god, is quite pronounced. This conclusion, while certainly compelling, seems to render the careful analysis of the composition and order of invocations in the royal inscriptions (chap. I-VII) rather fruitless. The other limitation of the mythological research, as readily admitted by P. Espak (p. 186), is their uncertain chronology. Even though interesting parallels can be drawn between different compositions, it is difficult to say how these inform us about the evolution of Enki's mythology.
- 4 While *The God Enki* succeeds in dispelling many myths of the modern Assyriological thought through careful analysis of the available material, it makes certain statements which I find very problematic. For example, a recurring theme throughout the book is the role of the mothergoddess, identified at different times with Ninki, Ninmah, Ninhursaĝ, Nintu and others. The gradual replacement of this feminine fertility figure by with the god Enlil is interpreted by P. Espak as evidence for a decrease in the social status of women, as well as for a transition from a more peaceful agricultural community to one dominated by militaristic warlords (p. 65-66; 189-190; 206). This idea

is not new, compare for example to Charvát 1988, *On people, signs and states* (p. 39), who places this transition between ED I/II and ED IIIa, based on the comparison of the personal names in the Archaic Ur Texts and those of the Fara Tablets. The somewhat romanticised concept of a pre- or protohistoric gynocentric Mesopotamian community may have been inspired by a ED IIIb royal Lagasite text, ascribed to Iriinimgina, thought by some to mention polyandry (RIME 1.09.09.03; CDLI P222610). P. Espak's references to the works of J. G. Frazer and M. Gimbutas betray an outdated anthropological paradigm. It is now widely accepted that while truly matriarchal communities are extremely rare, egalitarian approach to gender roles in preindustrial societies seems to be primarily among huntergatherer communities. It is entirely possible that the preliterate Mesopotamian civilisation, with their heavy reliance on agriculture (p. 205), worshipped a mothergoddess figure associated with earth and fertility. Significance of a female cult figure is, however, in no way indicative of the social position of women. Consider, for example, the the cult of the Virgin Mary in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, which has enjoyed an enduring popularity from Antiquity to Modern Times in numerous very much androcentric societies (see Childe 1951, *Social evolution*).

- 5 The Conclusion of the book does not introduce any new ideas, giving a brief overview of the findings of the previous chapters. All objections which can be raised against *The God Enki* relate to speculations tangential to the main subject matter. A few spurious claims based on fragmentary material do not subtract from the book's value as a comprehensive overview and reference material for the study of the complex and multifaceted problem of the god Enki/Ea and his place in the Sumerian pantheon. P. Espak's work is a wonderful resource for anyone interested in the god Enki and Sumerian beliefs in general.