Przegląd Religioznawczy 2(288)/2023
The Religious Studies Review

ISSN: 1230-4379
e-ISSN: 2658-1531
www.journal.ptr.edu.pl

ALEKSANDRA KUBIAK-SCHNEIDER
University of Wrocław
Centre of Studies of the Ancient World
e-mail: aleksandra.kubiak-schneider@uwr.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0002-3273-2447

BERNHARD SCHNEIDER
University of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński
Insitute of Archaeology
e-mail: mcb170@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0001-5104-655X

DOI: 10.34813/ptr2.2023.12

Sacred meals in Hatra and Nippur in late Parthian times

Abstract. The common meal with deities comprises one of the most popular religious rituals. It results from the popularity of offerings composed with such alimentary items like meat, bread, fruits, wine, oil, etc. This paper deals with the sacred dimension of the cultic banquets on the example of epigraphical and archaeological evidence. As case-studies are presented two cities: the Northern Mesopotamian city of Hatra (ca. 290 km northwest of Baghdad) and the Southern Mesopotamian city of Nippur (ca. 150 km southeast of Baghdad). The case of Hatrene sacral architecture together with written material in the local dialect of Aramaic defines very similar structures in Nippur as sacred space for cultic meals and helps to reconstruct the practices in the period from 1st c. to the mid-3rd century CE.

Keywords: archaeology, architecture, Parthians, epigraphy, Near East, Middle East, religion, polytheism, Hatra, Nippur, Mesopotamia, feasting, banquet.

> *Among the Parthians, the king at their banquets occupied a couch on which he reclined alone. It was separated from the other couches and somewhat higher than the others. The king's table was set before him apart, as to a departed spirit, and was laden with native dishes.*
>
> Poseidonius of Apamea, 1st c. BCE (transl. P. Harland & Harland, 2022).

The quoted remark of Poseidonius, the Stoic philosopher from Apamea on the Orontes living in 1st century BCE, reveals part of the technical side of Parthian banqueting. First of all, it turns the attention of the reclining position of the banqueter, second on the couch, surely equipped in pillows and mattresses, thirdly on the

food described as "native dishes". This description renders well a situation confirmed by the Hatrene and Palmyrene iconographic evidence. A relief from Hatra represents the reclining king, occupying his couch alone (Dirven, 2005). The case of Palmyra, not governed by any local king, represents priests placed one or by two on a banqueting bed (Ingholt et al., 1955, nr 731, pl. 35). These scenes convene culturally to the situation described by Poseidonius.

Alongside the meals with the dead, practiced still nowadays in some parts of the world, there were meals with the gods, also a common point of many contemporary religions. That results from the fact that the most common offerings to the gods are, beside aromatics (resins, perfumed oils, etc.), the alimentary items such as bread, meat, drinks, fruits, etc. Through the ritual of sacrifice, the alimentary offerings passed from a profane to the sphere of gods. They were consecrated and purified. In both terms: consecration and sacrifice resound the element of "sacred", which has a notion of something restricted, limited, sometimes hidden. The word refers to the activities, space and objects rather than to the persons or deities. The access to the sacred is restrained for the people by the walls of the sanctuaries, initiation stage, specialization and profession, gender, role in the society, etc. The idea of sharing the divine food results among others from an economic factor of circularity: offerings and sacrifices do not go to waste, especially being sanctified, but are consumed together in a small or large community (Kubiak-Schneider, 2023, p. 38). The priests and temple personnel as well as state authorities were sharing the food provisions during the festivities dedicated to the gods.

Banqueting has a long tradition in Mesopotamia as is evidenced by the cuneiform corpus. This includes banquets with the king (Ermidoro, 2015, pp. 89–120) as well as with the gods (pp. 121–159). While the former is better researched in terms of etiquette, also via iconography (pp. 191–236), the latter can be also deduced via the literary corpus (pp. 49–88).

This paper takes on the ritual of sacred banquets in two Mesopotamian cities: Hatra, located in the North about 50 km from Assur and Nippur, located in Southern Mesopotamia. The Hatrene evidence in its cultural context is chosen here as a reference to understand the sacred space for dining with the gods in Parthian Nippur, while we find similar architectural structures. Opposite to Hatra, Nippur does not provide any monumental inscription. Nevertheless, we apply the fragmented information from the Hatrene inscriptions in the local dialect of Aramaic, one of the official languages of the Parhian empire, also probably spoken in Nippur, to the archaeological remains of the sacred complex in Nippur for understanding how ritual life could go on in Nippur. Within our paper we try to answer the question on the use of particular architectural features observed in the Parthian Nippur like *iwan*, courtyard and a square building approaching them to Hatrene remains. We provide for the first time an insight through the cultic angle on the vestiges of late Nippur and the celebrations involving the sacred meals in Nippur and in Hatra.

In 2005 L. Dirven published a paper on the banquet scenes from Hatra (Dirven, 2005). She focused more on the iconography and the issue of banqueting, also its funerary aspect, at Hatra and elsewhere. We do not want to double her research.

Our intention is to compare the Hatrene evidence with a contemporary structure at Nippur, keeping in mind the shared historical background of commensality in both Northern and Southern Mesopotamia. Through this comparison it can be tried to better understand rituals and festivities in the Southern Mesopotamian city also in the less well researched Late Parthian period, i. e. the period between 1st century to the mid-3rd century CE (De Jong, 2013, pp. 147–148). We concentrate on dining with the gods, not including meals with ancestors. When it concerns Hatra, we want to look through the written evidence concerning the terminology referring to the structures for sacred meals as well as to the particular social and professional groups who potentially participated at the banquets. We will look also at the practice of šip, coming from the Elamite tradition and vividly performed in Achaemenid and Seleucid Empires (5th century – 150 BCE) as well as in Sasanian times (250–51 CE) (Canepa, 2020, p. 184).

Hatra

The religious space in Hatra is divided on 2 areas, where the first is constituted by the central Great Temenos of the spectacular size of 435 m length and 322 m width, and the second is located within the urban network of houses and so-called small shrines giving in total the city of about 2 km diameter (Foietta, 2018, p. 109; Kubiak-Schneider, 2022, p. 795). One of the small shrines, temple XIII provided the only Hatrene Aramaic inscription which directly refers to banqueting and the space dedicated to this form of feasting (Salihi, 1990; Dirven, 2005; Jakubiak, 2014, pp. 117–119). The text H 408 (Beyer, 1998, p. 103) dates to 235 CE and refers to the construction of a structure called *kpt'* in the local variant of Aramaic. This term appears 4 times in the same text. The meaning of it is "a vaulted chamber" (Hoftijzer & Jongeling, 1995, p. 529, v. *kph*) and not necessarily *iwan*, as translated by L. Dirven (2005, p. 66). It is not a very popular term in the epigraphic records. One more time it is attested in a Greco-Aramaic inscription found in a village near Palmyra. The word *kpt'* appears as a reference to the building offered to the god named in Greek Zeus Megistos (the Greatest) Keraunios (the Thunderer) and the Lord of the Universe – Baalshamin in Aramaic (PAT 0259, from 124 CE; Kubiak-Schneider, 2021, p. 122). In Greek it is rendered as *kamara* and according to the non-Aramaic variant of this inscription it was dedicated to the deity together with the *kline*, the couch used for the banquets. When we compare the Aramaic term *kpt'* to Akkadian *kapatu*, we can notice a meaning of bringing together and gathering. The vaulted hall could be then used for cultic gatherings (Gawlikowski, 2009, pp. 16–18). This Hatrene inscription (H 408) clarifies further the use of the built vaulted chamber by the reference to reclining position. The text states the wish of the dedicator 'Oqa, son of Barnai, probably from the clan of Ramgu/Damgu, whose protective deity, Gadde – *gd'*, was worshiped within this temple, that his successors can recline here forever. The Aramaic term used here for reclining is *gn'*. It is nowhere attested in other epigraphic sources except in Hatra in the context of this text. We can report this word also to the banqueting as

it is a usual position for dining. The clan of Ramgu/Damgu is present in the whole temple in the epigraphic record, which means that it was administered by a particular Hatrene family, whose ancestral deity was Zaqiqu, the deity of dreams (the son of Šamaš, see Maul, 2007, p. 368). The involvement of different families in the cultic administration is widely attested in the entire East, looking e.g. at Palmyra (for the administration of the temples in Palmyra see Kubiak-Schneider, 2022a, 2023), villages of the Hauran in Southern Syria (Mazzilli, 2018) or Wadi Rum (Rieger, 2017, pp. 18–20) and many other places when it concerns Roman Imperial period (1st century – 3rd century CE). However, the size of the feast and rituals that proceeded within the temple XIII in Hatra was definitely minor in the reference to the sacred area of the Great Temenos, which was a place of celebrations in the national or even international scale.

The Great Temenos is the sphere of activity of the royal house and of the city elite. There are two major parts of the Great Temenos. The first one contains two Great Iwans and the Twin Iwan,[1] some small rooms and a Square Temple and is determined in the inscriptions as Sagil (H107, Beyer, 1998, p. 53; Jakubiak, 2014, p. 64; Marcato, 2019b, pp. 92–94). These structures were dedicated, according to the inscriptions found within them, to the main deities of Hatra: Maran (Our Lord) – Šamaš, Martan (Our Lady) – probably Nanaya, Barmarin (Son of Our Lords), whose identity is discussed (Foietta, 2018, p. 352). The term *iwan* refers in the scholarly literature concerning history of architecture and archaeology to the large, vaulted hall enclosed by walls from the 3 sides and open at the fourth. It is an architectural feature observed in many cities of the Middle East from the Parthian period (Grabar, 1987–2011 – https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ayvan-palace, opened on 27.03.2023). The Great Iwans were constructed by the initiative of Lord Worod, the Hatrene king in the beginning of the 2nd century AD. The inscriptions found within this area are mostly graffiti with the formula of remembrance, personal names and the mentions of different associations (*pḥr*): architects, weavers, leatherworkers, etc. If we look at the *iwans* in the Great Temenos and open space around as a place for festival gatherings designated also for eating and drinking with the gods (Gawlikowski, 2009, pp. 14–15), as attested by a Hatrene graffiti from the House of Maʿnu (Bucci & Morriggi, 2019, 112, H1100), we can conclude that the written material, especially the graffiti with the remembrance formula (*dkyr*) was left by the people who dined together with the deities during the official banquets. Writing on the walls was not considered as destruction of the sacred place, as it would be thought nowadays, but a prayer or a mark in front of the deities to be perpetually looked after and it was an occasion to call for eternal remembrance within the sacred precinct. Beside the calls for remembrance, we find many curses on the walls of the sacred buildings in the main cultic complex of Hatra concerning the cases of destruction of the sacred buildings. This strategy was undertaken to set the rules of conduct and preserve the temples from the masses and from the possible consequences of banqueting

[1] The *iwans* in the Great Temenos of Hatra were named by the different excavators and scholars, therefore we keep here the capital letters.

(Harland, 2012, pp. 78–79). These curses were especially valid during the banquets aroused with wine (Ascough, 2012, pp. 69–70).

An inscription H35 (Beyer, 1998, p. 38) states the profession of the father of the honored woman, who was probably a priestess, that he was a wine seller and temple servant. This wine could be offered for the deities and served during the cultic meals (analogically it is in Palmyra when the tesserae mention the rations of wine, see Kubiak-Schneider, 2022a, p.82; Milik, 1972, p. 186). The cultic personnel, including the gods' craftsmen working and donating for the temples, got during the celebrations their allocations in food (Jursa, 2007, pp. 229–230; Pirngruber & Waerzeggers, 2011, 112; Kubiak-Schneider, 2022a, pp. 82–83). By working on behalf of the temple, its economy, administration, ritual activities, etc. they were allowed to enter the banquets and celebrate with the god.

The celebrations must have been accompanied with music and singing. In one of the adjacent rooms of the one of the Great Iwans was found an inscription designating a kind of space, probably a podium or a stand for Esmenda, a singer/musician (*zmr'*, see H219, Beyer, 1998). Aramaic does not make a distinction between singer and musician. Probably playing instruments and singing was seen as one profession. Being mentioned within the sacred area he must have belonged to the temple personnel. This profession is a rare occurrence in the epigraphic sources, it appears in Hatra and in few Nabatean inscriptions (Hoftijzer & Jongeling, 1995, p. 332 v. *zmr2* and *zmrt*). Lucian of Samosata indicates the presence of musicians in the cult of Atargatis in Hierapolis (Lightfoot, 2003, pp. 486–487). The music, singing and dancing were elements of feasting and worship, confirmed by the graffiti from the temple of Aphlad in Dura-Europos depicting the musicians (also female) and dancers in the room dedicated to feasting and banqueting (Klaver, 2019, p. 56). The Hatrene musician Esmenda could perform during the sacred meals, especially since this place was attached to the gathering hall.

Nippur

Hatra shows close connectivity to the Babylonian traditions, as pointed out by L. Dirven (2014). Connections between Assur, in the sphere of influence of Hatra, and Nippur were already drawn by Keall (1970, 1976, 1995, 2014).

The Southern Mesopotamian site of Nippur (modern Niffer) produced an exceptional archaeological record in Parthian times, especially on and around the main tell to the East called Bint el-Amir in Arabic, usually translated as "daughter of the prince" (Hilprecht, 1903; Peters, 1897, p. 245). Excavations from 1889–1900 and later from 1948 onwards (Knudstad, 1966; Knudstad & Keall, 1968) revealed a massive construction, the so-called "Parthian Fortress" (c. 50–150 CE) (Clayden & Schneider, 2015, pp. 360–361), built over the former main sanctuary of Enlil, latest with the reign of Šarkališarri (around c. 2200 BCE) called in Sumerian Ekur, "House/Temple, Mountain" (c. 2750 until at least 150 BCE) (Clayden & Schneider ,2015; Schneider 2017, 2018). Furthermore, about 100 m to the Southwest of the latter,

a Parthian version of a traditional Mesopotamian temple plan with broad rooms and in its center a double-cella including ante-cella and courtyard, surrounded by an L-shaped corridor at two sides (southeast and southwest), was built over comparable earlier versions of the temple of Inanna (c. 2750 until c. 150 CE) (Zettler, 1992, pp. 50–54; Keall, 2014).

The "Parthian Fortress" was generally seen as the end of any cultic activity on the mound of Bint el-Amir (Hilprecht, 1903,1904; Keall, 1970). The later excavators were unaware of the unpublished documentation available from the earlier explorations at the end of the 19th century. Therefore, such a conclusion becomes understandable. Although, some details in the archaeological record from the post-World War II excavations point towards a cultic use of at least parts of the "Fortress" (Schneider, 2023, pp. 179–180). Already during the excavations in 1948–50 the remains of a set of three horse burials were encountered in the upper layers of locus 10 of the "Enlil Temple" which was later cut by the deep foundations belonging to the later phases of the "Parthian Fortress" (McCown & Haines 1967, Pl. 26).

The earliest phase of construction of the "Parthian Fortress" (phase I) with the most recent floors dated by coins as terminus ante quem 83 CE (Keall, 1970, 2014), was still taking care of the outlines of the older structures, including ziggurat and courtyard walls. Therefore, it is possible that the building was preserved as a sanctuary until late in the 1st century CE. The next phase (phase II) which, besides the extension of the courtyard walls, included the addition of buttresses on all four sides of the ziggurat but was probably never finished as plans changed towards a newly planned construction (phase III). During this last expansion (phase III), the "Parthian Fortress" included a massive outer fortification wall, hence it was also called "citadel phase" by the excavator Knudstad (1966; Knudstad & Keall, 1968). In the northern quadrant, massive halls and corridors were designated as "Palace" by the early excavators (Fisher, 1905/06, Pl. 14), probably already influenced by the reports of W. Andrae, first from Assur (see also Hauser, 2011, p. 116) and then from Hatra, but for sure still with the impressions of Ctesiphon in their mind (Andrae 1908, pp. 7–8). The rooms in the outer fortification wall were reused to bury the dead in "slipper shaped coffins", probably in the 2nd and 3rd century CE, although there regrettably exists no more precise date for the beginning of the use of such coffins.

The unpublished documentary evidence from the early Nippur expeditions provides us with a plan by J. A. Meyer, Jr. in his journal number XX, (entry of 11th June 1894, Haverford College Library, Special Collection) which is also preserved via a later ink drawing by Fisher (Nippur archive of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology), showing a podium shaped structure in the center of the double-walled "Great Hall" of rectangular shape. It consists of two layers of burnt brick with rests of probably yet another layer of brick. It was described by Meyer in his journal entry as an "altar or fireplace" with traces of the impact of fire on its top. This sheds some light on the possibility of a cultic use of this building. To the northeast is situated another similar building, called "Small Hall" by Fisher (Fisher, 1905/06, Pl. 14). The construction of double walls, made of mudbricks with a burnt brick foundation below, probably served the roofing but

additionally provided much needed air circulation in the hot summer months. The latter was also achieved by a U-shaped corridor which led around three sides of the two halls. On at least two sides, rooms were added which probably served as storage facilities. The "Small Hall" which opened towards northeast was interpreted as an iwan by Keall (1970, 2014), who reconstructed it, following the example of Assur (Andrae & Lenzen, 1933, Pl. 11), as part of a courtyard with four *iwans*. Also without such a reconstruction, it definitely shared a common tradition with a comparable structure at Tell Abu-Qubur (Wright, 1991; Gasche, 2011, Fig. 7) where the *iwan* also opens towards the northeast. The possibility of the discovery of another related structure was recently brought forward by Mühl and Fassbinder (2016, pp. 245–247), in surveying Gird-i Shatwan, a Parthian site in the Shahrizor Plain, Sulaymaniyah province of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The main gate of the "Parthian Fortress" was never found but everything points towards the not preserved wall in the northern part of the southwest side, near the western corner as the original place of entrance. All the other three sides preserve a closed wall. This would also fit the situation at the traditional Babylonian style temple at the site of the earlier Inanna temple just to the southwest. There the temple opened towards the Northeast with its main gate, directly towards the "Parthian Fortress".

Coming back to the *iwan* at Nippur, a broad plaza towards the northeast showed traces of two rows of post-holes (Keall, 2014, Fig. 16), providing a roof extension while accommodating a bigger amount of people (Fig. 17). Taking also into account the shadow provided by the built over ziggurat to the south, it would be a fitting place to hold a banquet, although no traces of benches were found, there is always the opportunity that movable furniture, like wooden cultic beds or mattresses, or carpets were used, a practice still common nowadays. For example, the guest house of Hajji Tarfa, a big reception hall of reed (Arab. *muḍīf*) existed still around 1950 in the broader vicinity of Nippur which served already to receive the expedition members in 1889. Recently (2019–2021), Abbas Alizadeh has excavated part of a building of public character with massive mudbrick walls on the otherwise unexplored southwestern annex of the "Westmound" (Alizadeh, 2022). He argues that the excavated part which consisted of an elongated hall with a bench along its southern wall flanked by two square rooms, belonged to some sort of a public mensa (p. 22). Without being able to solve the question, if it belonged to a building of sacred or more profane character, one can observe that public feasting and dining was more common in Parthian Nippur than heretofore anticipated.

Common points and the broader cultural context

The ensemble at the "Parthian Fortress" at Nippur reminds of a similar situation at the Great Iwan at Hatra. The square room behind a bigger rectangular *iwan* seems to be characteristic not only for Nippur and Hatra but constitute a more common feature in Parthian Mesopotamia as further examples (Assur, Tell Abu Qubur, and Gird-i Shatwan) showed.

Illaria Bucci and Marco Moriggi describe some houses at Hatra, e.g. Edificio A, featuring a sequence of a square room, long room and an *iwan* (Bucci & Moriggi, 2019, pp. 33–36), a similar system can be observed within the Great Temenos for the sacred architecture and at the Parthian "citadel" at Nippur. Sacred architecture is known to copy in a much more monumental way domestic architecture (Hundley, 2013, pp. 131–132). A graffito from the so-called House of Maʿnu at Hatra depicts a banquet at an *iwan* (Bucci & Moriggi, 2019, pp. 23–24; for graffito see p. 112, H1100). It is interpreted as a sacred banquet held in a Hatrene temple (Bucci & Moriggi, 2019, p.17).

According to a Hatrene Aramaic dedicatory inscription found in situ at the Southern Iwan, at least this part is designated as the "elevated house of joy" (*byt ḥdy' 'ly'*) of Sagil, the Great Temple and dedicated by god Barmaryn to his father, the sun god Šamaš (Beyer, 1998, p. 53; Jakubiak, 2014, p. 64; Kubiak, 2016; Marcato, 2019, pp. 92–94; Kubiak-Schneider, 2022b, p. 796). As Marcato (2019, pp. 92–93) has pointed out, this could be derived from a stock-phrase deriving from a more ancient Babylonian tradition. What he leaves out in his short discussion is the fact that "elevated" (Hatrene *'ly'*< Akk. *elû*) is also connected to this stream of tradition. Interestingly enough, it is also included in the temple name of *Esagil* (Sum. É-SAG-ÍL, "House whose top/head is high/elevated", with a nasalized g pronounced as ng) of Marduk in Babylon.

The same basic pattern is followed by the name of the temple of Anu in Uruk during Seleucid and Early Parthian times, *Bit Reš* ("Head Temple"). It was a traditional Babylonian temple which copied parts of the *Esagil*, and was potentially in use as late as the beginning of the 1st century BC (George, 1995; Kose, 2013; Baker, 2013). Probably one could think of a simplified translation as "main temple" but also the fact that both Bit Reš and Esagil were connected to a high rising ziggurat, and were locations of a part (the "beginning", which is also an alternative meaning of Akkadian *reš*) of the *akitu* festival, might have played a role here. A name for the ziggurat at Nippur is *Esagdil*, "House of Secrets" (George, 1993, pp. 138–139) which stood in the (Sum. KISAL-MAḪ, Akk. *kisalmaḫḫu*, see below).

There exists another term for elevated/sublime (Sum. MAḪ) as for example in the temple name *Emaḫ* (É.MAḪ) in Babylon (and elsewhere, see George, 1993, pp. 119–121), a temple built on a platform, while the the court of judgment É.DUB.LÁ.MAḪ (Sum. "House, Exalted Door-Socket"), is a feature of the temple of the moon-god of Ur (George, 1995, p. 79). Furthermore, one of the main gates of the temple could be called "elevated gate" (KÁ-MAḪ) as for example at the Esagil in Babylon (George, 1992, no. 7; Allinger-Csollich, 1998, pp. 287–290). The same component MAḪ made it into the term *kisalmaḫḫu* (Akk.), the main (often the biggest) courtyard of a temple, as for example in the *Esagil* in Babylon or the *Bit Reš* in Uruk but also the *Ekur* at Nippur. The latter provided the example for all the other main temples (George, 1995) including the temple of Aššur in Assur which was even called *Ekur* in a direct reference to the temple of *Enlil* at Nippur.

More interesting in comparison with the Great Iwan at Hatra is the fact that beside KÁ-GAL (Sum. "Great gate"), KÁ-MAḪ (elevated/sublime Gate) comprised one of the at least two (maybe three) main gates known to be located on the north-eastern

side of Esagil in Babylon as well as at the later Bit Reš in Uruk (George, 1995, p. 194; Baker, 2013, p. 22; Kose, 2013). This general orientation fits to the one of the *iwan* at Nippur and related structures (see above). At Hatra in turn, the Great Temenos is directed towards east-southeast, roughly pointing towards the Tigris (ca. 52 km away, measured with Google Earth Pro), to the north of the ancient Assyrian religious capital of Assur. The Southern Iwan points roughly towards a position between Assur and the ancient site of Kar Tukulti-Ninurta ("port of [king] Tukulti-Ninurta [I]"). This direction could be explained with an event in the cult where the rising sun plays a role. A reference to the sun-god Šamaš is provided by the so-called Nippur Compendium. The two main surviving sources are dating to the Seleucid period (ca. 322–140 BCE). One fragment was found in the scholarly library within the house of Iqiša at Uruk (George, 1992, p. 145), a descendant of the Ekur-zakir family with possible ties to Nippur, a few smaller fragments derive from Nineveh and Babylon or Borsippa (7th to 5th century BCE). In the entry for the seventh month *Tašritu* ("*Tiru*", September/October), the "Chariot of Enlil, Foremost Weapon of Enlil" is explained as "For the rising of Šamaš" (p. 155) which could refer to the setup of this event at the foot of the stairs to the southeast of the ziggurat of *Ekur* (Schneider, 2023, pp. 165–166). The sunrise at a certain date could also provide an explanation for the preferred direction of the Great Iwan at Hatra which is dedicated to Šamaš.

Speaking about elevated (Hatrene *'ly'*< Akk. *elû*) in connection with gates, it seems to be indeed a persistent way of naming high portal-like structures, with the "Sublime Porte" (*Bâb-ı Âlî*), originally the gate of the Grand Vizier of Istanbul (Artan, 2011), even to the point of becoming a synecdoche for the state in Ottoman times. Furthermore, in reference to the Sagil inscription at Hatra it should be pointed out here that the Topkapi palace was known as "Palace of Felicity" and the gate leading to the innermost private part of the third courtyard was called "Gate of Felicity".

The example from Nippur presents the possibility of the use of the courtyard, in this case via a removable structure, as an extension of the roofed *iwan*. The Achaemenid and Seleucid traditions show that feasting space was not only limited to the inside of buildings, but they were performed also in the open-air. There, banquets were held in the courtyards but also in the open space, e.g. in Persepolis, Ai-Khanum, Bisutun (Canepa, 2020, pp. 60, 185–186). Such spots could host more people than the buildings, were easier adaptable for processing the food with fire (cooking, baking, charring, etc) and people could move in a much more free way. In the Achaemenid tradition there was a common sacrifice, called *lan* in the sources, for diverse deities, mostly of non-Iranian heritage. The offerings allocated for these sacrifices served as allowances for the priests who performed them (Canepa, 2020, p. 154). We do not however dispose of any source which would name the dishes or foodstuff consumed during the sacred banquets. In the Persepolis archives, the most important Achaemenids' religious rituals were large-scale royal sacrifices followed by massive feasts. Such feasts are determined as *šip* (Canepa, 2020, p. 184). The texts speak about the performance of this celebration, pointing out a large assembly of people gathered in the concentric rings, with at least one member of the aristocracy or royal family (Canepa, 2020, pp. 154 and 185). It had a political and social dimension,

being also a different stage of the same religious events composed with sacrifices, dancing, chanting, etc. (Ascough, 2012, pp. 60–61). The feast portrayed the microcosm of the empire grouping together a community of workers, court functionaries, army, etc. It is also known that such celebrations in a huge and pompous scale were performed also by Alexander and the Seleucids, who were making large expenses for its organization and provisions (Canepa, 2020, pp. 184-185). Furthermore, the Arsacids continued traditions of the great predecessors, the Achaemenids (Wolski 1966, p. 71), which makes the bridge between the Achaemenid times and late Parthian era. The numerous depictions of the reclining deities with banqueting tools like a bowl, couch, etc., in Hatra and in Bisutun from the Parthian period, indicate that the gods were present at the festivals (Dirven, 2005, pp. 65–66; Canepa, 2020, pp. 185–186). It is nothing else than a continuation of earlier traditions of the people of Mesopotamia, where banqueting with the gods was an important element of the *akitu* festival of the New Year (Debourse, 2022, p. 55). This festival in the month of *Nisan* was one of the most important celebrations and it was an occasion to provide luxuries and loads of foodstuffs supplied by the king. Evidence, that this festival was also observed in 1st millennium BCE Nippur is suggested by the Compendium (see above) which provides for the first month Nisan each an *akitu* of Marduk, Ninurta ("for his father Enlil"), Ištar/the Queen of Nippur as well as for Sin ("for Ninurta, the net of the gods") (George 1992, p. 155). The *akitu* temple is sometimes named in the Akkadian sources as "temple of great banquets" (Debourse, 2022, p. 55). An *akitu* temple built directly outside the Nergal gate of Nineveh was called "House of Joy and Gladness for the Festival for the beginning of the year", probably referring to the singing and dancing accompanying the festival. This building was located outside of the city walls, but in later times, like the late Parthian period, it could move to the urban area and the examples from Hatra and Nippur could relate to that, especially when we take into consideration the name "House of Joy".

Conclusions

The consumption of meals within a community demonstrates the social dimension of eating. In the sacred context, feasting brings together religious and social aspects of life. Food is the basic, biological need of humans, but also it is a strong attachment--building factor. The banqueting with the gods is a shared feature by many ancient and modern cultures.

Sharing meals with the gods and representatives of the Earthly society is a natural consequence of celebrations and ritual life. The common meals present themselves as boundaries, they gather only a fragment of the society, a "social circle" in a delimited space and circumstances (Ascough, 2012, p. 69). They are as well connected to the particular groups initiated into these practices. The sacred spaces were particularly designed to not give an open access for the entire society, but for the chosen individuals or groups. The access to dining with the deities was also limited for the cultic personnel and the royal family as well as the associated people. The national dishes,

as Posidonius stated, the presence of the king or other high authority, celebration of festivals with chants, music and dining are the markers of the identity as well as maintain the links with the history and the past (Feeley-Harnik, 1995, pp. 566–567; Souisa, 2018, p. 8). The examples of Hatra and Nippur, both lying within the sphere of ancient Persian and Mesopotamian traditions, demonstrate the management of space for this popular cultic practice.

The structure at Nippur, previously interpreted solely as a palace or fortress, via comparison to Hatra, reveals connections to cultic space. It probably served for dining and feasting with the deities in a bigger scale on the occasion of holidays and in smaller scale in the daily management of rituals. With the architectural evidence at both sites showing striking similarities, we can envision that to some extent the Hatrene epigraphic material could also enlighten the situation at Nippur where such material is not preserved. Furthermore, both Hatra and Nippur both continue ancient traditions of dining with the gods which were already practiced earlier in Mesopotamia and persisted during the periods under foreign domination from the Achaemenid period onwards.

In this paper we definitely did not reach the final truth but we rather like to see it as the start of a process to reach a better understanding of the religioscape of Parthian Nippur and Southern Mesopotamia which in turn could also be of profit to get a better understanding of the picture at Hatra and Northern Mesopotamia. This, naturally, should be done on a bigger scale, incorporating the evidence of other sites such as, for example, Parthian Babylon, Borsippa etc.

References

Alizadeh, A. (2022). Nippur in the Age of Covid-19. *News & Notes, 251* (Winter/Spring), 20–21.

Al-Salihi, W. (1990). The Excavations of Shrine XIII at Hatra. *Mesopotamia 25*, 27–35.

Andrae, W., & Lenzen, H. (1933). *Die Partherstadt Assur.* Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Orient Gesellschaft, Band 57. Hinrichs.

Artan, T. (2011). The making of the Sublime Porte near the Alay Köskü and a tour of a Grand Vizieral Palace at Süleymaniye. *Turcica*, *43*, 145–206.

Ascough, R. S. (2012). Social and Political Characteristics of Greco-Roman Association Meals. In D. E. Smith & H. E. Taussig (Eds.), *Meals in the Early Christian World* (pp. 59–72). Palgrave Macmilla.

Baker, H. (2013). Beneath the Stairs in the Bit Rēš Temple of Hellenistic Uruk. A Study in Cultic Topography and Spatial Organization. *Zeitschrift für Orient-Archäologie*, *6*, 19–42.

Beyer, K. (1998). *Die aramäischen Inschriften aus Assur, Hatra und den übrigen Ostmesopotamien (datiert 44 v. Chr. bis 238 n. Chr.)*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Bucci, I., & Moriggi, M. (2019). *Aramaic Graffiti from Hatra, Culture and History of the Ancient Near East.* Vol. 99. Brill.

Canepa, M. (2020). *The Iranian Expanse. Transforming Royal Identity through Architecture, Landscape, and the Built Environment, 550 BCE–642 CE*. University of California Press.

Clayden, T., & Schneider, B. (2015). Assurbanipal and the ziggurat at Nippur. *KASKAL, 12*, 349–382.

Debourse, C. (2022). *Of Priests and Kings. The Babylonian New Year Festival in the Last Age of Cuneiform Culture.* Culture and History of Ancient Near East, vol. 127. Brill.

De Jong, A. (2013). Hatra and the Parthian Commonwealth. In L. Dirven (ed.), *Hatra. Politics, Culture and Religion between Parthia and Rome, Oriens et Occidens 21* (pp. 143–160). Franz Steiner Verlag.

Dirven, L. (2005). Banquet Scenes from Hatra. *ARAM*, *17*, 61–82.

Dirven, L. (2014). Religious Continuity and Change in Parthian Mesopotamia: A Note on the Survival of Babylonian Traditions. *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History*, *1*, 201–229.

Ermidoro, E. (2015). *Commensality and Ceremonial Meals in the Neo-Assyrian Period.* Antichista 8. Studie rientalni 3. Edizioni Ca'Foscari.

Feeley-Harnik, G. (1995). Religion and Food. An Anthropological Perspective. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, *63*, 565–582.

Foietta, F. (2018). *Hatra: il territorio e l'urbanistica*. Archaeopress.

Foietta, F. (2021). Cooking, Drinking and Banqueting at Hatra. New Data from Building A.*Mesopotamia*, *56*, 191–205.

Gawlikowski, M. (2009). Le banquet sous les voûtes. *Dossier d'Archéologie*, *334*, 14–23.

Harland, P.A. (2012). Banqueting Values in the Associations: Rhetoric and Reality. In D. E. Smith & H. E. Taussig (Eds.), *Meals in the Early Christian World* (73–85). Palgrave Macmillan,

Harland, P.A. (2022). *Parthians: Poseidonios on Royal banquets 1 st century BCE*. http://www.philipharland.com/Blog/2022/07/parthians-poseidonios-on-royal-banquets-first-century-bce/

Gasche, H. (2011). Modèles de l'iwan dans l'architecture Achémenide. In C. Lippolis & S. Martino (Eds.), *Un Impaziente Desiderio di Scorrere il Mondo, Studi in onore di Antonio Invernizzi per il suo settantesimo compleanno* (pp. 177–185). Le Lettere,

George, A. R. (1992). *Babylonian Topographical Texts.* Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, vol. 40. Peeters.

George, A. R. (1993). *House Most High: The Temples of Ancient Mesopotamia*. Mesopotamian Civilizations, vol. 5. Eisenbrauns.

George, A. R. (1995). The bricks of E-Sagil. *Iraq*, *57*, 173–197.

Hauser, S. R. (2011). Assur und sein Umland in Arsakidischer Zeit. In J. Renger (ed.), *Assur – Gott, Stadt und Land. Colloquien der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft* (Band 5, pp. 115–149). Harrassowitz.

Hilprecht, H. V. (1903). *Explorations in Bible Lands during the 19th Century*. A. J. Holman.

Hilprecht, H. V. (1904). *In the Temple of Bel at Nippur: A Lecture Delivered Before German Court And University Circles*. University of Pennsylvania.

Ingholt, H., Seyrig, H., Starcky, J., & Caquot, A. (1955). *Recueil des Tessères de Palmyre*. Geuthner.

Jakubiak, K. (2014). *Sacral Landscape in Hatra*. Światowit Supplement Series A 13. Instytut Archeologii Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego Press.

Jursa, M. (2007). The Babylonian Economy in the First Millenium BC. In G. Leick (ed.), *The Babylonian World* (pp. 224–235). Routledge.

Keall, E. J. (1970). *The significance of Late Parthian Nippur*. PhD thesis. University of Michigan.

Keall, E. J. (1975). Parthian Nippur and Vologases' Southern Strategy: A Hypothesis. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, *95*(4) (Oct.–Dec.), 620–632.

Keall, E. J. (1977). Political, Economic, and Social Factors on the Parthian Landscape of Mesopotamia and Western Iran: Evidence from Two Case Studies. In L. D. Levine & T. C. Young, Jr. (Eds.), *Mountains and Lowlands: Essays in the Archaeology of Greater Mesopotamia* (vol. 7, pp. 81–90). Bibliotheca Mesopotamica.

Keall, E. J. (2014). Nippur in the Parthian Era. *The Canadian Society for Mesopotamian Studies Journal*, *9*, 5–15.

Klaver, S. F. (2019). *Women in Roman Syria. The Cases of Dura-Europos, Palmyra and Seleucia on the Euphrates*. PhD thesis published on-line. https://dare.uva.nl/search?identifier=fbf-4c7ac-f9de-4d30-bb76-3a59522f1987

Knudstad, J. E. (1966). A Report on the 1964–1965 Excavations at Nippur. *Sumer*, *22*, 111–114.

Knudstad, J. E., & Keall, E. J. (1968). A Preliminary Report on the 1966–67. Excavations at Nippur (Historical Summary: E. J. Keall). *Sumer*, *24*, 95–106.

Kubiak, A. (2016). The Gods without Names? Palmyra, Hatra, Edessa. *Aram*, *28*(2), 327–338.

Kubiak-Schneider, A. (2021). *Dédicaces sans théonyme de Palmyre. Béni (soit) son nom pour l'éternité.* Religions of the Greco-Roman World, vol. 197. Brill.

Kubiak-Schneider, A. (2022a). Palmyrene Tesserae in Context of Temple Administration.In R. Raja (ed.), *The Small Stuff of the Palmyrenes. Coins and Tesserae from Palmyra*. Studies in Palmyrene Archaeology and History (vol. 5 pp. 81–88). Brepols.

Kubiak-Schneider, A. (2022b). Hatra of Shamash. How to assign a city under the divine power?. In Th. Galoppin, E. Guillon, M. Luaces, A. Lätzer-Lasar, S. Lebreton, F. Porzia, J. Rüpke, E. Rubens Urciuoli & C. Bonnet (Eds.), *Naming and Mapping the Gods in the Ancient Mediterranean. Spaces, Mobilities, Imaginaries.* DeGruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110798432-041

Kubiak-Schneider, A. (2023). Palmyrene Temples: Economic Institutions. In N. Andrade & R. Raja (Eds.), *Exchange and Reuse in Roman Palmyra. Examining Economy and Circularity, Studies in Palmyrene Archaeology and History*, vol. 8 (pp. 37–45). Brepols.

Lightfoot, J. L. (2003). *Lucian on the Syrian Goddess*. Oxford University Press.

Marcato, E. (2019a). *Personal Names in the Aramaic Inscriptions of Hatra*. Antichistica 17. Studi orientali 7. Edizioni Ca'Foscari.

Marcato, E. (2019b). The "House of Joy" at Hatra and Babylon's Esagila. *NABU*, *55*, 92–94.

Mazzilli, F. (2018). *Rural Cult Centres in the Hauran. Part of the broader network of the Near East (100 BC–AD 300)*. Archaeopress.

McCown, D. E., & Haines, R. C. (1967). *Nippur I: Temple of Enlil, Scribal Quarter, and Soundings. Excavations of the Joint Expedition to Nippur of the University Museum of Philadelphia and the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*. Oriental Institute Publications 78.

Milik, J. T. (1972). *Dédicaces faites par des dieux (Palmyre, Hatra, Tyr) et des thiases sémitiques à l'époque romaine*. Geuthner.

Mühl, S., & Fassbinder, J. (2016). Magnetic investigations in the Shahrizor Plain: Revealing the unseen in survey prospections. In K. Kopanias, & John MacGinnis, *The Archaeology of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Adjacent Regions* (pp. 241–248). Archaeopress.

Myer, C. F. (1992). Joseph Andrew Meyer, JR. Architect at Niffer. In M. deJong Ellis (ed.), *Nippur at the Centennial. Papers Read at the 35e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Philadelphia, 1988* (pp. 137–149). Occasional Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund 14.

Peruzzetto, A., & Valentini, S. (2000). I sondaggi recenti nel temenos di Hatra. *Topoi*, *10*(1), 159–178.

Peters, J. P. (1897). *Nippur or Explorations and Adventures on the Euphrates – The Narrative of the University of Pennsylvania Expedition to Babylonia in the Years 1888–1890*, vol. 2. New York – London.

Rieger, K. (2017). Loose Bonds and Porous Boundaries among Mobile People as Religious Agents in the Greco-Roman Arabian Desert. *Religion in the Roman Empire*, *3*, 11–49.

Schneider, B. (2017). Some Remarks on the Archaeology of the Ekur of Nippur during Post--Kassite Times. In O. Drewnowska et al. (Hrsg.), *Fortune and Misfortune in the Ancient*

Near East, Proceedings of the 60th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale at Warsaw 21–25 July 2015 (pp. 387–408). Eisenbrauns.

Schneider, B. (2018). Ekur in the Late and Post-Assyrian Periods. In B. Horejs, Ch. Schwall, V. Müller, M. Luciani, M. Ritter, M. Guidetti, R. B. Salisbury, F. Höflmayer & Th. Bürge (Eds.), *Archaeology of Religion and Ritual. Proceedings of the 10th International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East, 25–29 April 2016, Vienna* (vol. 1, pp. 343–354). Harrassowitz.

Schneider, B. (2023). *Die Ziqqurrat von Nippur im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr. Marru 12*. Zaphon.

Souisa, N. (2018). Sharing Meal, Sharing Life Together. An Anthropological Perspective on the Significance of Sharing Meal Ritual Based on the Religious Life. *ASSEHR*, *187*, 7–10.

Van der Spek, R. J. (1992). Nippur, Sippar, and Larsa in the Hellenistic Period. In M. deJong Ellis (ed.), *Nippur at the Centennial – Papers Read at the 35e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Philadelphia, 1988.* Occasional Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund 14 (pp. 235–260). The University Museum.

Wolski, J. (1966). Les Achéménides et les Arsacides. Contribution à l'histoire de la formation des traditions iraniennes. *Syria*, *43*, 65–89.

Wright, G. R. H. (1991). Abu Qubur. The 'Parthian Building' and its Affinities. In H. Gasche, N. Pons, G. Verhoeven, & D. A. Warburton (Eds.), *Fouilles d'Abu Qubur*. Mesopotamian History and Environment Series I. Northern Akkad Projects Report (pp. 75–91). University of Ghent.

Zettler, R. L. (1992). *The Ur III Temple of Inanna at Nippur. The Operation and Organization of Urban Religious Institutions in the Late Third Millennium B.C.* Berliner Beiträge zum Vorderen Orient, Band 11. Von Zabern.

Financing note

The part concerning Hatra is a part of the research in the project Al-At realized at the University of Wrocław within the grant Polonez Bis 1; the project no. 2021/43/P/HS3/02595 co-funded by the National Science Centre and the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 945339. For the purpose of Open Access, the author has applied a CC-BY public copyright license to any Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM) version arising from this submission.

The part concerning Nippur is a part of the project MeMaRe realized at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University within the grant Opus, the project no. 2021/41/B/HS3/04062 funded by the National Science Centre. For the purpose of Open Access, the author has applied a CC-BY public copyright license to any Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM) version arising from this submission.