

This project will highlight the lived experience of religion of the diverse, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic communities of historic Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq, NE Syria and neighbouring regions) throughout three millennia (3000-539BC). Mesopotamia witnessed the earliest city-states, whose life centred on temples and shrines inhabited by deities believed to govern natural and cultural phenomena. Residents dedicated objects to these deities, which could be uninscribed or inscribed, sometimes with a personal message to the divine recipient. How did people forge connections with the divine and what objects did they dedicate to these temples and shrines? Who had access to the large monumental temples and did people worship different, lesser, personal deities in their houses? Did the lower echelons of society dedicate objects of lesser quality? And what about different gender or ethnic groups: did they dedicate different objects, putting them in different places? ‘Mesopotamian Material Religion’ aims to probe such questions and more and offer a holistic view of the role that objects and space played in the shifting religious landscape of ancient Mesopotamia. By foregrounding how *all* people negotiated their religious identities in the longue durée, it will generate a new understanding of the entanglement of religion with the material world.

Its core material includes: 1) c.10,000 uninscribed dedicatory objects found in Mesopotamian sacred contexts and 2) all archaeologically identified sacred spaces (c.600 spaces across c.60 sites). While most uninscribed dedicated objects were not the remit of elite individuals and most of the inscribed ones were commissioned by individuals of higher status, the two cannot always be conflated. By comparing inscribed *and* uninscribed objects within the same sacred context and analysing large-scale patterns in their comparative characteristics, we may identify insofar as the two were equivalent. Differences in context may also point to alternative worship praxis for those without access to elite technologies and the most sacred spaces. We will hence map sacred contexts and spaces. Mesopotamia proper is devoid of natural sacred spaces, such as high mountains or springs; sacred spaces were therefore consciously created. Here we define sacred spaces based on the presence of installed human-made features: a) the large monumental temples dedicated to the major deities of the Mesopotamian pantheon; b) smaller temples/shrines within the cities dedicated to minor deities; c) public spaces; d) household and neighbourhood shrines, painting a picture of private religion; e) those well-delineated open-air sacred spaces, as such were used for public worship; and f) spaces of ancestral worship.

The project’s overarching aim –to generate a comprehensive and inclusive history of religious dedicatory practice in the long historical Mesopotamian trajectory– will be achieved by combining a novel theoretical framework with concrete and data-driven means of analysis. Unlike previous histories of Mesopotamian religion, which are often unable to anchor the material in space and time, our approach maps human-divine relationships and worship practices onto the living landscape of the ancient past in a quantifiable way. This is the only project to apply digital humanities, archaeometric and statistical analysis to holistically analyse Mesopotamian worship. The resultant models will not only highlight the personal religious experience of the ancient people in Mesopotamia, but also tie them into a greater landscape as it shifted along with the socio-political fortunes of local and regional communities. Further, the collection and analysis of dedicatory material in an open-access format is of vital importance to scholarly and local communities. Due to historical foreign excavation and collecting practices, much Near Eastern material is dispersed in museums worldwide, unevenly published and virtually inaccessible. Upheavals in the region have also threatened its cultural heritage: digitisation and comprehensive publication is thus crucial. This will be the first sustained effort to make such a breadth of material, touching upon our own lived experience of religion, accessible to all.

