The Babylonian Akītu Festival and the Ritual Humiliation of the King
By Sam Mirelman

Many Mesopotamian festivals are known, but only one involved a priest striking the king. The akītu was one of the most important calendrical festivals of ancient Mesopotamia. It was performed at several different cities, and at various dates, from the third millennium BCE onwards. However, the details of the festival are mostly known from cuneiform tablets dating to the first millennium BC. In the first millennium BC the Babylonian akītu festival was performed twice a year. The spring akītu took place in the month of nisannu (March-April). This was the first month of the Babylonian calendar, corresponding to the spring equinox. The second akītu was performed in the seventh month (tašrītu = September/October), corresponding to the autumn equinox. Detailed descriptions of the festival are known especially for the cities of Babylon and Uruk, but also to a lesser extent for various cities in Assyria. However, in all cases our knowledge of the festival is fragmentary and incomplete.
On day 8 an assembly of the gods took place in the temple of Marduk, followed by a procession of the cult statues of Marduk and the other gods out of the Ishtar gate and to the akītu-house, located outside the city walls. Various indirect sources point towards the symbolic enactment of Marduk’s defeat of Tiāmat (the sea) at the akītu-house, thus reflecting the myth of the Babylonian Creation Epic in actual ritual. At day 11 Marduk and the other gods formed a triumphant procession back to Babylon. This procession to and from the akītu-house was probably the only point in the Babylonian calendar when the general public could witness the cult statues of the gods, since access to the temple complex was normally restricted only to priests and temple functionaries.

Ištar Gate of Babylon, as reconstructed in the Pergamon Museum (Berlin)
The main ritual description of the akītu of Babylon in nisannu survives in cuneiform tablets dating to the late 1st millennium BCE. These sources include ritual descriptions, but also references in royal inscriptions and other indirect evidence. Highlights of the festival include day 4, when the Babylonian Creation Epic (enūma eliš) was recited in front of the cult statue of Marduk. Marduk was the principal deity of Babylon, and both the akītu festival and the Babylonian Creation Epic are generally concerned with the exaltation of Babylon and Marduk.

One of the primary purposes of the festival was the (bi-)annual renewal of the king’s mandate, and this aspect of the festival is a feature of day 5. On this day the king was led into the temple of Marduk in Babylon where he underwent a “ritual humiliation.”
This was a private ritual involving only the king, the high priest and the cult statue of Marduk. It involved the high priest leading the king into the temple of Marduk, temporarily removing the king’s insignia (scepter, loop, mace and Crown of Kingship), striking the king’s cheek, leading him into the cella in front of Marduk, pulling the king by the ears, and making him kneel on the ground. At this point the king uttered a protestation of his innocence to Marduk, asserting that he has not committed an offense against Marduk, Babylon, the Esagil (Marduk’s temple in Babylon), or the privileged subjects (kidinnu-citizens) of Babylon:

[I did not sin, Lord of the Lands. I was not neglectful of your divinity. I did not des]troy Babylon, I have not commanded its dispersal, I did not make Esagil tremble, I did not treat its rites with contempt. I did not strike the cheek of the kidinnu-citizens, I did not humiliate them, I did [not]... to Babylon, I did not destroy its outer walls ...

After a break in the text, the high priest reassures the king that Marduk will support and extol his kingship and destroy his enemies. The high priest returns the king’s insignia, after which he strikes the king’s cheek a second time:

“He (the high priest) strikes the king’s cheek. When he has struck his cheek, if his tears flow, Marduk is content. If tears do not flow, Marduk is angry; an enemy will arise and bring about his downfall.”

It is of interest that the second slap to the king’s cheek is designed to produce tears as the result of a physical action. Thus, ritual weeping was not conceived as an expression of one’s inner emotional state. As in the practice of hiring professional lamenters at funerals, something that is known from ancient Mesopotamia and various other ancient and traditional cultures, lament and ritual weeping was conceived as a demonstrative, performative act. The acts of prostration, penitence and ritual weeping featured in this ritual are intended to promote divine favor, as shown by various other forms of evidence from Mesopotamian ritual and literature.

This ritual is an example of status reversal. The king’s temporary loss of his status is demonstrated to Marduk by the removal of his insignia, the act of prostration, and the striking of his cheek by the high priest. Such acts of prostration and temporary loss of status are also a feature of the akītu festival in Autumn, when the king spends the night in a reed “prison” structure outside the city. His royal insignia are removed, and lamentful, penitential prayers are recited. In the morning the king receives his insignia back, and his royal status is restored.

It is clear from such rituals that the king’s absolute power was conditional upon bi-annual confirmation from the god(s) and the priesthood. However, a potential problem with this famous ritual has been highlighted in recent scholarship. The principal ritual description of the Babylonian akītu festival of nisannu dates to the late first millennium BCE. In this period Babylonia was under foreign rule first from Cyrus and the Achaemenids (539-331 BCE), followed by Alexander and the Seleucids (331-141 BCE), and then by the Parthians. There is some evidence demonstrating that such foreign kings at times actively supported the Babylonian cult, and one or two of them may even have participated in the festival itself. However, several scholars consider the late ritual texts not as copies from earlier originals, and a reflection of actual ritual practice. Instead, according to one interpretation they may be considered as a reflection of the Babylonian priesthood’s assertion of itself in an environment of foreign domination. Thus, according to this approach the humiliation of the king may be understood not only as a means of keeping the king’s power in check, but as a reflection of a power play between the king and the priesthood.

The Babylonian akītu festivals reflect a common ritual structure of status reversal, for which there are many examples from other cultures around the world. On the other hand such festivals may be considered as a reflection of the political context in which they were written and/or performed. The “ritual humiliation” of the king in such rituals functioned as a means of (re-)legitimating the king in the eyes of the god(s), the priesthood and the elites. However, should we interpret this as a reflection of the king’s limited power? Or should we understand it as a reflection of the fact that any absolute ruler cannot exercise power in isolation, but only with the active support of an inner circle of elites surrounding that ruler?
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