Kai Kaniuth, Anne Löhnert, Jared L. Miller, Adelheid Otto, Michael Roaf, and Walther Sallaberger, eds.

Tempel im Alten Orient

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This valuable volume contains twenty-four essays from a 2009 Munich conference on the ancient Near Eastern temple. The essays are in German and English, each with an abstract in the alternate language, and are ordered alphabetically by the authors’ names. They cover a geographic spread from Hittite Anatolia to Achaemenid Fars and a timespan from the Neolithic to the Achaemenid Empire. The size of the volume and variety of the essays means only a brief summary of each can be made here.

Wilfrid Allinger-Csollich, in “Gedanken über das Aussehen und die Funktion einer Ziqqurat,” argues from recent excavations of ziggurats in Borsippa and Warka that ziggurats should be understood as large tower-temples rather than bases for the upper temple.

In “Rituale beim Abriß und Wiederaufbau eines Tempels,” Claus Ambos describes how rituals were required during the entire process of temple construction, to protect against evil and keep the titular god pleased.

Reinhard Bernbeck’s “Religious Revolutions in the Neolithic?” critically discusses modern assumptions about temples and rejects a direct continuity between the Neolithic and later Mesopotamian temples.
Jerrold S. Cooper, in “Sex and the Temple,” argues that, while there was likely real sex around the Mesopotamian temples, no females impersonated the goddess in sacred marriages with the king.

In “Babylonische Tempel zwischen Ur III- und neubabylonischer Zeit,” Margarete van Ess explores various correspondences between literary and archaeological evidence for Babylonian ziggurat-temple complexes, focusing on Ur III Uruk and Ur and the Neo-Babylonian Borsippa Ezida. She discusses the design of the complexes, the use of deposits in building works, meaningful measurements of bricks and complexes, and the relation of shape foundations and staircases to cosmological ideas.

Frederick Mario Fales’s “The Temple and the Land” reconstructs the ways that Mesopotamian temples could influence the extratemple society beyond economics, in terms of “theological” fame and power.

Uri Gabbay, in “The Performance of Emesal Prayers,” argues that the use of Sumerian Emesal prayers in the first millennium reflects their cultic contexts in two ways: their timing during the day and the local theologies of the temples.

In “Hethitische Rituale im Tempel,” Susanne Görke starts from a royal Hittite prayer to explore a cultic context that includes feasting, the king and queen, and the importance of noncultic participants.

Markus Hilgert’s “‘Tempelbibliothek’ oder ‘Tafeldepot’?” focuses on Sippar to problematize the categorization of textual finds in temples as “libraries,” using praxis theory. He denies an evident single owner or direct correlation to cult practice for the collection there, and thus he discourages the use of “library.”

Michael Jursa, in “Die babylonische Priesterschaft im ersten Jahrtausend v. Chr.,” explores the social and economic situation of the Neo-Babylonian priesthood, seeing the families as a rule insular, conservative, often poor, and not as influential as sometimes supposed.

Kristin Kleber’s “The Late Babylonian Temple” characterizes first-millennium temples as state institutions that supported the royal ideology, war, taxation, and building efforts, while remaining a source of local pride and potential resistance.

Kay Kohlmeyer, in “Der Tempel des Wettergottes von Aleppo,” describes the Bronze and Iron Age temple of the weather god in Aleppo, emphasizing its importance for art and cult in the region, and postulates that this was related to topographical and climactic factors.
In “Die babylonischen Tempel in der Zeit nach den Chaldäern,” Walter Kuntner and Sandra Heinsch critically challenge the narrative of Xerxes destroying the Babylonian temples by reassessing the archaeology of four temples, arguing that, not only did the temples remain throughout the Persian period but that their very size may have been an Achaemenid innovation.

Anne Löhnert’s “Das Bild des Tempels in der sumerischen Literatur” describes the way the temple was depicted in Sumerian hymns, noting in particular the close ways the temple and city were interrelated, how the cloistering of the temples promoted awe but was counterbalanced by festivals, and the significance of the temple doors and gates.

Nicolò Marchetti’s “Mesopotamian Early Dynastic Statuary in Context” discusses the use of statues royal statues in third-millennium Mesopotamia, arguing that there was a transformation from a magical “live” double before a god to a method for establishing dynastic continuity.

Stefan M. Maul, in “Das Haus des Götterkönigs,” places the roles of Marduk and Assur within the theologies of creation and the political projects of empire formation. He argues that shared participation in transregional cults could indeed be community forming.

Wiebke Meinhold’s “Tempel, Kult und Mythos” describes the logic behind the collection of gods worshiped in a sanctuary in relation to the titular deity(ies). She argues that, in addition to familial, characteristic, and functional relationships, the example of Šarrat-nipḫa in Assur shows they can also be constructed through myth.

Andreas Müller-Karpe argues, in “Einige archäologische sowie archäoastronomische Aspekte hethitischer Sakralbauten,” that several clearly attested Hittite temples were built that coincide with astronomical phenomenon, including the solstices and the rise of the polestar.

Adelheid Otto, in “Gotteshaus und allerheiligstes in Syrien und Nordmesopotamien während des 2.Jts v. chr.,” explores the setting of Syrian temples within larger temenos complexes and argues that similar functions as the larger Babylonian temples were fulfilled there. This granted the Syrian temples more of a “communal” character than the more enclosed Mesopotamian ones.

In “Syrian and North Mesopotamian Temples in the Early Bronze Age,” Frances Pinnock sees a strong, independent tradition of temple architecture and their relation to power structures in the archeology of Syria, one that emphasized the correspondence between divine and earthly leadership roles.
Shahrokh Razmjou and Michael Roaf’s “Temples and Sacred Places in Persepolis” highlights the significance of religious ritual for the Achaemenids. This is broached through arguing that there were a number of temples and sacred areas in and around Persepolis, proposing that even the tachara-“palaces” of Darius and Xerxes on the Persepolis terrace were actually temples.

Michael Roaf, in “Temples and the Origin of Civilisation,” focuses on early southern Mesopotamia and argues that it is likely that religion was a formative force in early urban centers and societies, not just a result of the process.

Ingo Schrakamp’s “Die ‘Sumerische Tempelstadt’ heute” rejects the idea that the early dynastic city was ruled by the temple, arguing instead that the temple provided necessary subsistence while political power remained with the palace.

Ursula Seidel, in “Bildschmuck an mesopotamischen Tempeln,” describes the interior and exterior decoration of second-millennium Mesopotamian temples within three categories of palm trees and water, door guardians, and astral images. She sees these as emphasizing fruitfulness and protection of the sanctuary, while the interiors were designed to focus attention on the deity present there.

The volume ends with indices of names (divine, personal, places), topics, texts, and words in five languages.

The collection contains a useful range of relevant topics over a long span of time, discussing archaeological, iconographical, and textual evidence, religious and political issues concerning temples, and historical and methodological questions. To be commended is the inclusion of ritual and mythological elements in the discussion. The results of recent excavations are included, and the relevant essays have ample pictures and floor plans. This combination allows the reader to gain a good sense of the phenomena of the major cultic center in the Near East over time as well as some of its particularities of time and place, while interrogating many aspects of the institutions’ implications for society and historical reconstruction. Both new archaeological evidence and new perspectives allow several essays to query long-standing opinions related to temples (in particular, in reference to the Achaemenids). For my area of interest, it was pleasing to see the Achaemenid period discussed in relation to a long-term ancient Near Eastern perspective; indeed, the first millennium is relatively well represented.

I see two minor drawbacks of the volume. First is the lack of the inclusion of temples from Egypt or Canaan/Israel. This is no doubt due to the exigencies of the symposium from which the volume derives and the already significant length, but both Egypt and
Israel certainly belong within the wider milieu and would profit from the juxtaposition with the (mostly Mesopotamian) material here. Second, the order of essays would perhaps have been more convenient to the reader had it been structured by era or theme. As it is, the connections and contrasts between the various contributions are harder to notice than they might have been otherwise.

Overall, this is a valuable volume that any department dealing with the ancient Near East or the Hebrew Bible will want on its shelf, and it is certain to stimulate future work on religious institutions in the ancient Near East.