The Algerian Historical Journal
ISSN: 2572-0023 / EISSN: 2716-9065
https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/PresentationRevue/664
Volume: 09, N°: 02 (2025), p10- 26

The Civilizational Role of the Temple in Mesopotamian Society

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Abstract:

The Mesopotamian temple held a privileged position as a landmark, reflecting the religious, social, and economic life of its society. It was regarded as the house of the deity and a sacred center for rituals, yet its role extended beyond worship to daily life. Over time, it became a vast economic institution, owning land, managing resources, and organizing agricultural and distribution activities. The temple also served as an administrative center maintaining social and political order. Its architectural and artistic features demonstrate creativity and symbolism, carrying both religious and political significance. Overall, the temple reflects the interconnected nature of religion, economy, and governance in Mesopotamia.

Article info

Received:
09/10/2025
Accepted:
06/12/2025

Key words:

- ✓ Mesopotamian society
- ✓ Temple, ziggurat
- ✓ Civilizational role
- ✓ historical and archaeological significance

Introduction

Religious thought in Mesopotamian civilization was one of the fundamental pillars upon which the social, political, and economic structures of society were built. Daily life was closely intertwined with worship and religious rituals, with the temple serving as the central institution where the multiple functions of society converged from worship to administration and economic organization. This reflected the profound link between the sacred and worldly life. As a result, the temple held a pivotal position, becoming more than a place of worship; it evolved into a comprehensive civilizational institution that played various roles. It served as a spiritual authority that legitimized rulers and reinforced the collective values of society, while also standing as a civilizational symbol that revealed the significance and symbolism of religion in shaping human identity and worldview.

However, the temple's role extended beyond material functions. It also held educational and cultural significance, being closely associated with scribal schools and the preservation of knowledge. This duality, combining religious symbolism with scientific and educational functions, made the temple one of the basic elements of Mesopotamian society, ensuring its stability and embodying its identity over time. On this basis, this study aims to highlight the religious role of the temple, while also examining its administrative and political structures, as well as its architectural and artistic dimensions, which reflected both sacred value and temporal authority.

1. The Nature of the Mesopotamian Temple

In the Sumerian language, the temple was known as (É), meaning "house," the place where the gods were worshipped and rituals performed. In Akkadian, it was called (bitu), meaning "the dwelling of the god on earth." (Saad, 1426 / 2005, p. 12) Similarly, in Babylonian, the word "house" (Al-Rawi, 2001, p. 120) was utilized - a term common in the languages of the Arabian Peninsula. The hall in which the divine statue was placed resembled the design of the throne room in the royal palace, symbolizing authority and distinction. It also represented aspects of the sacred inner chamber of the temple, where the statue of the god was installed on an elevated platform (Saad, 1426 / 2005, p. 12).

The temple first emerged in southern Mesopotamia around the mid-fifth millennium BC during the Ubaid period. At that time, it consisted of small rooms built of mudbrick and baked brick. Scholars note that "mudbrick and brick were used as primary materials due to the ease with which builders could shape them and create both architectural and aesthetic elements, such as arches, vaults, and other structures. Mudbrick was also used in temple construction because of its low cost, accessibility, and the builders' desire to preserve their architectural heritage, in addition to their appreciation of its unique and pure properties. Stone, on the other hand, was used in a limited way" (Abdul Kassar, 2014, p. 326). These were set on artificial terraces and decorated with façades characterized by recesses and projections, an architectural feature that later spread as far as the Nile Valley (Abdul Kassar, 2014, p. 326). Over time, these structures expanded and became more complex. Temples came to include open areas accessible to the public as well as restricted sections reserved for priests, who alone were allowed to enter the most sacred part of the temple, known in Babylonian as Erib-biti, meaning "inside the temple. (Taha Baqir et al, 1980, p. 27)"

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The Algerian Historical Journal
EISSN: 2716-9065 / ISSN: 2572-0023

In every major city, a principal temple was dedicated to the worship of the city's patron deity, considered the most significant temple in the land. The king served as chief priest of the temples, regarded as the "shepherd" chosen by the city god and directly accountable to him. Constructing and restoring temples was among the king's foremost duties. However, such projects were not grounded in the king's decision alone; temple building followed specific rituals and divine signs, sometimes initiated through the interpretation of the king's dream by the high priest as a command from the god (Rashid, p. 97).

The temple was described as the "house of the god," consecrated for worship and rituals. It symbolized the link between humanity and the divine, while also standing as an architectural masterpiece embodying both spirituality and artistry. In Mesopotamia, the temple was not merely a place of worship but a comprehensive civilizational center that played a crucial role in daily life. It was the heart of religious practice, where rituals, ceremonies, and festivals were held and where people sought communion with their gods. It also served as a judicial center, where judges resolved disputes, and as an economic hub, functioning like a bank that provided deposits and loans. Temples owned extensive farmland that generated considerable revenue and employed large numbers of workers and farmers. Furthermore, they acted as cultural centers, particularly in education, intellectual activity, and literature. Archaeological discoveries from temple archives encompass economic records, literary texts, lexical lists, and a wide range of knowledge across disciplines (Faiz, 2019, p. 283). Despite changes over time, Mesopotamian temples retained distinctive architectural characteristics, most notably:

- The corners of the temple were aligned with the four cardinal directions: east, west, north, and south.
- Each temple contained a platform designated for presenting offerings to the gods.
- Within the temple was a chamber known as the sanctuary, regarded as the holiest part, where the statue of the deity was placed. The sanctuary often also included the altar.
- The walls of the temple, particularly the façade, featured what are known as projections and recesses, consisting of indentations or offsets in the construction (Taha, pp. 27-28). Cuneiform texts further indicate that the city of Babylon contained 1,179 temples, both large and small. Among these, approximately 153 were major temples dedicated to the worship of the most prominent deities, in addition to smaller shrines and offering places (Taha B. , p. 627).

2. The Administrative Structure of the Ancient Babylonian Temple: The Priestly Institution

The title (EN) emerges in cuneiform texts as "lord" (Harry, 2019, p. 57) and referred to the high priest at the top of the Sumerian priestly hierarchy (Khazaal, 1998, p. 272). In the Semitic language, it was written as (ēnu), meaning "holders of high rank." Its counterpart was the high priestess, (ēntu). The high priest (EN) combined both religious and temporal authority (Rashid A. H., 2004, p. 95).

The offices of high priest and high priestess held great prestige in Mesopotamia and were highly esteemed by kings, who frequently appointed members of their own families, sons and daughters, to these exalted positions (Zibari, 2004, p. 54). Scholars note that "the story of his birth appears on three tablets. The first and second tablets date to the Neo-

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The Algerian Historical Journal
EISSN: 2716-9065 / ISSN: 2572-0023

Assyrian period (c. 750 BC), while the third tablet belongs to the Neo-Babylonian period. Sargon was known for his strong personality and as the founder of the Akkadian Empire. He was a military, administrative, political, and economic leader, and trade flourished during his reign, reaching as far as Anatolia" (Al-Samarrai, 2017, pp. 20–21). Examples encompass:

- King Sargon of Akkad (2371–2316 BC), who appointed his daughter as high priestess.
- King Naram-Sin (2260–2224 BC), who appointed his son Bīt-ili as high priest of the god of Marad (https://www.investdiw.gov.iq).
- King Ur-Baba, founder of the Second Dynasty of Lagash (2200–2100 BC), who appointed his son as high priest.
- Išbi-Erra of the Isin Dynasty (2017–1985 BC), who appointed his daughter as high priestess of the god Nanna (Wahd, 2006, p. 15).
- King Ur-Nammu (2113–2092 BC), founder of the Third Dynasty of Ur, who appointed his son as high priest.
- King Rim-Sin of Larsa (1822–1793 BC), who appointed his son as high priest.
- King Ashurbanipal (669–627 BC), who appointed his son as high priest (Zibari A. M., 2004, pp. 54–55).

The Assyrian kings themselves also held high priestly ranks. The primary reason for appointing their children to these positions was to ensure control over the religious sphere. This policy secured popular loyalty and support while reinforcing the legitimacy of royal authority. By placing family members in the offices of high priest and high priestess, kings strengthened the perception that they were the direct representatives of the gods on earth. In some cases, these offices became hereditary, further consolidating the unity of the royal family and enhancing its authority (Zibari A. M., 2004, p. 55).

2.1. SANGA

The term Sanga (Sumerian: sanga, Akkadian: sangum) referred to the chief priests, who belonged to the higher ranks of the Mesopotamian priesthood (Zibari A. M., 2004, p. 54). Classified in the first tier of the priestly hierarchy, the title Sanga designated the "senior priests" and included the māḫu; the "great" or "chief" priest who was appointed according to specific criteria (Khazaal, 1998, p. 272).

According to Falkenstein, the precise meaning of the title Sanga remains uncertain, but it most likely denoted an important administrative and religious position. Evidence supporting the importance of the title includes its occurrence in various archaeological sites, such as Jemdet Nasr. Scholars note that "named after Tell Jemdet Nasr in Babylon Governorate, it is a small tell located 26 km north of the city of Kish. The Jemdet Nasr civilization flourished between the end of the Late Uruk period and the beginning of the Early Dynastic period (c. 3000–2900 BC). It represents the last stage before the historical period, during which humans reached an advanced level in art, writing, lighting, and pottery production and decoration" (Asfour, p. 343). This suggests the prominence of this office in that city. Some historians argue that the title referred to the temple's chief administrator, responsible for managing temple affairs, organizing religious activities, and overseeing all temple personnel. Other titles discovered at the Jemdet Nasr site demonstrate a connection between the title Sanka and other positions, such as Dub-sar, referring to a government

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The Algerian Historical Journal
EISSN: 2716-9065 / ISSN: 2572-0023

official, and Kar, referring to individuals involved in temple administration (Ali, 1975, p. 131).

2.2. GUDA-PSUM

The gudapsûm priest was among the high-ranking clergy of Mesopotamia and held a prominent position in Sumerian society. The earliest reference to gudapsûm priests dates back to the Early Sumerian period, where they were designated as (GUDU.ZU.AB). The term also appears in a hymn to the god Enlil as (ABZU GUDU). According to Al-Saadi, "Enlil: Written in Sumerian as En-lil and in Akkadian as Il-lil, the name consists of two components. The first, En, means 'Lord' among the Sumerians and corresponds to Bel in Akkadian. This component was used to refer to the god Enlil by some kings who titled themselves 'Bel' in the city of Nippur from the time of Naram-Sin to the end of the Middle Babylonian period" (Al-Saadi, 2009, p. 1)

These priests played a crucial role in various aspects of religious life, encompassing offering sacrifices, performing rituals, interpreting dreams, and advising kings. The title gudapsûm occurs frequently in texts from the Old Babylonian period, especially in the cities of Ur, Sippar, Isin, and Larsa. According to Basma Jalil et al, "City of Sippar: Located 45 km southwest of Baghdad, its name appears in cuneiform texts as UD.KIB.NUN, meaning 'City of the Sun's Prince' or 'City with Large Sunny Spaces.' In Akkadian, it is Sippar, which also means 'copper'" (Basma Jalil et al., 2022, p. 181). Babylonian records emphasize their significance as witnesses in legal contracts, with some documents mentioning three or even four gudapsûm priests as witnesses to the same transaction (Laith, 1412/1991, p. 65).

The kudu-psûm priest also held specific responsibilities during the wheat harvest in the Old Babylonian period. He would rent the "divine weapon," or the sacred symbol of the god Shamash, from the temple and carry it through villages and rural areas during the harvest season. The purpose of this ritual was to ensure the fair collection of taxes, equitable distribution of crops, and proper storage of the harvest, while also generating additional income for the temple. Texts from the reign of the Babylonian king Ammi-ṣaduqa (1646–1626 BC) record that a kudu-psûm priest paid three kūr of wheat to rent the divine symbol of Shamash during the harvest season. It is also noted that the field owner would give the kudu-psûm priest 10% of his annual yield (Laith, 1412/1991, p. 66).

2.3. PASI-SU

In Sumerian texts, the word (GUDU), composed of (UH+ME), appears, corresponding in Akkadian to (pasisum = passum). The term derives from the verb "to anoint," meaning "to smear with oil," which reflects one of the functions of the pasi-su priest: ritual anointing with oil, symbolizing purity and sanctity. Another interpretation of (pasisu) referred to a special consecration ritual that elevated these priests to their sacred office. In this view, the priests were anointed with oil during their installation ceremony, symbolizing a change in their religious status and their promotion to a higher rank (Laith, 1412/1991, pp. 74-75).

The title was also common among Mesopotamian kings and rulers, who considered it a prestigious priestly designation. Notable figures who bore this title include:

- King Ziusudra, the hero of the Sumerian flood story, who referred to himself as King Ziusudra (pasisu).

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AHJ المجلة التاريخية الجزائرية
The Algerian Historical Journal
EISSN: 2716-9065 / ISSN: 2572-0023

- King Sargon of Akkad and his son Manishtushu, who both assumed the title pasi-su priest of the god Anu.
- King Naram-Sin, grandson of Sargon, who also bore the title pasi-su priest of Anu.
- King Shu-Sin of the Third Dynasty of Ur, who was titled pasi-su priest of the god Enlil. (Laith, 1412/1991, pp. 75-76).

2.4. ERIB-BITI

Erib-Bīti was a Sumerian-Akkadian title given to a person of special status within the temple. The term derives from the Sumerian word Lu.ku.e, meaning "the one who enters the temple. (Renger, 1985, p. 200)." This demonstrates that the Erib-Bīti had special permission to enter all or some parts of the temple, an exclusive privilege likely granted due to specific qualifications or a distinguished social standing in Mesopotamia. The functions of the Erib-Bīti were diverse. He often served as a witness in legal transactions. For example, in texts from the Old Babylonian period in the city of Sippar, Erib-Bīti is frequently mentioned as a witness. In one contract regarding the leasing of the priestess Nadītu, Erib-Bīti was listed as the first witness, followed by the monastery gatekeeper. Similarly, three Erib-Bītis were recorded as witnesses in a contract of sale, suggesting that multiple individuals could hold this title simultaneously (Laith, 1412/1991, p. 103). He also emerged as a witness in a commercial transaction involving a temple priest of Šamaš. Furthermore, one text records him managing the ownership of an estate called sibtu (a type of feudal property). One researcher notes that the use of the term sibtu suggests that Erib-Bīti, like military officials, could receive land grants from the king as a form of benefice (Harris, 1975, p. 171).

The title Erib-Bīti also refers to the economic hierarchy within temples during the Old Babylonian period, emphasizing his elevated social position, which granted him access to temple spaces and participation in its activities. The mention of sibtu further implies a possible link between the Erib-Bīti and the ruling class, as such lands were commonly granted to military personnel as rewards (Laith, 1412/1991, p. 103).

For instance, one text states: "The chief of the Erib-Bīti shall lead the torch from the ziggurat, accompanied by the mashmashu (exorcist priests)." According to Mansouria “Mashmushu: Also called Ashipu, he was a magician and intermediary between the sick person and the deity. The Ashipu was responsible for the principle of substitution, taking a sacrificial animal and placing it beside the patient in bed, then passing a copper knife over the patient’s neck to sacrifice the animal. The patient’s family would weep and offer funerary sacrifices to the gods” (Mansouria, 2021–2022, p. 90). In addition to the kalu, referred to by Al-Sawah as follows: “Kalu: This class of priests was responsible for reciting hymns accompanied by music to entertain and soothe the hearts of the major gods. Various musical instruments were used for this purpose, including the drum (lilissu). They also participated in New Year celebrations and festivals” (Harry, 2019, p. 400).

2.5. SAL–ZIKRU

The priestess Sal-Zikru played a crucial role in Mesopotamia. She was classified among the Sumerian priestesses as a gatekeeper priestess. Her name Sal-Zikrum literally means “woman-man” or hermaphrodite. She was a nun attached to the temple but not consecrated to any particular deity. Her duties included bringing individuals to serve in the

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The Algerian Historical Journal
EISSN: 2716-9065 / ISSN: 2572-0023

palace or temple, often through adoption (Khazaal, 1998, p. 278).

The priestess Sal-Zikru is mentioned in the Code of Hammurabi. For example, in Article 178 which states: "If an Entum, Naditum, or Sal-Zikru, to whom her father wrote a tablet when he gave her a dowry, but did not grant her full legal independence (i.e., she remained under guardianship), then upon the father's death, her brothers may take her field and orchard while providing her with food, oil, and clothing proportional to the value of her share, thereby ensuring her livelihood. If her brothers fail to offer this support, she has the right to lease her field and orchard to any tenant she chooses, who in turn must maintain her. However, she only possesses the right of usufruct which is the use and benefit of the property not the right to sell it or to bequeath it to others, since the inheritance itself belongs to her brothers. (Aidan, 1999, p. 145)"

3. The Civilizational Role of the Temple

3.1. In Education

The history of Mesopotamia, especially in the south, abounds with monumental achievements. Among the most notable was the appearance of the first known writing system in the second half of the 4th millennium BC. Archaeological excavations in a temple at ancient Uruk, Level IV, demonstrated more than a thousand clay tablets containing economic records associated with the temple's needs, as well as word lists created for educational purposes. These were written in the earliest form of writing (Taha B. , p. 241): Pictographic writing which relied on the realistic drawing of material objects, or parts of them, to convey meaning (Suleiman, 2005, p. 83).

Later, Mesopotamians developed symbolic writing Symbolic Writing which uses agreed-upon symbols to represent material or abstract objects, such as a circle with a dot in the center to indicate a day (Suleiman, 2000, p. 49). This enabled them to record abstract concepts, and eventually advanced to phonetic writing was used by the Sumerians to depict material objects approximately, along with numbers indicating quantity. Most of the discovered tablets contain economic and educational content, including lists of food and textiles (https://istakteb.com/2022/10/02),employing cuneiform signs for their phonetic values rather than their pictorial or symbolic meanings (Al-Nuaimi, 2001, p. 10). Therefore, the temples of Mesopotamia were not merely places of worship but also significant cultural and educational centers (Taha B. , p. 163). They contained schools where writing, reading, arithmetic, astronomy, law, and music were taught, often under the guidance of priests. Initially, education was restricted to priests and select students ,It started with training in writing, then expanded to literature, language, astronomy, mathematics, and medicine, as seen in institutions such as the Temple of Tell Harmal and Nabu Shukhari in Babylon (Al-Nuaimi, 2001, p. 18).

Temples were the earliest centers of learning and continued to offer instruction through different periods. From the Old Babylonian period onward, interest in education grew significantly, particularly as political authority began to overshadow religious authority. To preserve their influence, temples highlighted spreading religious doctrines through education (Rashid F. , 1985, p. 189). They established formal schools with curricula infused with a religious character, thereby securing the loyalty of educated individuals (Rashid F. , 1983, p. 16). The scribes in the temples were often drawn from among the priests and were

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The Algerian Historical Journal
EISSN: 2716-9065 / ISSN: 2572-0023

trained within the temple. However, not all priests were scribes, nor were all scribes priests. Scribes managed the administrative affairs of the temples, oversaw their storerooms, and recorded and circulated various products and goods.

At times, they traveled with merchants to different cities to record and verify financial data. They also assisted in classifying and documenting records and in preparing tablets as votive offerings to the gods (Pearce. L. E., 1994, p. 2277),Some held important positions in both government and temples, exerting considerable influence on royal decisions, as they participated in diplomatic negotiations and could not easily be replaced (Bashur, 2008, p. 224), Not all scribes possessed the same skills; some were capable of handling multiple tasks such as drafting contracts and letters using syllabic writing, which was easier for those trained in cuneiform Scribes also played a role in temple celebrations, and in some cases were employed in the army as supply clerks, responsible for distributing provisions and recording lists of spoils (Harry, 2019, pp. 87-88).

Their main income was derived from temple service, with some working there for as long as forty years, and from their ranks arose senior temple officials. In addition to their temple duties, some scribes engaged in trade and moneylending, while others maintained connections with individuals outside formal ties to the state or the temple (Bashur, 2008, p. 225), Scribes were also active in the palace, where they recorded the king's activities and provided various administrative services, such as arranging and storing texts for later retrieval from palace archives and libraries, supervising workers, and overseeing public buildings such as storehouses and royal communications, Some Babylonian seal inscriptions even designated particular scribes as personal servants of the king (Pearce. L. E., 1994, p. 2276).

The role of scribes was not confined to administration alone; they were also responsible for organizing storerooms and temples, collecting taxes, and presenting offerings. They performed both religious and civic duties. For instance, a temple scribe would prepare incantations, collect rents from fields and houses, and deliver foodstuffs as offerings (Bashur, 2008, p. 242).

3.2. Its Role in the Establishment of Libraries

Temples contained libraries dedicated to preserving clay tablets employed by priests and students in their religious and educational practices. These temple libraries (Muhammed, 2003, p. 130) housed a wide variety of documents, encompassing prayers, hymns, and religious stories, as well as linguistic, literary, and astronomical texts. Such collections provided priests and intellectuals with resources to expand their knowledge and enrich their culture (Kramer, p. 44). The materials discovered in temple libraries were not limited to religious texts. They also included legal documents written in specialized terminology and linguistic forms. This was an essential part of temple-school training, where scribes were taught to draft contracts and legal rulings. These documents and exercises are valuable historical sources that highlight the legal systems of Mesopotamian civilization (Taha B. , 1976, p. 109). Among them were the historical annals of the Esagila Temple, which continued for nearly four centuries (Kassar, 1988, p. 279).

In 1989, archaeologists discovered a small Babylonian library in the E-babbar Temple,

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The Algerian Historical Journal
EISSN: 2716-9065 / ISSN: 2572-0023

dedicated to the Sun god in Sippar, north of Babylon. The library was situated in a room leading to a larger chamber. Inside, they found clay tablets neatly arranged in wall niches. The room was moderate in size, with medium-height walls, and had been constructed during the reign of the last Neo-Babylonian king, Nabonidus (Tait, 1994, p. 2198). One of the temple's rooms contained literary texts inscribed on clay tablets preserved in their original positions. This discovery is regarded as the earliest known library in history (Nail, 2007, p. 104).

3.3. Astronomy

In Mesopotamia, astronomy was mainly a means of identifying directions and guiding caravans rather than an end in itself. It was also employed to observe the heavens, determine stellar and planetary positions, and assist temple priests in making predictions about people's destinies. Priests often exploited this knowledge to gain wealth from both kings and commoners (Will Durant, 1971, p. 250). Astronomy was the science that most distinguished the Babylonians and brought them renown throughout the ancient world. Yet, it was closely intertwined with magic. The Babylonians did not study the stars to produce maps for caravans or ships, but rather to forecast the future and human destinies. Therefore, they were more astrologers than astronomers. Each planet was considered a deity concerned with human affairs and indispensable to their governance: Jupiter was Marduk, Mercury was Nabu, Mars was Nergal, the Sun was the god Shamash, the Moon was the god Sin, Saturn was the god Ninib, and Venus was the goddess Ishtar. Every movement of a star or planet was believed to signal an earthly event or predict its occurrence. For instance, a low-hanging moon meant that distant peoples would submit to the king, while a crescent moon foretold that the king would be defeated by his enemies. Priests were diligent in their work, consulting volumes on astrology. Observing celestial bodies and astronomical phenomena was regarded as one of the most significant temple activities, since they were interpreted as signs of divine favor or anger (Maurice Croiset, 1986, pp. 250–251). Such interpretations were believed to be reflected in events such as floods, victories, defeats, diseases, epidemics, and even damage to temples. Astronomical terminology also emerged in the Mesopotamian Creation Epic (Enuma Elish, dating to the third millennium BC), which included references to constellations, planets, stars, and the measurement of time year, month, and day. The opening lines read (Al-Nuaimi S. A., 1427 / 2006, p. 7):

1. e-nu-ma e-liš la nabuú šama-mu
2. šap-liš ammatum šuma la zakrat

1- "In the heights, when heaven had not yet been named,
2- And below, when the earth had not yet been called by name..."

In the translation of the fifth tablet from the seven tablets of creation, the following appears:

Ú-ba-aš-šim man-za-za DINGIR.MEŠ GAL.MEŠ
MUL.MEŠ tam šilšu-nu lumaši uš-zi-iz
ITI.MEŠ MUL.MEŠ 3 TA.À MUŠ-zi-iz
ištu umi ša MU us-si-ru úşu-ra-t
Úšaršid man-za-az nébére ana ud-du-rik-ši-šú-nu
Ana la e-pes anni la e-gu-ú ma-na-ma
man-za-az dEnlil dé-aúkin it-ti-šu (Al-Nuaimi S. A., 1427 / 2006, p. 8).

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AHJ المجلة التاريخية الجزائرية
The Algerian Historical Journal
EISSN: 2716-9065 / ISSN: 2572-0023

"Marduk fashioned a dwelling for the great gods
And set their constellations as the LUMASHI (zodiac).
He appointed three stars for each of the twelve months.
Having assigned the names of the year,
He fixed the position of Nibiru to regulate the days,
So that their measure should neither exceed nor fall short.
He established the stations of Enlil and Ea with Nibiru. (Taha B. a., 1949, pp. 27–29)"

According to Al-Nuaimi, Lumashi is a group of stars referring to the following seven celestial bodies or constellations: Orion, Pleiades, Leo, Canis Minor, Centaurus, and Sagittarius, while Nibiru refers to the Sun. (Al-Nuaimi S. A., 1427 / 2006, p. 8).

There was also a long register of astronomers and diviners from the Old Babylonian period, who observed the skies and submitted their reports to the royal court. These included the astronomer Sapidua, the diviner Arb-Sin, and the diviner-astronomer Ashkhi-du (Al-Zarqi, 1997 , p. 23).

3.4. Its Role in Medicine

The main temples of Mesopotamia served as central hubs of education, preserving both religious and scientific knowledge, owing to their prominent role in Babylonian society. Most scholars and intellectuals belonged to the priestly class, and many of them practiced medicine through prayers, incantations, and magical rituals, which were considered part of the healing methods utilized by practitioners of medicine (Abdul Rahman, 1989, p. 45). Some priests were known as aspu, specialists in expelling evil spirits which refers to an incantation or charm. It first appeared in the Old Babylonian period and continued into later times. Ashbu was also used to designate the chief priest. Numerous references to the Ashbu priest occur in Sumerian texts, for example, under the title Lugal in the Early Dynastic period, and in the Epic of Gilgamesh among the senior priests dwelling in the underworld. These references underscore the high rank held by the Ashbu priest during that era (Laith, 1412/1991, pp. 55-56).

While others were called barun, diviners who predicted the future of patients and read their destinies. It was term attested since the Old Babylonian period referring to a soothsayer or one who performed sacrificial rituals (Laith, 1412/1991, p. 107). Moreover, there was another group of practitioners, not belonging to the priesthood, referred to as asu. They treated patients in a practical and objective manner, relying on medical knowledge, remedies, and surgical procedures (Al-Labadi, 1992, p. 49). Overall, there were two main types of medical practice: practical medicine and magical medicine. The latter, practiced mainly by priests, was particularly widespread and heavily relied upon by the population (Al-Labadi, 1992, p. 49).

3.5. Its Role in Justice

The people of Mesopotamia attached great significance to justice. They established public assemblies or councils, which usually convened at the city gates and served as centers for judicial decisions and dispute resolution (Abdul Rahman, 1989, p. 151). Judges are mentioned in Sumerian as Du-Kus and in Akkadian as dayyānu (Hussein, 1971, p. 5). Cuneiform texts indicate that the earliest courts were held in temples. Morover, part of the

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The Algerian Historical Journal
EISSN: 2716-9065 / ISSN: 2572-0023

judicial system was connected to religious activities within the temples (Ahmed Amin, 2017, p. 254), where priests often acted as judges, making them the earliest legal scholars (Taha B. , 1976, p. 282).

However, over time judicial authority gradually shifted away from the temples, especially by the late third millennium BC, during the reigns of the Isin and Larsa dynasties. This transformation became more apparent in the Old Babylonian period, when judicial power passed from the priests to secular judges and rulers, particularly under King Hammurabi. This transition emerges to have been motivated by Hammurabi's concern that priestly judges might resist or undermine the royal laws he had enacted. To address this, he replaced them with civil judges directly accountable to him. The expansion of the state, population growth, and the increasing diversity of customs and religions also required a greater number of judges with more varied responsibilities. In this way, Hammurabi ensured the effective implementation of his code of law (Khaled, 2002, p. 102).

However, cuneiform texts demonstrate that judicial documents regarding testimony before judges were conducted in temples, where the witness would take an oath in the name of a god, the king, or the city. An example of this appears in a judicial document from the Old Babylonian period, specifically a letter sent by an individual to an official (Al-Abadi, 2011, p. 53), which stated:

Figure (3): A Judicial Letter from the Old Babylonian Period

iš-tu da-ba-bu šu-ú i-na	إش-تُ ذ-بَ-بُ شُ-أ، إ-نَ
pu-úḫ-ri ub-ti-ir-ru	پُ-أخ-ر أب-تِ-إر-رُ
a-na É ^{d} ja-ab-li-ja a-na	ا-نَ إي، يَ-لِ-يَ ا-نَ
bu-úr-ri il-qú-šu-nu-ti	بُ-أر-ر إل-قُ-شُ-نُ-تِ
iš-tu i-na É ja-ab-li-ja	إش-تُ إ-نَ إي، يَ-أب-لِ-يَ
da-ba-ba an-ni-á ú-ki-in-nu	ذ-بَ-بَ أن-نِ-ا أ، -كِ-نُ
"بعدما أثبتت هذه الكلمات علنا، اخذوا للإفادة (للإثبات) إلى معبد الإله يابليا"[1].	

Source: (Al-Abadi, 2011, p. 54)

Additional evidence exists concerning testimony before judges, encompassing the practice of granting the plaintiff or defendant a period of six months to produce witnesses. If witnesses were not presented within the allotted time, the individual would bear the penalty of the case. This is reflected in Article (13) of the Code of Hammurabi, which states: "If a man does not have nearby witnesses, the judges shall grant him six months. If within those six months he does not produce his witnesses, that man is a liar and shall bear the penalty of that case." (Al-Abadi, 2011, pp. 56-57). Article (5) also refers to judges who commit treachery in their duties, stipulating their removal from office. The article states: "If

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AHJ المجلة التاريخية الجزائرية
The Algerian Historical Journal
EISSN: 2716-9065 / ISSN: 2572-0023

a judge renders a judgment, delivers a written decision on a sealed tablet, and later alters his judgment, they shall prove against that judge the alteration of the decision he issued. He shall pay a fine equal to twelve times the penalty required in that case, and he shall be removed from his judicial chair in the assembly and shall never again sit with the judges in any other case (Hussein, 1971, p. 5)."

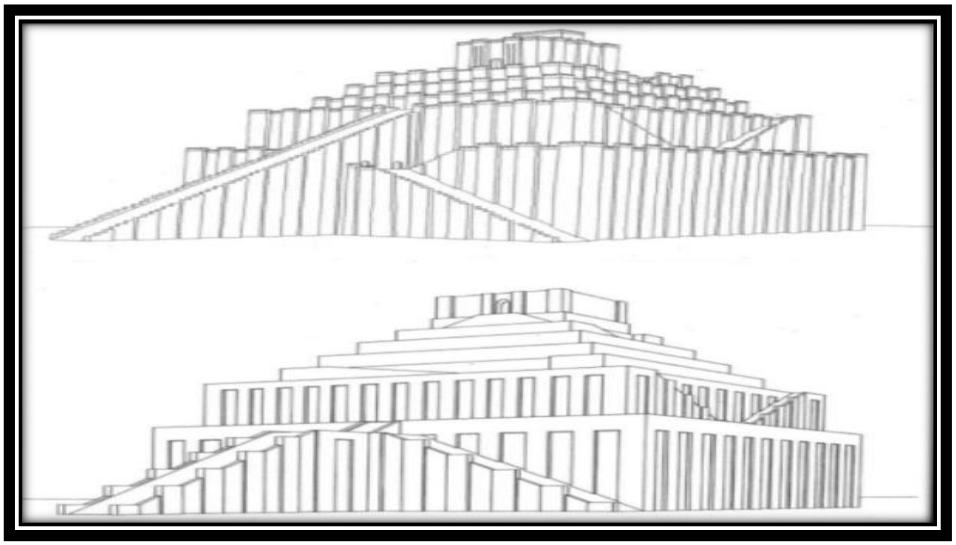
From the above, it is apparent that the Old Babylonian period (2006–1595 BC) produced the richest corpus of legal texts discovered compared to other Mesopotamian eras. Moreover, the large number of legal documents covering multiple Babylonian social transactions reflects the maturity of legal thought fulfilled in Mesopotamia in general, and by the Babylonians in particular, an advancement that contributed significantly to the broader cultural and civilizational development of Mesopotamia (Al-Bakri, 2006, p. 13).

4. Types of Babylonian Temples: The Ziggurats

4.1. The High Temple (Stairway to Heaven

The earliest reference to the ziggurat emerges in the biblical Book of Genesis, in the story of a people in the land of Shinar who "built a great city and a lofty tower reaching the heavens, replacing stone with brick in their construction." The ziggurat was an elevated, ascending structure culminating in a sacred sanctuary at its summit. Its architectural form varied across cultures. Among the Sumerians, it was rectangular and consisted of three small terraced levels in the form of a stepped pyramid, the most famous being the Ziggurat of Ur-Nammu. Among the Assyrians, it was taller, consisting of eight spiral-arranged levels, with the Ziggurat of Aqarquf as a notable example. For the Babylonians, it was referred to the Tower of Babel, described by Herodotus (as cited by Geoffrey Parrinder) as follows: "The temple tower in Babylon, called Etemenanki meaning 'The Foundation of Heaven and Earth', consisted of seven stories with sloping outer surfaces spiraling upward from one floor to the next (Barender, 1905, p. 24)." The Babylonian ziggurat was situated north of the Esagila temple, a massive sacred complex surrounded by a double wall known as the Temenos (Khaled N. S.-K., 2012, p. 124).

Figure (2): The Ziggurat of Babylon



Source: Mohammed Barij Al-Ramahi, p. 261.

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The Algerian Historical Journal
EISSN: 2716-9065 / ISSN: 2572-0023

According to archaeological evidence, the ziggurat was a square-shaped structure built of mudbrick, consisting of three to seven tiers. Each tier represented a phase in the spiritual journey culminating at the summit, where a small temple known as the shalkuru, the waiting room (Al-Ahmed, 2013, p. 47), was located. Ziggurats were dedicated to the temples of the city's chief deities and were constructed under royal authority, reflecting the king's religious commitments (Al-Maliki, 2019, p. 29). The temple complex also included the temple library, called girginakku (Harry, 2019, p. 410), which was related to the temple of the god Nabu, the son of the god Marduk and the goddess Sarpanitum, who was revered in Borsippa as the god of writing and the arts (Firas, 2018, p. 241). Other rooms were reserved for priests and priestesses, workshops for artisans, a private harbor for the temple, and storerooms for agricultural produce as well as goods acquired through trade. For this reason, the ziggurat was among the most prominent architectural landmarks in all ancient Mesopotamian cities, holding sacred significance in society as it was profoundly tied to both religious beliefs and daily life (Al-Hadithi, 1988, pp. 15–16).

4.2 .The Ground Temple

The ground temple resembled the ziggurat in function, as both served as resting places for the gods. While the ziggurat symbolized an ascent to the heavens, the ground temple functioned as a gateway for communication with the gods on earth. In the ground temple, the deity was believed to reside in the sanctuary chamber, where they could hear the prayers of worshippers, receive offerings, and listen to grievances and petitions. This communication was manifested through the shrine (mihrab), where the god was thought to appear from their chamber. Thus, the sanctuary chamber acted as the god's gateway and a symbol of divine presence among humanity. According to Babylonian belief, the ground temple served as a hall for divine manifestation (Taha B. a., 1949, pp. 19-20). At the entrance was a chamber called the gate chamber or doorkeeper's room, which led to an open courtyard. Beyond this courtyard was another room connected to the sanctuary chamber, which housed the shrine, the heart of the ground temple. Here stood the statue of the god, regarded as the most sacred part of the temple, so revered that it could be considered a temple in its own right. The sanctuary also contained the shrine niche and altar platform, along with outer courtyards, additional chambers, and facilities, some reserved specifically for priests (Belkheir, 2009, pp. 135-140). Ground temples were generally simple in architectural design, resembling ordinary houses. They typically consisted of a courtyard surrounded by priests' quarters, connected to another courtyard containing storerooms for offerings presented to the gods. Small chapels were also present, where people gathered to worship and pray. Finally, the innermost sanctuary, the holiest part of the temple, served as the central place of communication with the gods, where worshippers expressed gratitude and prayed for the achievement of their wishes (Al-Maliki, 2019, p. 29).

The design of ground temples varied from north to south. In southern temples, for example, the Holy of Holies (sanctuary) was aligned with the main entrance, while in northern temples it was situated along the longitudinal side of the structure, requiring worshippers to turn in order to face the statue of the god within the sanctuary (Al-Sheikhly, 1990, p. 226).

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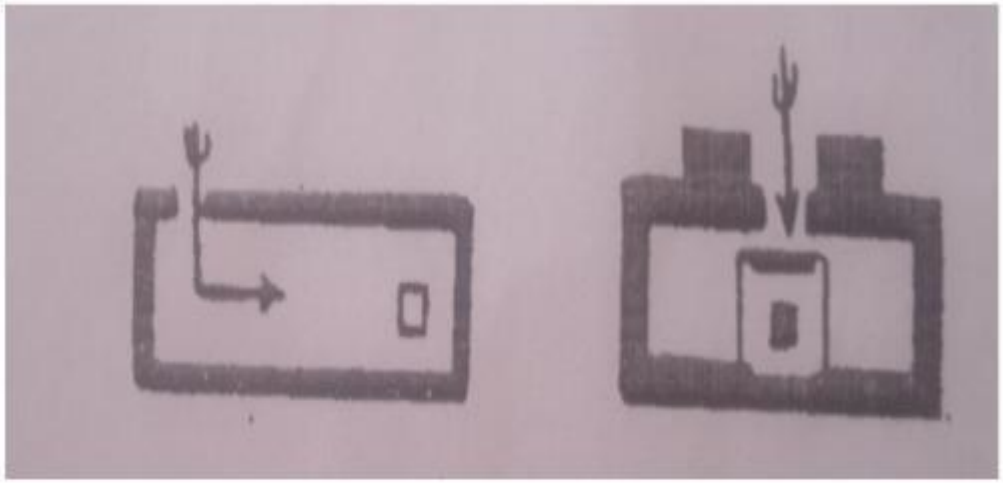
EISSN: 2716-9065 / ISSN: 2572-0023

Figure (3): Layout of the sanctuary chamber in the northern and southern ground temples.



Source: (Taha B. a., 1949, p. 21).

CONCLUSION

Archaeological evidence demonstrates that the role of the Mesopotamian temple went beyond its religious function to involve daily activities, as indicated by artifacts, inscriptions, statues, and architectural remains. These findings have helped trace the belief system that shaped the identity of Mesopotamian society and emphasized the crucial role of priests as mediators between the human world and the gods. From this perspective, the archaeological study of the temple not only highlights its function but also provides researchers with a key tool for reconstructing the intellectual and cultural dimensions of this society.

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