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Following these chapters, a detailed catalogue compiled by a large team of archaeologists documents the 265 objects presented in the exhibition. Each entry provides a general description of the object, its date, and its provenance. The volume concludes with an up-to-date bibliography featuring especially relevant cave studies, ranging from archaeological reports to theoretical interpretations of caves.

This book will be of interest to a wide range of readers, including archaeologists, historians, anthropologists, geologists, ecologists, scholars of religious and cultural studies, museum professionals, and students of human-environment interactions. Its interdisciplinary approach, situating caves not merely as archaeological sites but as dynamic spaces in which natural, cultural, and symbolic dimensions intersect, is particularly significant. By combining rigorous scientific research with accessible exposition, richly illustrated documentation, and reflections on conservation, the book illuminates the multifaceted roles of caves across time. In addition, it provides a foundation and inspiration for further studies, encouraging scholars to continue exploring the complex interactions between humans and subterranean environments. As such, *Cave Stories from Darkness: Brought to Light* offers a comprehensive framework for understanding caves as both natural archives and cultural landscapes along with valuable insights for anyone interested in the enduring significance of these unique spaces.

Erica Angliker

University of Sao Paulo
erica.angliker@gmail.com

Bernardo Ballesteros, *Divine Assemblies in Early Greek and Babylonian Epic*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024. 496 pp. ISBN: 9780198924593.

As Liverpool FC's anthem reminds us, gods never walk alone. Deities in many ancient mythologies are portrayed sitting together—dining, getting drunk, disputing, and taking counsel. The book under review, a revised version of the author's 2018 Oxford PhD thesis, focuses on the institution of divine assemblies, examining them as a shared theme in Greek and Mesopotamian epic and myth. In doing so, it positions itself at the intersection of Near Eastern literary studies, classical philology, and comparative mythology.

The book begins with a historical survey of the study of cultural and literary contacts between the ancient Near East and the Aegean, and a detailed methodological discussion of how to approach similarities between divine councils across ancient Mesopotamian and ancient Greek literature. Should one see these contacts as based on borrowing, or, to use the author's term, 'monogenesis', or as cases of independent development ('polygenesis')? The question is not definitively answered, but the methodological discussion is eye-opening.

In Part I of the book (chapters 1–5), the two corpora at the heart of this study are surveyed and analyzed. On the Mesopotamian side, Ballesteros lists Sumerian and Akkadian narratives, mainly the Epic of Gilgameš and the myths of Atrahasis, Enūma eliš, Erra and Išum, as well as city laments. On the Greek side, the main compositions that are treated are the Homeric epics, the Homeric Hymns, and Hesiod.

Subsequent chapters examine ‘comparing conventions’ (chapter 3): how the themes of silence, noise, fear, secrecy, withdrawal, and reproduction work as recurrent motifs of divine assemblies, with careful cross-readings of the Hymn to Apollo, the *Iliad*, and Near Eastern comparanda. A full chapter on what the author calls ‘Morphology’ treats assemblies as a type-scene: it identifies their standard components (arrival, perception, speech), core elements (participants, narrative interventions), and typical outcomes (accomplished, failed, or ‘departure’ assemblies), as well as large-scale structural connections created by successive or linked council scenes. This part closes with a chapter on ‘Diffusion’ (chapter 5), which addresses poetic technique and reception, tracing distant but suggestive analogues in Old Norse, Sanskrit, Polynesian, and Aztec materials, and reflecting on what ‘Indo-European’ or broader cross-cultural links might, and might not, explain.

Part II, ‘Thematic Comparisons’, opens with a chapter on ‘Divine Assemblies and Cosmic History’ (chapter 6). This chapter examines divine assemblies as embedded in cosmic time, reading Greek and Babylonian destruction myths (including the Flood and the Trojan War) as episodes where councils mark turning points in world order. A chapter on ‘Distance and Proximity’ (chapter 7) then interprets divine-human distance in Old Babylonian literature, especially in the Epic of Gilgameš, in city laments, and in Old Babylonian flood stories, before turning to the *Iliad* to track how assemblies stage alienation, intimacy, and contact between gods and humans. In chapter 8, ‘Enemies of the Assembly’, the author explores *Chaoskampf* myths through myths like Anzû and Lugal-e, which define what stands outside or against divine order. A chapter on ‘Divine Power: Atrahasis and the Gods’ Kingship’ (chapter 9) dissects Enlil’s and Ea’s roles in the assemblies that took place around the primordial flood. These mythological episodes are seen as a test-case for divine instability, office holding, honour, and for the relation between supreme divine authority and council procedure. The penultimate and final chapters, ‘Cosmic Order: Homer’s Zeus and Divine Offices’ (chapter 10) and ‘Divine Counsel’ (chapter 11), examine divine authority through the parallel between Zeus and the Babylonian supreme god Marduk. Divine authority is analyzed across the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, focusing on how assemblies re-establish order, distribute offices, and crystallize flexibility versus permanence in the Olympian and Mesopotamian divine sphere.

Reading the book as an Assyriologist specializing in Mesopotamian literature and mythology, I found the study accurate, substantial, and eruditely supported by up-to-date bibliography. It is a pity, however, that the author did not fully dismantle the scaffolding of the PhD thesis on which the book is based. The drive for bibliographical exhaustiveness, the appetite for cumulative structural comparisons, the tendency to anchor literature and mythology in a specific historical framework, and the methodological over-caution tend to dilute the many valuable insights contained in the study, and make it, at times, laborious to read.

Nonetheless, this important volume offers a stepping stone for further questions—for instance, how we should understand the long enumerations of gods found in numerous non-mythological and non-epic texts (which the book does not treat), such as the following Old Babylonian incantation against diseases:

May I cast on you (m.) a spell driving out all diseases, which Enlilbanda, the one deciding all fates, placed (for me)! May Ea cast on you a spell of life! May Nudimmud, and Nammu, (with) the authority of Anum, cast a spell on you! Ningirim, the lady of incantations cast a spell, Ningirim, the lady of incantations! The patient is getting up through her incantation, he suffers no more. May Ninkarrak compress you with her gentle hands! May Damu let your misery pass by you! As for the murderous bile, Lamaštu, the Snatcher-demon, dog bite, (or) human tooth, may Annunītum trample (them) through her incantation! Adad, Šakkan, Nisaba, Šamaš, Nāru, Ħursānu, the holy gods, may they purify you! (With) the authority of Enlil may they purify you, the twin-brother and twin-sister, the children of Sīn, Šamaš and Ištar! Should either the gossiping man, the irate woman, the sleepless man, sorceresses or the sneering person, or one rejected by (his personal) god be angry with you, may the king of the Apsū, the pure exorcist of the gods, cast a spell that you can not stop upon you! May it bring your suffering immediately to the Netherworld! I cast a spell upon you driving away all diseases!¹

How are such enumerations—common in magical texts, rituals, and even royal inscriptions—to be compared with divine assemblies? What is at stake in the difference between a listed pantheon and a deliberating council of gods?

A further question, which lies largely beyond the remit of B.'s book but is nonetheless suggested by his emphasis on councils of gods, concerns the relation between such divine assemblies and the later theological developments of first-millennium Mesopotamian religion. How do the council-scenes of the myths relate to the increasingly triadic structuring of the pantheon and to the heavily monotheistic bent around a supreme god—Aššur in Assyria, Marduk in Babylonia—sometimes articulated in macranthropic hymns² and in complex male-female (or triadic) configurations of divinity?³ In other words: can the deliberating assemblies of earlier literature be read as a mythological pre-history to the more unified, even proto-monotheistic, conceptions of the divine discernible in later theological constructions?

¹ CT 42, 32 = N. Wasserman/E. Zomer, *Akkadian Magic Literature: Old Babylonian and Old Assyrian Incantations: Corpus – Context – Praxis* (Leipziger Altorientalische Studien 12), Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2022, 159–60.

² A. A. Fadhil/E. Jiménez, 'Literary Texts from the Sippar Library iii: 'Eriš šummi', A Syncretistic Hymn to Marduk', *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie* 112 (2022), 1–46; A. A. Fadhil/E. Jiménez, 'Literary Texts from the Sippar Library iv: A "Macranthropic" Hymn to Ninurta', *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie und Vorderasiatische Archäologie* 113 (2023), 193–222.

³ S. Parpola, 'Monotheism in Ancient Assyria', in: B. Nevling-Porter (ed.), *One God or Many? Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World: Essays on the concept of monotheism/polytheism in ancient Assyria, Egypt, Greece, and Israel*. Transactions of the Casco Bay Assyriological Institute 1. (Casco Bay ME, Casco Bay Assyriological Institute), 2000, 165–209; B. Nevling-Porter, 'The Anxiety of Multiplicity. Concepts of Divine as One and Many in Ancient Assyria', *ibid.*, 211–71. See further, G. Baumann, 'Trendy Monotheism? Ancient Near Eastern Models and Their Value in Elucidating "Monotheism" in Ancient Israel', *Old Testament Essays* 19 (2006), 9–25; B. Pongratz-Leisten, 'Assyriological Approaches Towards a History of Religion of Mesopotamia', in: R. Rollinger et al. (eds.), *The Intellectual Heritage of the Ancient Near East. Proceedings of the 64th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale and the 12th Melammu Symposium, University of Innsbruck, July 16–20, 2018* (Vienna, Austrian Academy of Sciences), 2023, 73–136.

This and related questions await further study, for which B.'s systematic and thorough book now serves as a solid point of departure.

Nathan Wasserman

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
nathan.wasserman@mail.huji.ac.il

Sebastian Scharff, *Hellenistic Athletes: Agonistic Cultures and Self-Presentation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. 369 pp. ISBN 9781009199957.

Sebastian Scharff has contributed a work of painstaking scholarship—or to steal a phrase from the Hellenistic Callimachus, a σύμβολον ἀγρυπνίας. (Chapter 3 alone has 707 footnotes.) His book will engender future breakthroughs in understanding the phenomenon of Hellenistic sport and, most important, Hellenistic culture. However one defines the Hellenistic period, it is a crucial entry point for understanding what happens subsequently in the athletics of the Greco-Roman era.

The Hellenistic Age was a time of innovation, boldness, and with that, excess. 'Spectacularization' (p. 36) is an apt neologism for the enhanced facilities for the audience as well as the *hysplex*, elaborate starting gates for the runners. The impulses of the age are writ large in its politics, art and literature, and, indeed, athletics.

Needless to say, periodization finds only rough consensus, especially in regard to athletics. Much of what we see is quite familiar from earlier centuries, and many differences are a matter of degree. S. properly invites reflection on what to include (p. 5) as Hellenistic, and his convention of keeping the label for the period from the reign of Alexander to the death of Kleopatra is sound: witness the *periodos* growing from the Pindaric four great athletic festivals to the expanded *periodos* of Imperial times (27).

It can only be a good thing that our gaze and the scholar's intense focus turn to these post-Classical centuries. There is much that will seem contemporary to us. (The energetic efforts to raise the prestige of a festival to international status, for example, as seen in Kos, Miletus and Magnesia (20–1) might strike us as familiar, as nations vie for the opportunity, not infrequently a financial disaster, to host the Olympics and World Cup events.)

S. is consistently careful about the fragmentary state of the evidence. He properly dismisses the fantasy that posited archaic amateurism and purity against presumed Hellenistic corruption and decline (pp. 1–3). S. is not swayed by current fashion, either. He respectfully parts company with the contemporary, rather polemical rejection of Jakob Burckhardt's perspective of an *agonales Wesen* in Greek civilization (9, note 49). (One could, in fact, reasonably connect the expanded number of age categories at the local festivals [38–40] with the undimmed Hellenic desire to be recognized as the best, somewhere, somehow.)

In chapter 2, S. turns to key features of Hellenistic athletics. He discusses the elaborate system of announcing the games (*epangelia*), increase in the number of athletic festivals, expansion of the number and features of the facilities themselves, prizes for the athletes, sponsorships, and corruption.

The gravamen of this volume comes in the chapters that follow. These take up the question of how victorious athletes present themselves, principally in the epigrams that