

# The Meeting Etiquette in the Middle East: Continuity and Change

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## ABSTRACTS

### **In the Sight of Mesopotamian Gods**

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In ancient Mesopotamia, the relationship with deities has constantly passed through the gaze. The eyes in fact represented a link between the earthly world and the divine one. This is evident in the presence of votive statues with large eyes within temples of the Early Dynastic period as well as the presence of eyes in votive deposits.

Starting from the end of the Third and during the Second Millennium BC, the presentation scenes recognizable both in stelae and in cylinder seals further emphasize this close relationship between gaze and divine power.

This contribution therefore intends to analyze this aspect through an investigation that will define through a viewshed analysis of the power of gaze as a fundamental tool for the development Mesopotamian societies' dependence on divine immanence.

### **Rings of Power: a Study of Silver Rings and Social Norms during Ur III**

Andrea Marocchi Savoi (Università degli Studi di Messina)

In this paper, we aim to explore the nuances of gift-giving etiquette during the Third Dynasty of Ur period. Gift-giving etiquette encompasses the conventions and social norms that dictate how gifts are exchanged between individuals or entities within a society. This includes determining the appropriate timing for gift-giving, identifying acceptable or desirable types of gifts, understanding the proper presentation of gifts, and navigating expectations of reciprocity. These practices can vary widely across different cultural and social contexts, often reflecting the traditions, values, and interpersonal dynamics of a community.

Our analysis will focus specifically on the so-called silver rings, as documented in textual records. These items were reportedly presented to members of foreign delegations—akin to modern-day diplomats—in various cities across southern Mesopotamia. It is believed that these rings were part of a broader welcoming ritual, which also involved the exchange of a variety of goods, ranging from servants to luxury items like silver and textiles.

The norms governing these gift exchanges were meticulously defined, dictating who was to give what, to whom, and on which occasions. This system of gift-giving was not merely an expression of generosity but served as a critical mechanism for fostering social cohesion and legitimating political

authority. It underscores how the material and symbolic dimensions of gifts were deeply woven into the social fabric of the time, reflecting and reinforcing the era's social hierarchy and power structures.

### **Time in Women's Rituals and Etiquette**

Annunziata Rositani (Università degli Studi di Messina)

Time has always played a fundamental role in Mesopotamian rituals, even in those performed by women. In ancient Mesopotamia, the etiquette that women, especially priestesses, had to follow in rituals was rigorous. Ritual gestures were predetermined, as were the timing of actions and sometimes clothing. Likewise, the natural phases of life were often marked by rites of passage.

This contribution will analyse the relationship between the etiquette of rituals in which women, especially priestesses, were protagonists, and the timing of such rites: the days, months, and seasons of the year in which they were held, as well as the different moments of women's life, in an interesting synchronisation between nature and women's ritual etiquette.

### **“To the king my lord”: Etiquette in the Neo-Assyrian Letters**

Lorenzo Verderame (Università degli Studi di Roma “La Sapienza”)

The paper addresses the etiquette in the exchange of letters during the Neo-Assyrian period. Thousands of letters have been discovered in the archives of Assyrian capitals, the majority of which are addressed to rulers. The complexity of the language and the richness of expression are determined by the sender's literacy level. To provide an insightful analysis, the paper will focus on the letters delivered by the highest ranks of the scribe, the so-called *ummânu* “scholars”, to the kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal. These letters contain a variety of features and forms that reveal the sender's personality and relationship with the king.

The paper opens by describing the letter exchange system in Neo-Assyrian courts, specifically who was authorized to communicate directly with the monarch, who could only do so by letter, and how the letters were read at court. It addresses the vocabulary used by the sender in responding to a prior letter from the king or introducing a letter written on the sender's own initiative. The article investigates how to address the sovereign and the vertical/hierarchical way of responding to the king's request or requesting for favours or information. It provides an outline of the main arguments used to justify or defend their mistake, ranging from recounting former rulers' customs to mentioning the treaty they entered into. In the final section, it presents the dossier of two unusual senders, Balasî and Nabû-ahhê-erîba, mentors of the prince Assurbanipal and outsiders of the prominent Assyrian scribal houses.

### **Meeting the King. Ceremonies at the Assyrian Court**

Davide Nadali (Università degli Studi di Roma “La Sapienza”)

The Assyrian king lived and ruled in his royal residence: at the same time, the palace was the place from where the king left for the military campaigns and returned, triumphantly, after the battle was over.

The palace was also the place where the king received visits from Assyrian people (the magnates of the court) and foreigners: this does not imply the palace was open indistinctly to anyone, but a protocol was of course established according to the type of people entering, the occasion and the need.

The present communication aims to present and analyse the organisation of the ceremonies of the people meeting and encountering the king in his palace: in particular, the analysis presents the different degrees of meeting, distinguishing between physical encounters and relationships from a

distance, pointing to how this difference can affect the meaning and the impact of confronting the Assyrian king as well as the implications the ceremonies might have accordingly.

### **The Joy and Fear of Meeting an Authority: the “Assyrian” Bearing**

Portuese Ludovico (Università degli Studi di Messina)

Assyrians, from the king and the queen to the attendant, are always depicted with an erect posture: their legs are straight, their hips, shoulders, and chest raised and width, their arms stiff, their head held high. A gesture is often associated with such a posture, namely the gesture of the hands clenched together, which generally consists of the right hand that lays above the left cupped hand, interlacing the thumbs. The visual context shows that this bearing occurs when meetings with an authority takes place. The authority can be either the king or a deity. Such a bearing is attested since the Early Dynastic times and occurs both in three and bi-dimensional images.

It is the aim of this contribution to offer a fresh analysis of the “Assyrian” bearing and, implicitly, of a continuing Mesopotamian visual tradition, by relying on a psychological, sociological, and emotional approach to posture and gesture. It will be argued first that the stylistic features represented are not merely formal properties of the works, but rather have been deployed as signs, carrying definite and identifiable values. Second, it will be concluded that posture and gesture aimed at conveying the joy and fear of meeting an authority.

### **At the presence of the King of Kings. Persian Gestures from the Achaemenids to the Sasanids**

Pierfrancesco Callieri (Università di Bologna, Campus di Ravenna)

One of the aspects of Iranian kingship that still has obscure sides to it is that code of gestural expressions that seems to constantly accompany the depictions of the ruler of Persia in the Sasanian period (3rd-7th centuries), and that is intimately linked to the conception of the figure of the King of Kings of what P.O. Harper has placed better than other scholars in its position as the last of the great Near Eastern empires despite going beyond the latter’s chronological placement in the late antique and then early medieval ages.

Many studies have been devoted to the kingship of the Sasanian period, for which the availability of textual and epigraphic sources has made it possible to reach a significant consensus on many of the aspects discussed.

More complex is the situation of research on iconographic sources, which have appeared to most as insufficient in quantitative terms to attempt a comprehensive interpretation.

The communication on the programme, presented by an archaeologist who is aware of his inability to aspire to innovative results where very fine art historians have brought to light all the difficulties of the subject, nevertheless intends to bring to the attention of an audience that is more oriented towards the cultures of the ancient Near East, a summary look at the figurative evidence of court etiquette in the later Persian empire.

The exceptional prestige that contemporary witnesses from outside the Sasanian empire recognised in the court of Ctesiphon, which became a symbol of splendour and elegance, but also a place governed by a complex etiquette, seen from the perspective of Achaemenid Persia, appear less enigmatic and can be associated with the intentional bond that on more than one occasion the Sasanian rulers manifested with their famous ancestors.

## **The Gesture of Peace**

Carlo Donà (Università degli Studi di Messina)

Gestures are particularly important elements in the cultural dimension of an encounter, not only because they effectively capture an emotional dynamic (e.g. affection, threat, dominance, reverence, respect, and so on) but also (and especially) because they offer extraordinarily persistent symbolic expressions which, while beyond any kind of verbal signification, are handed down by imitation over long periods of time. As a rule, the history of gestures can be quite opaque, but in some lucky cases we can re-construct with relative precision the origin and development of these “memes” (to use a term coined by Richard Dawkins) and to specify the stages of their evolution. This is, in particular, the case with certain gestures relating to the use of the sword as a symbol of power, which certainly originated from the ancient Near East, and from there spread together with a certain notion of a kingship that took root both in the West, in the Euro-Mediterranean world, and in Iran and India in the East. This contribution examines a particular gesture, which aimed at defining a peaceful and fundamentally benevolent attitude, and follows its history from the most ancient attestations (in the first millennium BCE) through classical culture, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The collection of the testimonies of this gesture is not only of documentary interest, but also has a heuristic value: the examination of the gesture in its context shows that we can trace an uninterrupted cultural transmission, and consequently that its numerous instances are not only analogous but homologous.

## **Kings before the Gate: Ceremonies of Welcome in the Cities of the Hellenistic and Roman Middle East**

Rolf Strootman (Universiteit Utrecht)

In the premodern world, the relationship between cities and empires was precarious. They were in many respects each other's opposites but the one could hardly exist without the other. Empires protected cities and guaranteed their autonomy; cities provided empires with the capital they needed for the upkeep of their armies and courts.

What happened when a powerful ruler visited a self-governing city? In this paper I discuss descriptions in the narrative sources of the meeting of rulers and citizens in the Hellenistic and Roman Middle East. Who were the main actors and how did they greet one another? How was the king invited into the city and how his entry ritualized?

I argue that in the globalizing Hellenistic period a relatively standardized ceremony of welcome for the itinerant king and his court developed—a ceremony focused on the city's main gate. We will look at this ceremony's pre-Hellenistic antecedents, and by including the advents of Roman generals and emperors trace its later development. Central to the discussion will be the city gate, and its significance as a symbolic, liminal space.

## **Etiquette at the Abbasid Court**

Nadia Maria El Cheikh (American University of Beirut)

This paper discusses etiquette at the 'Abbasid court by analyzing sources that belong to the genre of *khidmat al-muluk*, from the third/ninth to the fifth/eleventh centuries. These texts define fundamental elements in mastering the etiquette at the 'Abbasid court, including forms of visual and aural display, colors of dress, precise spatial and temporal disposition of the bodies, all of which were deployed in the enunciation of royal power. The paper also analyzes the ways the form and style of the conversation were regulated, and the content controlled.

## **Court Etiquette in Banquets at the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal Courts**

Sinem Arcaç Casale (University of Minnesota)

This paper considers appropriate behavior during formal meals at the early modern Muslim courts of the Ottomans, Safavid and Mughals. Banquets brought together a range of courtiers, city dwellers, and foreign visitors in all of these courts. At the same time, on the surface convivial and less formal events when compared to other ceremonies, banquets could be highly codified, and indeed politicized events that lay bare power imbalances and hierarchies. From official menus and seating order to court chronicles and travelers accounts, a wide range of sources attest to this. While highlighting the rigidity and the formality of banquets at each court, this paper thus looks also at the differing historical attitudes, traditions, and formal rules that shaped the serving and consumption of food at each court.

## **The Meeting Etiquette in Late Ottoman Empire: Predicaments of *Alla Turca* and *Alla Franca***

Fatma Tunç Yaşar (Yıldız Technical University)

The profound transformations that took place worldwide, particularly within the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century, had a multifaceted impact on Ottoman life, culture, daily norms, and etiquette. The nineteenth century earned the mark “the age of civility” due to the growing emphasis on decorum globally, reflected in the proliferation of etiquette manuals. In the Ottoman milieu, this century witnessed an intense pursuit of modernization and reform, marked by a series of political initiatives aimed at aligning with European standards, particularly in military, administrative, technological, and cultural domains. Increasing interactions of Ottomans with Europeans in different realms led to changes and transformations in the Ottoman official protocol and everyday life. The penetration of the European lifestyle referred to as “*alla franca*,” into the Ottoman lifestyle denoted by the term “*alla turca*,” has led various segments of society to encounter, confront and negotiate this new way of living to differing extents. The confusion and tension arising from the amalgamation of the *alla turca* and the *alla franca* lifestyles in Ottoman life have revealed the need for guidance in this realm. In the late nineteenth century, numerous etiquette books and texts in periodicals bearing the title “*adab-ı muaşeret*” (etiquette) were published in Istanbul, the capital of the Empire. These publications redefined etiquette in the face of a changing and evolving world and aimed particularly to guide the Ottomans considering their interactions with Europeans. Targeting primarily the elite and the refined groups, these texts delineated the differences between the existing etiquettes of the Ottoman Empire and those of Europe, elucidated why the Ottomans needed to learn European etiquette, specified the conditions under which European etiquette should be applied and clarified the circumstances under which Ottoman customs should not be sacrificed for European etiquette.

Modern manners, which center on European etiquette, differ from the established Ottoman etiquette rules in many aspects, particularly regarding meeting etiquette. Practices such as greetings from elder to younger, the removal of shoes during indoor gatherings, organizing spaces, and relationships based on gender segregation are some elements that distinguish traditional Ottoman social behavior from European etiquette. This paper will explore how Ottoman gathering and meeting etiquette evolved and transformed in the context of modernization and civilization during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It will discuss the books and texts of prominent Ottoman writers, such as Ahmed Midhat, Lütfi Simavi, and Hasan Bahri, in navigating the ambivalent situations and practical dilemmas arising from situations such as greetings, handshakes, attire, dining, and departure, whether at a ball or soirée in the home, on the street, at a café, in an official meeting, or at the theater. The paper will examine how these etiquette manuals offered solutions to Ottoman individuals who found themselves in the predicaments of their culture and the requirements of modern etiquette.

## **Shaking and not shaking hands: greeting etiquette in contemporary Islamic discourse and in Muslim practice**

Morgan Clarke (University of Oxford)

Like most other aspects of life, the etiquette of meeting and greeting people is the subject of rich discussion in the Islamic legal tradition, itself the result of a long dialogue between scripture, custom and changing social norms. In this presentation, I focus on modern Twelver Shi'i Islamic legal debates in the Middle East over the rights and wrongs of shaking hands as a way of greeting others. Concerns over the propriety of physical contact between members of the opposite sex – unless they are close family relations – are reflected in many legal opinions that handshaking between men and women is impermissible. Concerns over the transmission of ritual impurity also lead some to counsel not shaking hands with non-Muslims of either sex. Both of these concerns might seem problematic in many modern contexts, where men and women, Muslim and non-Muslim, interact continuously in the workplace and other public settings. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Lebanon and among Muslim diaspora communities in the UK, I describe how people navigate the complex ethical and religious dilemmas that result.