

THE SYMBOLISM OF ANIMALS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO HUMANS IN THE CIVILISATION OF KURDISTAN IRAQ/MESOPOTAMIA

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Abstract

The natural environment in the ancient civilization of North Mesopotamia was one of the factors affecting the evolution of the beliefs and rituals of its population. The animals that accompanied ancient humans during the course of their lives in the periods of the Stone Ages have influenced humanity and gained our respect because of their contribution to an important symbiotic relationship. This relationship is all the more powerful since animals resemble humans in terms of biological characteristics such as organs, limbs, head, eyes, and the senses. It is well-known that the cave human and the first villagers co-existed with animals such as mountain goats, which lived on natural pastures in the coastal areas and semi-mountainous regions. But the relationship between humans and animals took on a special character after humanity's transition from primitive life to the more civilized urban existence. Archaeological evidence suggests that it is possible and highly likely that the civilization of North Mesopotamia actively engaged in the sanctification of distinctive species of animals, leading to the emergence of religious rituals related to certain animals since the tenth millennium B.C. This paper aims at shedding light on the oldest archaeological evidence about the human-animal relationship, showing the most important animals sanctified by Mesopotamia in prehistoric times, and clarifying the nature of thought related to religious beliefs through the worship and veneration of animals. The focus of this research would be on Animal Graphics as a Magical Ritual where clarification would be given to the most important types of those man-made drawings, and in his belief, their presence with him is part of the religious rituals and practices. Additionally, stress would be given to the most important types of animals with a religious ritual dimension where a group of animals drawn or sculpted by humans in prehistoric times, of which dogs, snakes and birds would be illustrated.

Keywords: Animals; archaeological; civilization; Mesopotamia; prehistoric; symbiotic.

1. Introduction

When I began studying archaeology in the 1980s, I came across a 1959 article by Earl Ubell, science editor of the New York Herald Tribune, which sparked my curiosity. The piece

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was titled “New Horizons in Science, Another Look at Humans’ Earliest Animal Friends” and in it, Ubell explored the relationship between humans and animals. I have since considered this subject from many perspectives throughout my academic career and developed a theory about the human-animal relationship which connects the fields of archaeology, social theory and epistemology: I am convinced that the environment in which the first humans lived alongside animals had a direct impact on the nature of ideas.

The natural environment in the ancient civilization of North Mesopotamia was one of the factors affecting the evolution of the beliefs and rituals of its population. The animals that accompanied ancient humans during the course of their lives in the periods of the Stone Ages²(Briadwood & Howe, 1960; Solecki, 1963; Steven, 2001; Kolinski, 2014) (between the food gathering stage and the food producing stage) have influenced humanity and gained our respect because of their contribution to an important symbiotic relationship. This relationship is all the more powerful since animals resemble humans in terms of biological characteristics such as organs, limbs, heads, eyes, and senses (ريتشارد, 2000, p. 2).

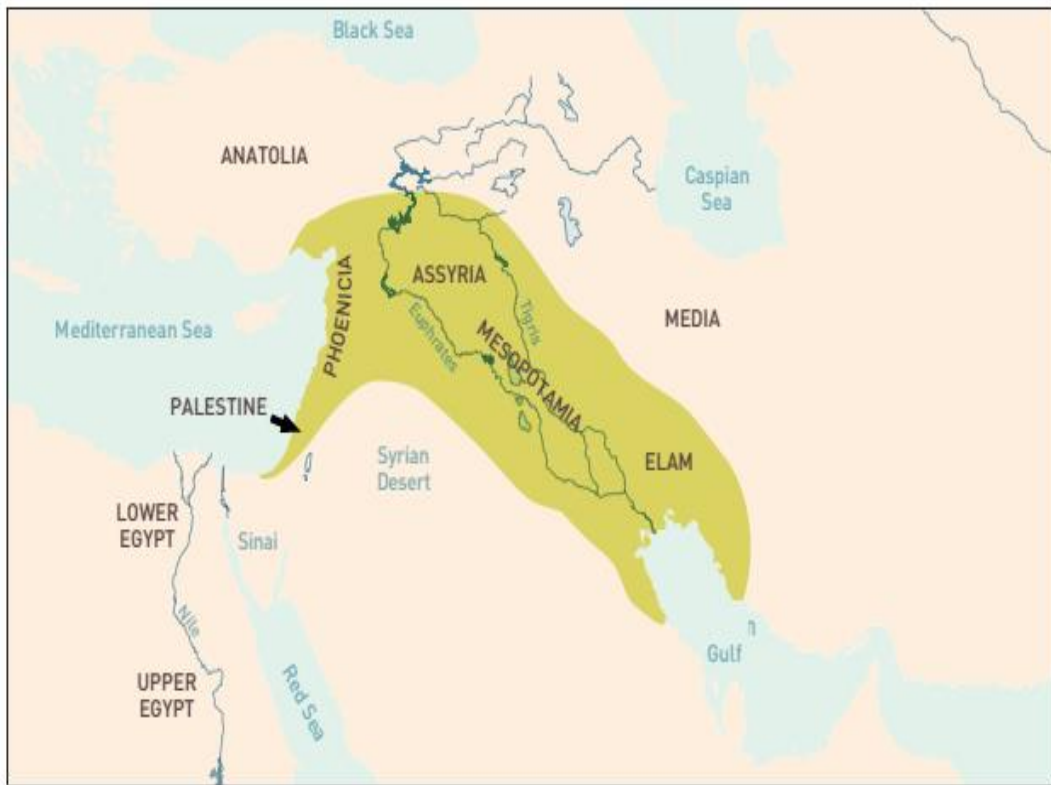
It is well-known that the cave humans and the first villagers co-existed with animals such as mountain goats, which lived on natural pastures in the coastal areas and semi-mountainous regions (Solecki, 1980, p. 68). But the relationship between humans and animals took on a special character after humanity’s transition from primitive life to the more civilized urban existence. Archaeological evidence suggests that it is possible and highly likely that the civilization of North Mesopotamia actively engaged in the sanctification of distinctive species of animals, leading to the emergence of religious rituals related to certain animals since the tenth millennium B.C (Brock, 1980, p. 37).

The following are aspects of these rituals relating to human belief and thought, which connect the co-existence of animals and humans in the civilization of ancient North Mesopotamia.(see map1) This investigation aims to answer the main idea:

There is a great deal of civilizational contact with the past, so it is necessary to study this polemic civilizational past, through a methodical, open-minded study that places the focus of the thinking on a general question upon the archaeologists and anthropologists seriously and systematically discussing its content.

The question is whether we can explain the many strong similarities between the beliefs and customs of different races, and their connections in terms of belief in general, about the sanctification of some natural phenomena for symbols that may be of no origin to animals or inanimate objects, still affected the behaviour and thought of some groups of people, whether in the Arab countries or Western world and even in the belief of many peoples in Asia and India for example, Through reverence for the animal, optimism or fear of it, while we live in the era of modernity and scientific and technological development.

² It is well known that in the Stone Age periods in ancient Kurdistan region history is dating back between the Paleolithic: 35.000- 10.000 BC, and the Mesolithic (the subsequent period of the Paleolithic): 10.000- 8000 BC, and the Neolithic period: 8000- 5600 B.C



Map1. Mesopotamia and neighbouring civilization, before from:

Frederick Mario Fales and others, Signs before the Alphabet Journey to Mesopotamia at the origins of writing, Venice- Italy, 2017, p.207.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Animal Graphics as a Magical Ritual*

Archaeologists and specialists in ancient paintings believe that art of all kinds accompanied religious beliefs as a necessary narrative vehicle that explained the journey of life. The collective life journey of human civilization began with living alongside non-domesticated animals, especially those that humans drew on the walls of the caves in approximate forms. Aspects of these paintings indicate that they served a religious or ritualistic purpose⁵. The instinctive motivation in humanity and our love of imitating things of a particular nature, such as beings that have movements similar to our own, and those that share common sensory perceptions and daily practices, is one of the things that led us to move toward art through the expression of shapes and reality, albeit complex and ambiguous⁶. A primitive human's artistic production was limited to the embodiment of all that he saw in the environment surrounding him⁷, believing that he had accomplished something that would become a tangible reality after he had represented it graphically through painting. Thus, he made manifest what was occurring in his religious thoughts and beliefs.

Equally possible is the idea that the paintings of ancient humans may be a kind of representation of the reality of the psychological preparation for real and practical actions, for example, the process of hunting. It was probably practised as a specific ritual before embarking

on certain activities such as fishing or prior to important occasions. This means that the establishment of such rituals was intended to imagine the presence of the person fishing in an atmosphere similar to the actual fishing atmosphere, to facilitate the act of fishing. This ritual can be understood to support and rehearse the intended success of the person's fishing endeavour and allay the fear of failure or threat from stronger animals. The hunters acted with the hand of a higher power, and they were probably the main proponents of the establishment of such rituals as an ideologically religious character³

2.2 Fishing Processes and Ritual Magic Paintings

It is impossible to precisely determine the motivation behind creating animals on the walls of caves, but evidence suggests that these paintings reflect the patterns of thought of the civilization of North Mesopotamia during the Stone Ages. These people were trying to control the natural environment around them, especially the animals that were in their geographical environment, for food and ceremonial purposes. Ancient Northern Mesopotamians conjectured that the more the painting was identical to the original, the more successful the fishing process would be. If a human was dominant and able to make an accurate representation of his prey and have possession and omniscience over this symbolic image day and night, this may enable him to control the origin, purpose and practice of the hunt to achieve an economic goal sought by the human to obtain his food and build his strength. In this way, the process of fishing becomes a spiritual embodiment of humanity's belief in its empowerment through channelling and controlling the feared and desired object. In addition, this process enabled human 'believers' to get rid of some dangerous animals and prevent evil. In this way, we can see that the act of representation was not merely mimicry of material objects, but rather a phenomenological embodiment of religious ideas and rituals⁴.

One of the oldest frescoes in Northern Mesopotamia is a painted mural that dates back to the era of Hassouna, apparently painted by a group of fishermen in Umm al-Dabbaghia⁵, hunting Onagers⁶ for food⁷. The purpose of this painting is mainly to imbue the hunters' skill with magical properties, as the painting expresses a magical force controlling the animals being hunted in the natural environment and contains ritual representations similar to those performed

³ البياتي، عبد الحميد فاضل، هيئة المنحوتات البشرية المدورة في العراق القديم، اطروحة دكتوراه غير منشورة، جامعة بغداد، 1997، ص37

كاظم، غفران رزاق ، الطقوس في الفن العراقي القديم - تمثيلات المشاهد الطقوسية على فخار العراق القديم، رسالة مقدمة إلى مجلس كلية 4 ص114. الفنون الجميلة بجامعة بابل، 2012

⁵ The site of Umm al-Dabbaghia had population stability dating back to the era of Hassouna, located 27 kilometers west of the city of "Al-hadhar", within the slopes of Mount Sinjar. An area of the archaeological site 100x85 m revealed several layers of housing, including rooms clad with a layer of plaster underneath the murals of scenes of hunting, in addition to the remnants of human settlement where the first layers of the site date back to the beginning of the sixth millennium BC. For more information, see:

حجارة، اسماعيل حسين، أوائل العصر الحجري المعدني في شمال بلاد الرافدين (4800-5800 ق.م)، مجلة سومر، مجلد 52، ج1 و2، 2003-2004، ص 14 ؛ الدباغ، تقي والجادر، وليد، عصور قبل التاريخ، مصدر سابق، ص 140.

⁶ This animal is called a "donkey", a hybrid animal, half a donkey. The bones discovered in the site of "Umm al-Dabbaghiyya" are the highest number of bones discovered in one location in the ancient east, which indicates that meat was the largest part of the diet of people living there. For more information about the mammalian mother, see:

بوكوني، ساندرا، البيئة الحيوانية لموقع ام الدباغية، تعريب: ميسون حبيب حسو، مجلة سومر، المجلد 30، لسنة 1974، ص 335-338

⁷ Diana K, Umm Dabbaghiyah, Fourth Preliminary 1974, IRAQ, Vol. XXXVII, 1975, Pl.II, a-b.

by the fishermen before engaging in the process of fishing, allowing them to feel superior to Terra and therefore able to catch the animal in reality. One of the animals at the top left of the scene is depicted as if being lifted by the hunter's hook while leaving the rest to run fast⁸. This painting is a ritualistic assignation of magical power to the hunters' skills. Through this imagined empowerment, the hunters convinced their visceral being that they would be able to catch one good specimen⁹.

The study of the topics of artistic paintings in ancient Mesopotamia during prehistoric times shows that these paintings are related to religious thought and belief, although a clear interpretation of the nature of these beliefs is still not fully resolved¹⁰. Human-made animal art allows researchers to gain significant insights into the available physical evidence, especially those forms and paintings carried out by humans on walls or pottery or stone tablets. Perhaps ancient human's skill in painting animals is due to the proximity of these animals they were hunting, especially those animals that provided him with abundant and sufficient food such as donkeys and wild cows¹¹.

2.2.1 *Animals as Friends of Humans*

After handling these animals, it was easy to examine and understand their shape, and this information was transferred into their understandings and beliefs¹². In support of this idea, the Cave of Gunduk (about 70 km north-east of Nineveh) is carved into the city of Aqra (Akre), and it is described as "a rectangular scene (around 1x2 m)". On the right side of the cave, a human is shown sitting in a long dress and wearing a crown with a goat beside him, its front hooves on his lap, suggesting subservience. Behind this is a secondary scene of a human standing and beside him is a mother bear suckling a small bear (see Figure 2). The fact that a human is an old man supports the idea that domestication and interaction with animals occur through close and consistent symbiotic relationships built over time – the old man has developed this relationship and now as the domesticator of the animals, benefits from the service of the animals under his reign. In the secondary scene, the depiction of a mother bear and her cub is significant because these are fierce, threatening predators, unlike the passive creatures of traditional domestication such as cows, goats, chickens and dogs. Archaeological evidence tells us that locals in this region tell legendary stories about the female bear's special relationship with humans. This festive scene featuring a mother bear and her cub is repeated frequently in the scenes of the civilization of North Mesopotamia in the words of Taha Baqer¹³.

The famous archaeologist, Seton Lloyd, has traced many ancient carved scenes to the beginning of human knowledge of agriculture, referring specifically to the progress in the cave

صاحب، زهير، الفنون التشكيلية العراقية عصر ما قبل الكتابة، مطبعة دبي، بغداد، 2007، ص 50⁸

⁹ Lloys, Seton and Others, Fifty Years of Mesopotamian Discovery, British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1982, p.20.

ابراهيم، نعمان جمعة، تقديس الحيوانات في بلاد الرافدين، في ضوء المشاهد الفنية من الألف التاسع حتى نهاية الألف الثالث ق.م،¹⁰ أطروحة دكتوراه غير منشورة مقدمة الى كلية الآداب بجامعة صلاح الدين/ اربيل، 2009، ص 25.

¹¹ Gorden V, New Light on the Most Ancient East, London, 1935, fig.9

¹² البروراي، حسن احمد قاسم، رموز الآلهة في منحوتات منطقة بادينان- دراسة حضارية، رسالة ماجستير غير منشورة مقدمة الى مجلس كلية الآداب – قسم الآثار بجامعة صلاح الدين، 2002، ص 89.

¹³ باقر، طه وسفر، فؤاد، المرشد الى مواطن الآثار والحضارة، الرحلة الثالثة، مديرية الفنون والثقافة الشعبية، بغداد، 1965، ص 45.

area of Gunduk¹⁴. We also know that the representation of animals connected with humans has been associated with the early periods of ritual, perhaps in this context taking a certain religious significance. In particular, we know that archaeologists have visited the cave and found evidence inside a small temple cave on the Eastern side¹⁵, but the evidence to support this interpretation is inconclusive.

2.3 The Most Important Types of Animals with a Religious Ritual Dimension

Although there are no explicit signs that tell us which animals are assigned degrees of purpose or importance in the paintings and carvings of animals in ancient North Mesopotamia, the data revealed by the material sources allow inference about the meanings and implications of the intellectual and religious significance of some animals¹⁶.

Among the animals that are illustrated in the archaeological studies material, we find the following:

2.3.1 Snake

The representation of the snake in art is common in prehistoric times, and among the oldest of these are models drawn on the pottery from the era of the mid-fifth millennium (4500 BC)¹⁷, where a piece of pottery was found from the site of Arpachiyah inscribed with a Cobra¹⁸, and another pottery fragment from the same period was seen at the site of Yarim Tepe, but the latter is painted in black¹⁹.

According to specialists of the legends of Mesopotamia, the snake is a symbol of the forces born in the earth, since early times, and it is described as the goddess known as the "Mother Land"²⁰. In accordance with historical understandings and ancient Mesopotamian beliefs, snakes occupied the land that became known as the cradle of civilization and, in this way, became synonymous with birth and nurturing. The earth (from which the snakes emerge) supplies humans and animals with food through germination. Likewise, the snake multiplies and nurtures her offspring. In the shedding of skin, snakes also signify the cyclical nature of life.

The excavation of these models confirms that the snake had an important role in the life of ancient humans and that the impact of the snake on the thought of the Mesopotamian human is related to worship, rituals and related religious ideas²¹26.

So, the snake motif, which appears frequently in Mesopotamian and Ancient Near Eastern art of many kinds, can be seen to satisfy a consistent social need for symbols which offer narrative explanations of life's journey. As discussed earlier, these early humans connected their lived experiences with a sense of higher power expressed as religious beliefs and rituals.

¹⁴ Lloyd S, F S A, Gunduk forward, Sumer, 1948, vol.4, p.43.

¹⁵ - الامين، محمود، استكشافات اثرية جديدة في شمال العراق، مجلة سومر، عدد 4 - الجزء الثاني، لسنة 1948، ص 207، شكل رقم 14.

¹⁶ ابراهيم، نعمان جمعة، تقديس الحيوانات، مصدر سابق، ص 25 وما بعدها

¹⁷ Goff, Beatrice Laura, *Symbols of Prehistoric Mesopotamia*, London, Yale University, 1963, Fig.76,78.

¹⁸ Mallowan M and Rose J, Excavation At Tell Arpachiyah 1933, IRAQ, Vol. II, 1935, p. 164, fig.77, No.9.

¹⁹ Merpert N and Humanchaev M, Yarim Tepe I and Yarim Tepe II in Northern Iraq, IRAQ, Vol.LXIX,1987, fig.21, N.4.

²⁰ - Langdon S, in the Mythology of all Races, I, New York, 1964, p.90.

²¹ ابراهيم، نعمان جمعة، تقديس الحيوانات، مصدر سابق، ص 37.

2.3.2 Dog

Among the other animals to have appeared in physical evidence (i.e. bone) or artistic scenes, especially the sculptures and paintings of animals in prehistoric times, we find the dog. Dogs are perhaps among the oldest animals to have formed a relationship with humans, which is suggested by the fact that dog skeletons have been found buried within human settlements since the Middle Stone Age and within the waste from the excavation in the cave of Pale Gawra²². Clearly, dogs occupied a special place in the imagination of ancient artists through paintings, sculptures and the creation of miniature likenesses. In the village of Germa in the Neolithic Age, we found many different sized models of dogs which had been fashioned from mud and blood-coloured stone mixture²³. In the Qalinj Agha hill in Erbil, we also found samples of mud dolls of dogs from the era of the mid-fifth millennium BC (period of Half)²⁴. At the archaeological site, "Tepe Gawra", we also found stone puppets of dogs and discovered a hole on the side of one shoulder²⁵. It was likely to have been used as an amulet attached to clothing, especially for sick children.

It is not surprising that these amulets performed a function with religious ritual dimensions. It has been established that the dog was described as an animal that treats its own wounds by licking them until they heal. The ancient symbolism of dogs can be connected to the healing goddess "Gula", a clear reference to the dog's link in ancient Mesopotamian thought to healing diseases²⁶.

2.3.3 Birds

Birds were among the animals that received sanctity and status associated with the practice of some rituals, from the early settlement of humanity during the tenth millennium of the Middle Stone Age. This is supported by the discovery of the remains of the wings of birds, likely to be from falcons or cranes within the excavations in the village "Zawy Chemi" or the late layers of the "Shanider" cave. These wings had been buried in well-designed graves, suggestive of human intervention in the burial with all care and attention²⁷. In addition, we have found birds in the paintings covering pottery dishes from the era of the Halaf civilization of the mid-fifth millennium. Similarly, birds on pottery vessels were found at the "Tepe Gawra" site, clearly indicating the human interest in birds, not merely for the sake of decoratively filling in the blank spaces on wares, but more likely, these semantics concerned the practice of some kind of religious ritual²⁸.

Perhaps the same purpose was in the imagination of the farmers from the village of "Zawy Chemi", where they were interested in birds as bearing religious connotations²⁹³⁴. Other sources provide strong evidence of the sanctification of birds: Depictions focus especially on the unique wing silhouettes of cranes and hawks showing these birds flying high and humans

²² Braidwood R and How B, *op.cit*, 1960, p.129.

²³ *Ibid*, p.28.

²⁴ Abu Al-Soof B, Excavation at Tell Qalinj Agha- Erbil, *ER*, Vol. 25, 1969, p.9, Pl.XIII.

²⁵ Tobler A, Excavation at Tepe Gawra, 2 Levels IX - XX IRAQ, Vol.101, 1950, p.179, fig.62.

²⁶ لايات، رينيه، الطب البابلي والاشوري، سومر، مجلد 26، لسنة 1970، ص44.

²⁷ Solecki R, Zawy Chemi Shanider A post – Pleistocene Village in Northern Iraq, 1964, p.405.

²⁸ Goff, *Beatrice Laura, op.cit, Fig.76,78.*

²⁹ الجادر، وليد، الانسان البدائي، مجلة الأكاديمي، العدد الاول، جامعة بغداد، 1971، ص23

shown far below. In ancient Mesopotamian thought, birds represented the wind as an important elemental force in agriculture. Ancient seals provide strong evidence of the belief that reverence for birds provided some protection for humans in agricultural settlements³⁰.

Finally, it can be said that the works of art completed by humans during the stone Age over 10,000 years ago offer the most obvious evidence for understanding the nature of human belief. Such artworks include many aspects of tradition, customs and beliefs. Through experience, telling and retelling, these became entrenched within the society. The nature of the art of ancient humans is not in itself the object of tradition but the revelation of the intellectual systems that have helped humans to establish certain rituals which support our collective purposes³¹. Humans in the Mesopotamian civilization lived in closer contact with nature, allowing for the development of a kind of harmony between human existence on the one hand and animal life on the other. Through this symbiosis, certain animals became objects of meditation, often elevated as indirectly representing religious symbolic value³².

3 Conclusion

Ancient humans' religious ideas developed in connection with their geographical and natural environment and served to fulfil essential practical, social and psychological needs. Religious beliefs and rituals were also important means by which ancient humans sought to minimize fear of the many natural hazards that threatened their stability and survival. In keeping with this idea, ancient humans achieved a high degree of social accord about the role of animals in their lives, which supported the structures of their civilization: They lived side by side with animals, observed and understood their behavior, domesticated certain animals and took advantage of their products. All this was possible because of a reflective and respectful attitude – ultimately reflected in the worship of animals as sacred beings.

There is compelling evidence to suggest that humans' perception of animals was crystallized by close observation of animal existence; a process often serving to illustrate effective survival strategies. Animals played a significant role in the expansion of human perception and, as the archeological and anthropological evidence demonstrates, they were accordingly acknowledged as sacred symbols, elevating the struggle for survival to the realm of spirituality.

In the end, we can say that the Archaeological and anthropological evidence available to researchers at some prehistoric times have proven that man has practiced an activity described as magical tending to what is known recently with the recent science as Para-psychological during the early ages of the emergence of civilization in the shadow of his primitive life. Additionally, while going through studying the evidence about magical practices, we can investigate a number of these Phenomena and traces the continuation of their existence in our midst from distant yesterday to the present day.

³⁰ Frankfort H, Cylinder Seal, London, 1939, Pl.XI.m.

³¹ صاحب، زهير وآخرون، دراسات في الفن والمجتمع، دار مجدلاوي، عمان، الاردن، 2006، ص28
³² سيرنج، فيليب، الرموز في الفن -الاديان-الحياة، ترجمة عبد الهادي عباس، دار دمشق، سوريا، 1992، ص38

There is no doubt that recent scientific studies have added a lot of valuable information that has been provided by Anthropologists and sociologists. They, have tried to provide logical and scientific explanations for such magical and para-psychological practices, because ancient and modern humans cannot believe in practices that do not depend on logic, especially since sorcery and quackery cannot interfere with the most important human practices

It goes without saying that specialists during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries classified these practices among the peoples of the ancient history in north Mesopotamia as magical, while recent studies have confirmed that they are among the parapsychological practices .This occurred especially since the roots of most of these practices have evidence for them in the customs, traditions and practices of the ancient East societies in the Northeast of the Mesopotamia and in the ancient near east.

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