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The Cupbearer and the Cult-Priest in the Temple: External and Internal Cultic Practitioners in Early Bronze Age Mesopotamia

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1 Introduction: "Cult Priest" as a Profession in Early Mesopotamia

In the cuneiform tradition of ancient Mesopotamia, religious practice can be traced over two and a half millennia. This article is devoted to the earliest phase, the third millennium BCE, and concentrates on Southern Mesopotamia, especially the region of Sumer south of Nippur.[1] The first pertinent written sources date from the Presargonic period, the time of the city-states in the 24th century BCE, and here the archives from Girsu, the capital of the city-state of Lagaš, are the most important source. Although the kingdoms of Akkade (23rd–22nd century BCE) and Ur (21st century BCE) incorporated the former city-states, many socio-economic institutions continued, such as collective agriculture, the variety of professions within each communal organization, or the role of temples in urban life. Therefore, and because of the common traditions in material culture, in a historical analysis the third millennium evidence can be discussed together under the heading of "Early Bronze Age." With the end of the Third Dynasty of Ur around 2000 BCE, Mesopotamia's society and culture changed fundamentally, and therefore the situation as discussed here does not

1 This study is related to a book-project on *Festivals and Feasting in Early Bronze Age Mesopotamia*, to which Adelheid Otto contributes the archaeological perspective and this author deals with the philological evidence. The Centre for Advanced Studies (CAS) at LMU approved our project and as senior researchers in residence in 2016/17, first research for this contribution could be undertaken. I am most grateful to Michael Jursa and Shai Gordin for the invitation to Tel Aviv and to all participants for the interesting discussions.

Conventions: Sumerian is transliterated in italics. Dates BCE refer to the Middle Chronology and follow Sallaberger and Schrakamp (2015). Ur III dates are given in the form year/month/day, with Š = Šulgi, AS = Amar-Suena, ŠS = Šu-Suen, IS = Ibbi-Suen. Bibliographical sigla of Ur III texts follow those of the Database of Neo-Sumerian Texts, or BDTNS (http://bdtns.filol.csic.es), other abbreviations are those of the *RlA*.

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pertain to the Old Babylonian period (2000–1600 BCE) or even later phases of Babylonian history.

When early Mesopotamia was first discovered a century or more ago, scholars unintentionally assumed that a religious world-view preceded a more secular one and therefore imagined a dominant role of priesthood in the first cities, culminating in the idea of a "priestly king." In ancient Near Eastern studies, however, it has become standard knowledge that the earliest Mesopotamian rulers were not "priestly kings" in the sense that religious leaders situated in temples executed political supremacy as well.[2] A political ruler or king interacted intensively with his state's temples since they constituted centres of society and economy. The temples as organizations comprised large segments of the population in the third millennium, and temples along with other communal organizations managed most economic activity such as agriculture, animal husbandry, crafts and the distribution of food and clothing. Temple festivals were the main social events in Early Bronze Age Mesopotamia, and representative heads (as the "high-priestesses") or executive directors of the dominant sanctuaries often stemmed from the ruling family.

In the Early Bronze Age, individuals were prominently defined by their profession in the communal organizations: temples, cities, and other productive units and suppliers of service. The administrative texts identified individuals often by their profession alone, rather than by their personal names, and they hardly ever give patronyms. Therefore, an investigation of "priests" or "cupbearers" as professionals (instead of individuals performing priestly duties) relies on a Sumerian and thus an emic category.

The professional translated as "(cult) priest" (Sumerian *gudu*$_4$) in the third millennium documents fulfils all criteria for a priest: He was working full-time or part-time at a temple in the service of gods, taking care of the preparation and presentation of the sacrifices, which constituted the central religious practice in Mesopotamia. He can thus be identified as a professional intermediary between human and divine sphere.[3] Seen in a wider perspective, the society

2 See among the early critical voices Edzard (1975: 336): "In der Tat ist die fast als communis opinio zu bezeichnende Auffassung, der en sei ursprünglich besonders eng einer priesterlichen Funktion verpflichtet gewesen, letztlich nicht beweisbar."

3 A priest is a cultic functionary, appointed as intermediary to the deity for a certain group (tribe, family or community) or a certain place (temple, shrine v.s.), who as a rule also keeps (and teaches) sacred knowledge and issues the blessing (Neumann [1998: 342]: "Priester ist der für eine bestimmte Gruppe (Stamm, Familie oder Gemeinde) oder einen bestimmten Ort (Tempel, Schrein oder dergleichen) als Vermittler zur Gottheit bestellte Kultfunktionär, der in der Regel auch heiliges Wissen hütet (und lehrt) sowie Segen spendet"). This is the definition of priest used as background for a wide overview of the office by Sallaberger and Huber Vulliet (2005).

supported the priest to deal with religious matters. Fabienne Huber Vulliet, in her still unpublished dissertation,[4] felicitously dubbed the *gudu*$_4$ priests as "*les desservants*." Besides them, the leading representatives, such as temple-lords (*saĝĝa*, *šabra*, etc.) or high-priestesses (*en, ereš-diĝir*, etc.) and specialized priests, along with other professionals, such as musicians, were employed at the temple. But since in contrast to "priests," other people like "musicians," "cooks," or "brewers" were not restricted to the temple, and those active in the temple were not characterized by any social, economic, or ritualistic features, these persons/figures cannot be considered as "priests" in the period under investigation.[5]

This agrees with the complementary observation that priests can hardly be categorized as a specific social class or group in the third millennium. As is the case with almost each profession, temple staff appears in different social positions. At Presargonic Girsu, the top twenty representatives of the city-state's temples, namely the "temple-lords" (*saĝĝa*), i.e. the directors of temples, or some "chief singers of lamentations" (*gala-maḫ*), counted among the circa fifty guests who came from the whole city-state, including office-holders, such as military commanders, scribes, or the chief merchant. These few temple directors and the chief lamentation priests obviously did not constitute a social "class" of priests of their own. The cult priests (*gudu*$_4$) performing the ritual presentation of sacrifices in the temples, on the other hand, cannot be differentiated from individuals of other professions. Like many men in a communal organization, the cult priests received parcels of land[6] or had to work on the canals.[7] According to the size of their fields (and the canal work they did) the few cult priests known from the Presargonic Girsu texts belonged economically to the upper quarter of the population.

Furthermore, there is no indication that cult priests (or any other priest) received a special education in written or oral lore; nor do priests feature as agents of literary production in the third millennium. Scribes (*dubsar*) were tasked with writing, whereas songs and hymns were composed and performed by singers (*nar*) at court or in the temple, laments by the lamentation priests

4 Huber Vulliet (2014).

5 In contrast to late Mesopotamian evidence, cultic personnel do not share any other socio-economic features that would set them apart from other professions; no institution comparable to the regime of prebends in first millennium temples is known from Sumer. Note that Waerzeggers (2010: 34) defined a priest "as a person who enjoyed the right to partake in the temple worship on account of his possession of the required legal title and on account of his ritual qualifications." Such a definition is possible and necessary for the historical situation she studies, Babylonia in the 6th century BCE, but it cannot simply be used for other periods as well.

6 VS 25 70; also tenants, *apin-la*$_2$.

7 E.g., VS 25 105, DP 655.

(*gala-maḫ*) of the cities or of the temples, and the conjurer acted as an expert in healing. Father–son relations of cult priests are attested (Huber Vulliet 2014), but the tradition of a profession in a family was valid for priests just as for any other profession. Thus, there is no indication that priests formed a special social class beyond the strong social coherence among peers of the same profession in Early Bronze Age Mesopotamia. In fact, professions formed a dominant factor in social life in early Mesopotamia, since people worked together in the large workshops and storerooms of the communal organizations; they even performed canal-work as peer-groups. In this wider social context, priests performed one more specialized profession in the highly differentiated society of third millennium cities, and their workplace was the temple.

With the Middle Bronze Age, the situation changed sensibly, and although the temples continued to be important employers, they lost their all-encompassing role in social organization. Divine worship became a personal matter as well (in literature), and religious practice more often took place at home (as indicated, for example, by the rise of family religion or the presence of religious motifs on terracotta plaques found in domestic dwellings). Evidently, in a new and different social context, temples changed their role in society, and the priests who performed the daily temple cult now occupied another place in the social fabric. Admittedly, this over-simplifying sketch of the historical development remains lacunary and defective, but in any case the socio-economic changes profoundly affected religion as a socially grounded cultural system. Thus, research on priests in the third millennium must resist drawing on evidence from the much-better known second and first millennia.

Although third-millennium cult priests ($gudu_4$) can easily be identified as professionals in the preparation of sacrifices in temples, another profession appears frequently in the written documentation as related to sacrifices or dedications, namely the "cupbearers" or "stewards" (*sagi*). Should they consequently be classified as "priests"? If so, what constituted the difference between "priests" and "cupbearers"? How can the fact that both "priests" and "cupbearers" handled sacrifices in the temple be related to the limits of sacred space in Early Bronze Age Mesopotamia? In this paper, I will discuss the job-profile of the cupbearer first, and then concentrate on his religious role from the Presargonic to the Sargonic and Ur III periods (24th to 21st centuries BCE). This allows for a comparison with the professional cult-priest ($gudu_4$) and invites for a more general conclusion on the accessibility of temples, and thus brings us back to the role of priests in the third millennium.[8]

8 Despite the best intentions, this survey can only scratch the surface of a large topic, since there exist hardly any studies on the economic and social role of temples in the Early Bronze Age, with the notable exception of R. Zettler's (1992) study of the archive from the Inana

2 The Cupbearer or Steward (*sagi*)

The cupbearer (*sagi*) was a steward or waiter who served his master or mistress and their guests at meals; they selected and handled food and drinks. Glassner (1993) gave a profile of his activities mostly based on later evidence. Third millennium archival documents concerning the *sagi* amply testify to his care of the vessels and dishes used for meals, and he appears as recipient of beer and food. Michalowski (2013) added some notes on the office in a study of Gudea's steward in the Ur III period, and Maiocchi (2010) dealt with Adab's Sargonic *sagi* Mesag, who received bronze vessels, delivered beer, e.g. to travellers, and handled foodstuffs. Along similar lines, Huber Vulliet (2014: 70–72) points out that the cupbearer did more than offer drinks, and stewards could also be experienced in beer production and as cooks.

The *sagi* was considered as being so close to the ruler's family that a steward, called Anita was even depicted within the family in the reliefs of Ur-Nanše of Lagaš (25th century BCE), where he holds a jug to indicate his office. When soliciting the opinion of colleagues on the origin of the cupbearer's elevated role during the preparation of this paper, it was often suggested that the cupbearer had to protect his master from poisoned food or drinks. Protection alone, however, can hardly justify integration into his master's family, since, for example, a group of well-armed guards was needed more urgently to protect a ruler—but guards were never depicted in the imagery of a ruler. Therefore, there is more to the office of the cupbearer: the city-ruler, his wife, or their children needed people they could trust, and as daily company at every meal, at least they had to get along with them personally. This was the background needed to appreciate an exceptional seal inscription, dedicated by king Ibbi-Suen to the cupbearer Suen-abūšu, whom the king called "the friend/buddy of his youth."[9]

Probably the most vivid description of a cupbearer's office can be found in Cylinder B of Gudea of Lagash (around 2120 BCE), a reference correctly adduced by Glassner (1993), although the very term *sagi* does not appear there. In this passage, the god Sulšagana[10] is portrayed as a steward serving his master, Ninĝirsu, food and drinks in the temple Eninnu; this activity includes a careful hand-washing, and the high-quality food makes Ninĝirsu rise from his bed, in order to come to the meal.

Temple of Nippur. This is all the more surprising, since it is especially the Ur III documentation that offers a rich source material on the circulation of goods and services related to temples and the cult.

9 Wilcke (1989); see RIME 3/2, p. 389.

10 Krebernik (2013) gives only a very concise overview and does not treat the god's function, besides his being a child of Ninĝirsu and Bau.

Gudea Cylinder B vi 24–vii 11 (after the meal was prepared according to lines v 19–vi 10; for an edition see Edzard 1997)[11]

vi 24	*e$_2$ sikil-e-da šu$_4$-luḫ ĝa$_2$-ĝa$_2$-da*	To clean the house, to apply hand-washing,
vi 25	*šu ku$_3$ a en-ra šum$_2$-mu-da*	a pure hand to give water to his lord,
vi 26	*kaš bur-ra de$_2$-da tin dug-a de$_2$-da*	to pour beer into precious dishes, alcoholic beverage in vessels,
vii 1	*e$_2$*-BABIR *e$_2$ a$_2$-sikil-ba*	and in its (the Eninnu's) brewery, the building "pure force,"[11]
vii 2	*u$_2$-lu$_5$-ši-e a pa$_4$-sir$_2$-gen$_7$*	to let there the emmer-beer splash
vii 3	*kuĝ$_2$-ga-an za-a-da*	like the waters at Pasir,
vii 4	*gud du$_7$ maš$_2$ du$_7$ udu niga*	and then, when the perfect oxen, perfect kids and fattened sheep,
vii 5	*inda$_3$ u$_4$-da ga maš$_2$ lulim-ma*	bread of the day, milk of goat and deer,
vii 6	*u$_4$ ĝe$_6$-e de$_6$-a nir ĝal$_2$ dumu ki aĝ$_2$*	are brought from day to night, so that they (i.e. the foodstuffs) let
vii 7	*^{d}en-lil$_2$-la$_2$ ur-saĝ ^{d}nin-ĝir$_2$-su$_2$*	the authority, the beloved son of Enlil, the warrior Ninĝirsu,
vii 8	*gu$_7$-a naĝ-a* ⌜DU?⌝*-be$_2$ u$_3$-a ⟨mi-⟩zi-zi*	rise from his sleep for the *serving*(?) of food and drink,
vii 9	*en šu$_4$-luḫ dadag-ga dumu-saĝ e$_2$-ninnu*	for this he (Gudea) introduced the lord of splendid hand-washing, Eninnu's first son,
vii 10	^{d}*sul-ša$_3$-ga* ^{d}*nin-ĝir$_2$-su-ra*	Sulšaga in his agency (lit. with his
vii 11	*me-ne$_2$-da mu-na-da-dib-e*	*me*) to Ninĝirsu.

This literary portrait of a cupbearer clearly combines the hand-washing before the meal with eating and drinking afterwards. Hand-washing was a widespread ceremony in ancient Mesopotamia, but its relationship to meals has gone largely unnoticed. With this passage in mind, one understands why the cupbearer, Anita, represented behind his master, king Ur-Nanše of Lagaš, holds a spouted jug to pour water into the shallow bowl in his left hand, as interpreted convincingly by Roßberger (2019). Hand-washing involved no transfer of goods

11 The term *a$_2$-sikil*, literally "pure strength," refers to a brewery; see the profession *nu-banda$_3$ a$_2$-sikil* among priests in Nisaba 11 31 i 17 (Ur III Umma).

and thus does not appear in the administrative textual records, but it must be counted among the prominent tasks of a cupbearer.

At Presargonic Girsu (24th century BCE), the cupbearer (*sagi*) was the one to bring the city-ruler and his wife beer prepared by the brewer when they stayed outside in an official mission.[12] Travellers appear only rarely in the same archive, but one can cite two instances of the *sagi* serving guests, once a man from Uruk.[13] He also checked the fish to be served, since the fishermen brought the fish for the "malt-eating festival of Nanše," directly to the steward's house.[14] The two stewards Nintazi and Enlu named in these texts are well-known men in the Presargonic archive from the Emunus, the organization headed by the Lady of Lagaš, wife of the rulers of the city-state Lagaš. This large organization comprised some six hundred active individuals who cooperated in agriculture, animal breeding, fishing, crafts, and many more services, and who shared their products in a basically redistributive economy. Nintazi, the steward in the example cited, belonged to the 60% majority of male Emunus members who had received sustenance land under king Urukagina. Under the latter's predecessor, Lugalanda, Nintazi was the first steward in the Lady's palace. In addition, as a holder of sustenance land he may well have remained the foreman of the other stewards of the Emunus organization, in a similar way to other holders of sustenance land that served as overseers for various professions. Enlu(saga), the other cupbearer mentioned before, was not a member but rather a neighbour of the Emunus. He disposed of a field lot as well, and from time to time he appears in his job in the circle around the Lady of Lagaš.

Cupbearers held a prominent position at court, and they counted among the domestics stationed permanently in the palace; these domestics belonged to the Emunus organization but they lived in the city-ruler's palace, where the Lady also had her apartment. The relevant lists show a remarkable uniformity of the palace personnel around the Lady: 5 to 7 *ḪARdu* women, maids of the Lady's personal entourage;[15] 6 to 10 cupbearers; and then professions such as barbers, cooks, those responsible for the storerooms or envoys.[16] The palace

12 DP 165: 10 + 10 + 5 *kurkur* vessels of light beer in three deliveries, "he (i.e. Nintazi) brought it to the city-ruler, who stayed to start work on the canals; Nintazi, the steward, was its commissioner"; 2 +2 *kurkur* vessels in two deliveries: "the Lady has desired it (for herself); Nintazi, the steward, was its commissioner; consumption from Amargirid, the brewer." DP 169: first delivery "to the city-ruler, when he stayed in front of […])," and secondly "to the city-ruler at the sheep pen for plucking wool."

13 Nik. 1 130 and 135.

14 BIN 8 370; VS 25 047; the *sagi* cares for fish also in ITT 5 9237.

15 On them see Karahashi (2018) with many further references.

16 For this group of persons, called *ša*$_3$ *dub e*$_2$*-gal* "registered in the palace" in the documents, see Prentice (2010: 29–39).

domestics including the cupbearers acted for her mistress in a ceremony of Bau's Festival, when they shared sacred food with the most honourable guests of the city-state.

Apparently, the profession of serving was considered a male domain, since even in the Lady's staff no women show up. The personal bonds of the cupbearers to their mistress becomes evident with the enthronement of a new Lady. Sasa, the wife of Urukagina, took over some staff from her predecessor, Paranamtara, but she exchanged half of the stewards. Our knowledge of the duties of a steward in the preparation and service of meals as well as their high number, even exceeding those of the female domestics, indicates the presence of daily banquets in the Lady's quarters. The entourage of cupbearers could take care of their mistress day and night, and possibly they performed other aspects of body care and cleaning, beyond washing her hands.

Members of the ruling family were surrounded by cupbearers from their childhood onwards, and this element helps best to evaluate their role. This is proven by the lists of personnel employed by the princes and princesses of Presargonic Lagaš. Each of the ruler's children commanded a similar group of persons who lived "in the palace," namely one or more female nurses or domestics (*ḫar-du*$_2$), sometimes a barber, a singer, and, obligatorily, one or more cupbearers.[17] Differently than what the translation "cupbearer" and the associations of such figures with banquets would suggest, cupbearers cared for royal children, princes, and princesses alike. Evidently this involved the supply of food and drinks as well as bodily care, such as washing and anointing, and so the cupbearer became one of the closest caregivers for princely children.

3 The Religious Role of the Cupbearer

The cupbearer's role as an individual close to the family, but probably also his experience in caring for his masters, made him the appropriate actor in a special ceremony in Presargonic Girsu (24th century BCE): the dressing of ancestors. Annually at Bau's Festival, the cupbearer dressed the statues of deceased ladies with new clothes and adorned them with jewels, thereby interacting with a launderer who provided the textiles. One archival document indicates in the subscript the sequence of steps, after the jewels were attributed to the four ladies: "At Bau's Festival, Sasa, the wife of Urukagina, king of Lagaš, gave them

17 For the lists see Karahashi (2018); my overview is based on a first hand-study of the twenty personnel lists documenting the organizations of the children of Lugalanda and Urukagina.

(i.e. the jewels) to the cupbearer Bau-iggal";[18] thus the steward executed the dedication in the name of the Lady. Another cupbearer named Engisa brought jewels as dedications (*a ru*) from the Lady Sasa to the goddess Ninmarki at Guaba.[19]

Both cupbearers, Engisa and Bau-iggal, did not only present dedications of jewels, but also of food offerings, both to the ancestors and to divine objects.[20] With the sacrifices, the same chain of events can be observed: Engisa, who we know as cupbearer, "brought (i_3-DU) 1 sheep and 1 kid to the divine chariot (of Nanše)" among the "sacrifices" (*niĝ$_2$ ĝeš ta$_3$-ga*) of the Lady (DP 43 vii 6–viii 2). Another document notes after various foodstuffs, sheep, bread and beer, fruit, vegetables, and onions: "it is the sacrifice of the city-ruler. He brought it to (the dead ancestor), Dudu, temple-lord. The cupbearer Bau-iggal [accompanied it there]."[21] In all these cases, the cupbearer executed the lady's or the city-ruler's dedication of jewels or the sacrifice of food and drink to the dead ancestors or to the gods.

This cultic role of the cupbearer is well known both from the subsequent Sargonic (23rd/22nd century BCE) and the Ur III periods (21st century BCE). Maiocchi (2010) has shown that Mesag, cupbearer of Adab, was responsible for offerings to the gods of Adab, whereas usually "he was a food taster and supervised the brewery and the kitchen."[22]

The function of the cupbearer in providing the gods with food and drink transpires also in the unique royal titulary of Šarkališarri, "strong king, cupbearer of Enlil, king of Akkade, king of the land of Enlil" (RIME 2.1.5.4). And no discussion of the cupbearer can pass without mentioning that, according to the legend, Sargon of Akkade served as cupbearer for his master Ur-Zababa; but Sargon's office led to the rewarding relationship with Inana, who supported her favourite.[23]

In the Ur III period (21st century BCE), the cupbearer often performed cultic duties for the king. In texts from the royal holdings at Puzriš-Dagān, the

18 DP 74 vi-v; for Bau-iggal as donator of jewels ladies at Bau's festival see DP 76 (without title) and cf. DP 73.

19 DP 69 from year Urukagina 2; Engisa acted as cupbearer for princess Geme-Nanše in the years Lugalanda 5 and 6.

20 On the differentiation between dedications of objects and sacrifices of food and other combustibles and a broad overview see Braun-Holzinger and Sallaberger (2016: "Weihgaben") and Mayer and Sallaberger (2003: "Opfer").

21 VS 14 120 = AWL 163: *niĝ$_2$-ĝeš-ta$_3$-ga*, *ensi$_2$-ka-kam*, *du-du*, *saĝĝa*, *mu-na*-DU, ^{d}*ba-u$_2$-ig-gal*, ⌜*sagi*⌝, [*e-da-ĝen*].

22 Molina (2014: 59 ad no. 1 0.5).

23 The most recent translation of the Sargon Legend is provided by Attinger (2010/17) with ample documentation of the earlier literature.

sagi appears as the one who executed the animal sacrifice to the gods when the king was not present in person. He thus worked in commission for the king, who otherwise would have entered the temple himself with the animals (as expressed in the documents by the formula *lugal ku*$_4$*-ra* "when the king entered" or "presence of the king").[24] The close link of the cupbearer to the king becomes also clear in documents from Umma. In the large annual documents of offerings for Šara,[25] the cupbearer is attested with those donations that were "sacrifices of the king" (*niĝ*$_2$*-ĝeš-ta*$_3$-ga or *siškur*$_2$ *lugal*) and that were added to the regular deliveries including the festival donations provided by the province of Umma. Royal donations were also sponsored for divine Šulgi or for gods, most prominently the healing-goddess, Gula, and the divine warrior, Nergal, in the garrison of Garšana (sometimes without further indication of royal participation). Similarly in documents from Girsu, the cupbearer appears with sacrifices that were donated according to "a wish of the king" (*ša*$_3$*-ge kuru*$_{13}$*-a lugal*).

Thus, there is an impressive tradition of the cupbearer responsible for bringing royal sacrifices into the temples to the gods or to the ancestors. Two important aspects have to be noted in this regard, which are described here.

First, in every instance of the documentation we deal with additional royal or other personal gifts to the temples, not the regular regime of offerings. The cited examples have shown this for Ur III Umma or Girsu, and it holds true for the Presargonic Emunus archive as well. There, the Lady of Lagaš supported the goddesses Bau and Nanše and sent provisions for their festivals, but the lady's organization, the Emunus, did not provide for the temples regularly. A good example of this are the offerings to the ancestors at Bau's Festival, for which the donations of the Emunus are modest when compared to the voluminous deliveries from the temple-lords and other representatives of the city-state (Sallaberger 2019); also daily or monthly regular sacrifices do not appear in the written record of the Emunus. The evidence from Ur III Umma juxtaposes the regular support of the temples with the additional animals coming from the king. This allows us to put the evidence in context, be it the Presargonic documentation or the Ur III texts from Puzriš-Dagān: the royal offerings delivered by the cupbearer were additional gifts, but the constant supply was organized by the temple itself. All contributions then made up the total amount of foodstuffs that could be distributed after the sacrifice.

24 Sallaberger (1993: 29–30).

25 Such as YOS 04 207; BDTNS 052060.

Secondly, whereas in the Presargonic texts some other professions could appear with offerings brought to the temple,[26] in the Ur III period it was exclusively the cupbearer who appeared in this capacity. One has to conclude that the office of presenting food to the gods became more and more professionalized, and the cupbearer, whose main duty was to serve his master or mistress and their guests at meals, became the only representative of the king to offer food to the gods. Although in the period under investigation, the 24th to 21st centuries, the office of a Mesopotamian king above the city-states began and soon gained much importance,[27] the cupbearer's duty to present donations in temples remained constant during the Early Bronze Age. Obviously this practice did not survive into the following Old Babylonian period.[28]

The cupbearer served drinks and food, and with hand-washing and anointing he also cared for the wellness of the guests. As a professional steward he could present sacrifices to the gods as well. Although in the cult the cupbearer appeared most often as a representative of the king in the Ur III period, *sagi*s also served in a temple or for a governor. Huber Vulliet (2014: 72) pointed to an individual from Girsu named Niĝurum, who had been a "royal steward" (*sagi lugal*) under the still-living king, Šulgi, but became *sagi* of the divine Šulgi after his death, at Šulgi's temple in Girsu (RTC 401). Similarly, a *sagi* was employed for offerings to the dead city-ruler, Gudea (Michalowski 2013).[29] Some sacrifices for the fields and animal herds were performed by a *sagi* who may have been sent by the city-ruler;[30] and the cupbearers Basa(ga) and Šara-bidu were "servants" of the city-ruler/governor of Umma.

26 E.g. RTC 60: animal fattener, "person of the inner room", barber.

27 For a similar development concerning the *mašdaria* festival donations see Sallaberger (2019).

28 See CAD Š/II s.v. *šāqû*.

29 Other cupbearers at temples: Huber Vulliet (2014: 70–77) discusses "cupbearers of Enlil" in Ur III Nippur (see also Michalowski [2013]), only known as office of fathers in seal-inscriptions, and points to *sagi*'s at temples in Sargonic Adab and Ur III Nippur (p. 76): "La limite entre fonction sacerdotale et séculière dans le service quotidien d'Enlil est donc impossible à établir." At Ur III Umma existed stewards (*sagi*) of Šara: seal of Ayakala, son of Manba, e.g. BPOA 2 2224; Durĝarni STU 55; for Girsu, see Huber Vulliet (2014: 77) on a *sagi/agrig* of Niĝirsu (MVN 12 210), and the *sagi/gudu*$_4$ of Meslamta'ea (SAT 1 286). On the terminology for the chief steward see Huber Vulliet (2014: 76): *sagi gal* in Ur III Nippur, *sagi-maḫ* in Sargonic Adab and Ur III Girsu, but *zabar-dab*$_5$ in the kingdom of Ur.

30 The cupbearer delivered the sacrifice (*ĝiri*$_3$ PN *sagi*) in Girsu texts: to fields (AnOr 7 258); for young animals in the herds (ASJ 16 113 22, BDTNS 167967, JCS 52 18 97).

4 Cult-Priest (*gudu*$_4$) *vs.* Cupbearer (*sagi*)

Whereas activities of the cupbearer are well documented in Presargonic Girsu, this is much less so for the priests who upheld the daily service in the temples, since their activities were not covered by the archive of the Emunus, the communal organization of the Lady of Lagaš.[31] In this archive, then, the representatives of the temples, the temple-lords (*saĝĝa*), appear in various contexts, as do the singers of lamentations (*gala*(*-maḫ*)) of large temples and cities, but cult-priests are met only rarely. There are attestations for a *gudu*$_4$ of Ninĝirsu, of Bau, and of minor gods and sanctuaries here and there. Some of the Lagaš *gudu*$_4$ appear as holders of fields, and some Emunus people live with a *gudu*$_4$ priest (see above section 1).

The *gudu*$_4$'s role as a priest with permanent responsibilities at the temple appears much clearer for the Ur III period. When the governor of Umma equipped the new temple of divine Šulgi (Bauer 2015, 149) with the necessary fields and animal herds for a regular income and the vessels for the cult, he also installed the personnel: those working in the fields and gardens, herdsmen, and cooks and brewers, and furthermore women grinding flour and weaving clothes. The only persons active in the cult were one *gudu*$_4$ priest acting as temple-lord (*saĝĝa*) at the head of the personnel list[32] and three singers. *gudu*$_4$ priests were regularly installed in a temple.[33] He was the priest at duty with a variety of relevant tasks: he cared for the temple building[34] and managed the dedications to the deity, the latter by placing the various precious vessels and other objects on the "board of dedications/offerings" (*gu*$_2$ *ne-saĝ-ĝa*$_2$).[35] Two female cult priestesses (*munus gudu*$_4$) appear in two documents from Irisaĝrig, in the latter function.[36] For the sacrifices, that is, the presentation of foodstuffs

31 It should be noted in passing that Urukagina's re-naming of the Emunus organization as "House of Bau" only changed its name to indicate that the Lady of Lagaš was represented by the goddess Bau. This renaming, however, had nothing to do with a "Temple of Bau," the archive was never a temple archive, and the Emunus continued to exist as a building complex in the city of Girsu after the reforms of Urukagina.

32 The reading of the profession in line 29 as *gudu*$_4$ ⌜*saĝĝa*⌝ was possible thanks to the excellent photographs kindly provided by Josef Bauer.

33 See, e.g., the list of sanctuaries and priests AnOr 1 088 for Umma. A similar office is the *šita ab* (or *šita ab-ba*) at Ur; Šale receives goods for offerings or delivers dedications (UET 03 0378).

34 BDTNS 023599 = Aleppo 156 (Umma, Š 39–40), receives wooden beams to build the temple of Šulgi.

35 BDTNS 065397 = PPAC 5 1210 (Umma): dedication of donkey; Nisaba 15/2 0176 to 0178, 0293, 0338 to 0345, 0504, Irisagrig: divine treasures.

36 Nisaba 15/2 0342 and 0345.

to the deities in the daily cult or at festivals, the cult-priests received grain.[37] On one occasion at a festival, a *gudu*$_4$ is attested as using oil for anointing.[38] Finally, a *gudu*$_4$ priest was also present when an oath was sworn in front of a deity.[39]

The only direct testimony for the jobs expected from a priest at a temple is a document from the Inana Temple of Nippur, published first as "Daily chores" by Civil (1982); but later, with more evidence from the Inana Temple available, it was identified as a list of duties which the temple-lord (*šabra*$_2$*/ugula e*$_2$) of Inana had to perform in the month of Inana's Festival (Zettler/Sallaberger 2011, 25–28). His responsibilities included tasks as diverse as the preparation of beer, the perfection of millstones, the transport of offerings to Enlil's temple, or the bathing of the divine statue. He was the expert of objects in the temples, and he performed special duties as well as cultic rituals. At smaller sanctuaries, the duties of a *gudu*$_4$ priest were surely comparable to those of Inana's temple-lord. Whereas the priest thus cared also for the upkeep of the temple and its rituals, the cupbearer entered the temples only to place dedications and sacrifices of foodstuffs. The cult-priest, *gudu*$_4$, maintained the daily cult and regular festivals, thereby using the food prepared by the temple's personnel from the yields of the sanctuary's fields, gardens, and animal herds. The cupbearer, *sagi*, brought additional special donations from the king, the city-ruler or perhaps other masters.

In practice, however, these two offices were not as separate as the translations might indicate, since the office of the priest (*gudu*$_4$) could be performed by a cupbearer (*sagi*). There are two sets of evidence for this, from Ur III Umma and Girsu, though possibly these actually represented two different administrative practices concerning the priestly office.

At Umma, the group of *gudu*$_4$ priests included individuals of various professions. The best testimony stems from some texts on "distributed wool and clothes of the tribute" (*siki tu*$_9$ *gun*$_2$*-na ḫa-la-a*).[40] Among the 39 persons called *gudu*$_4$-priests of Šara, some are qualified by a special task, and these tasks explain well the duties of priests (however, most people appear here by name only):

37 E.g., BDTNS 046094 = MVN 21 292 Umma; BDTNS 163266 = CUSAS 3 0998, Garšana; Nisaba 15/2 0716, Irisaĝrig (with a long list for various deities); also 0798 and 0974.

38 Nisaba 26 088: 10′ f. among expenditures for festivals: 1.67 liters of flavoured ghee, "for the cult-priests to anoint (themselves)" (*gudu*$_4$*-e* ŠEŠ$_4$*-de*$_3$).

39 UET 03 051: "stands close" (*ba-gub*) at oath swearing; BDTNS 058041 = Studies Owen 203 02 r.4: responsible for swearing an oath.

40 Nisaba 11 37 (ŠS 1/12d/-); see Nisaba 11 31 (ŠS 2), BDTNS 167820 = Studies Tadmor 2 209–220 i 1-ii 11 (ŠS 3, read *tu*$_9$ *gu*$_2$*-na*!); and see also Studies Hruška, p. 77 (ŠS 3; *gu*$_2$*-na* is unclear).

1 bringing bread (*inda*$_3$ *il*$_2$)
1 pouring beer (*kaš de*$_2$-*de*$_2$)
2 cupbearers (*sagi*)
1 bringing water (*a il*$_2$)
1 barber (*šu-i*$_2$)
1 brewer
1 (for) the grinding women
3 envoys (*sugal*$_7$, *sugal*$_7$ *za*$_3$-*ga*)
1 builder (*šidim-gal*)
1 inspector (*agrig*)
1 captain of the "pure strength" (i.e. the brewery; *nu-banda*$_3$ *a*$_2$-*sikil*)

For Girsu, one can cite three documents on the receipt of grain by a person called *gudu*$_4$ in the document, but *sagi* on his seal:

BDTNS 064346 = PPAC 5 0831 (Girsu, ŠS 08/-/-): grain from PN, received by Utukam, cult priest (*gudu*$_4$) of (god) Ĝešbare in the temple of Ĝešbare; seal: Utukam, son of Ur …, cupbearer (*sagi*) of (god) Ĝešbare
BDTNS 036032 = SAT 1 286 (Girsu, Š 46/09): grain from a granary for the food consignments (*sa*$_2$-*du*$_{11}$) to (the gods) Meslamtaea and Lugalsukudra, (received) from PN, seal of Lu-gegunu, cult priest (*gudu*$_4$), son of Ur-Ninĝešzida; seal: Lu-gegunu, cupbearer (*sagi*) of Meslamtaea, son of Ur-Ninĝešzida
BDTNS 169269 = Nisaba 13 021 (Girsu, AS 01/10/-): grain from the temple-lord (*saĝĝa*) of Ninmarki, received by Atu, cult priest on duty (*gudu*$_4$ *bala-a*); seal: Atu, cupbearer (*sagi*), son of Duga

Both Fabienne Huber Vulliet (2014: 71–72) and Michalowski (2013) have cited these and similar instances as evidence for a career from cupbearer to priest. In PPAC 5 0831 the title "cupbearer of (god) Ĝešbare" refers to the father, not to the cult-priest himself, but in SAT 1 286 the same person appears with both titles. An important clue for another solution other than that of a career is Nisaba 13 021: in this text the cult-priest is said to be "on duty" (*bala-a*). There is additional evidence for such terms of duties for cult-priests. Thus, for example, the food sacrificed to the gods at various occasions in the new Ningirsu temple was distributed to prebendaries, including "one third to the *isib* priests" or to the *gudu*$_4$ *bala-a* "the cult priest on term of duty."[41] The cupbearer working

41 Amherst 17; see Sallaberger (1993: 286–287 with note 1332); see also MVN 17 059.

as a priest thus did not serve the gods permanently, but rather only when he was on duty.

All references to the "term of duty" (*bala*) of *gudu*$_4$-priests stem from Girsu.[42] Perhaps this office was comparable to other terms of office, which are also called *bala*, referring to services for the community or the "state" in the Ur III period. In Girsu, artisans performed their office or "prebend" (*bala*) in the course of the annual festival of Nindara, and as a reward they received a share from the temple's foodstuffs.[43] Falkenstein, in his discussion of the Ur III court documents, pointed to the fundamental difference of the Ur III prebends as compared to those of the Old Babylonian and Neo-Babylonian periods, since in the third millennium these offices and their income did not constitute private property and thus could not be sold, exchanged, pledged, or divided. Besides that, the only priestly prebend known from the Ur III period is that of the *gudu*$_4$ office, that is, a general priestly service for the gods. By contrast, already in Old Babylonian times, offices were divided among various functions, and in the first millennium BC those preparing the food were involved as well.[44] The change in the regime of prebends and the accessibility of priestly offices highlights the different social role of priests earlier on, in the third millennium.

Besides the actual performance of priestly duties by cupbearers, the similarity of these two jobs should be stressed. A priest performed the most important rituals in a temple; and without any doubt, the sacrifice or food offering, in other words, the presentation of prepared food and drink (and sometimes incense) to the gods, can be regarded as *the* central religious practice in Mesopotamia.[45] This practice had its secular counterpart in the service of a master or of an honoured guest; and in both cases the rank of the guest, the composition of the group of guests, the event's date and time, and the role of the host determined the quantity and selection of food and drinks supplied. When the meal was prepared for the guest, his or her presence was presupposed, and there was no need for a theatre-like staging of a divinity eating in the temple. Musicians played both at banquets in the palace and in the temple, with the songs surely praising the respective gods or the ruler and marking the event as special and different from everyday meals. Although no third millennium sources describe the ritual actions in the temple, the fact that professional stewards served both

42 Falkenstein (1956, vol. 1: 143–144).

43 Civil (1989); RIME 3/2 1.2.2031.

44 Falkenstein (1956, vol. 1: 144).

45 Note in this regard, for example, the image of the king presenting the yield of his land to the gods in the temple in Sumerian literature, or the range of professions working in the temple that are mostly related to food-production. Any scholarly activities or singing do not define a priest's office in the Early Bronze Age.

in the temple (the cult priests) and in the palace (the cupbearers) hints at a certain perfection and thus ritualization of the service. To appreciate the service's solemnity and dignity, one should also consider the setting of the ritual in the temple, with its magnificent architecture or the decoration with niches even in smaller sanctuaries.

The practice of serving food was deeply rooted in the society, as we have seen: the cupbearers were the most familiar servants already of princes and princesses in the palace, a large group of them lived with the Lady of Lagaš, and no other professional had such an intimate position at court. Obviously not every Sumerian had his personal cupbearer, but the profession was well-known; a *sagi* as a holder of sustenance land was a member of the community, and this job allowed a social advancement for "ordinary people" to enter the innermost circle of ruling families. In my view, one must understand the food sacrifice as the central religious practice in this historical cultural context, and its performance by a priest as that of a professional butler who enjoyed an exceptional intimacy with his mistress or master.

Comparing a sumptuous banquet and a sacrifice in the temples is illuminating also when it comes to details. Food and drinks were presented in vessels, as was the water for hand-washing. Impressive series of vessels used in banquets and in the cult are attested in the written documentation of the third millennium, but it is impossible to differentiate between a cultic and non-cultic vessel inventory.[46] Often one recognizes brewing equipment among the vessels; once a royal lady received a silver ladle "for water for the hands."[47]

In pointing to the similarities between banquets and sacrifices, we must not forget the differences, either. The imagery from the third millennium displays an impressive difference between the figure serving the drinks or the water to wash the hands: the man is clothed in banquets with people drinking and dining, but he is nude when he pours out a libation in front of a deity.[48] In light of the previous discussion, the first figure can be identified as a cupbearer (*sagi*) and the second one a priest (e.g., a *gudu*$_4$). Nudity marked the priestly actor in terms of imagery, and therefore one can hardly doubt that a priest

46 For most vessels, their usage remains unknown, although a more careful study would probably lead to some results.

47 Phillips 13 iii 9 for Šulgi-simtī: 1 *šen-dili*$_2$ *a šu ku*$_3$*-babbar*; edition of the text by Paoletti (2012: 479–488).

48 Seidl (1998: 67, § 2.3.4.): "Nackte Männer, deren Kopf und Gesicht rasiert sind, fungieren von der Frühgeschichte (z. B. Alabastervase aus Uruk […]) bis zur Ur III Zeit (Ur-Nammu-Stele aus Ur […]) als Kultdiener." Cultic nudity is thus another feature that appears during the whole third millennium and disappears in the Old Babylonian and later periods; see Seidl (1998: 68).

actually performed his service in the nude. Direct textual evidence for this priestly cultic purity does not exist for the third millennium;[49] the oldest incantations for the purification of a priest entering a temple date to the Old Babylonian period (Farber/Farber 2003), when nudity had disappeared in art. But perhaps can one detect indirect hints for the shaving of priests in some documents? The first is the presence of a barber among the priests of Šara at Umma (see above pp. 102–3 on Nisaba 11 31 and 37 and parallels), since in the Old Babylonian (and also in Standard Babylonian) incantations for purifying a priest the use of a barber's knife featured prominently in the ritual washing. Also, in a Presargonic document, the barber is listed once among the persons who brought the sacrifices to the mortuary chapel (RTC 60). Was he there to shave the person presenting the sacrifices, according to the subscript of the latter text the city-ruler?

Other clues to ritual purification are some lists of clothes delivered and eventually distributed to priests of god Šara. In one case the first line gives a short explanation for the transaction: "1 textile when he had purified (himself), (delivered) because of Urgigir, the one pouring beer."[50] If this text is correctly understood, it indicates that the performing priests received their clothes after ritual washing;[51] the text does not indicate, however, whether the priests dressed before or after serving the food sacrifice.

As we have seen above, priests could serve the gods temporarily, so they must have undergone ritual purification regularly before their respective terms of duty, perhaps reciting incantations each time. The highest priests, by contrast, indeed entered a new status with their office, as evidenced most clearly by the adoption of a new name, best known from the names of the *en* priestesses. One might guess that a division line between the status-changing priesthood and the normal priestly service in the temple was the designation of the higher priests and priestesses by omens. This method for selecting a high-priest is often recalled in date formulae and in other contexts in the third millennium.

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49 See also Biggs (1998: 64).

50 BDTNS 034498 = Rochester 109 = YOS 15 152, Umma, ŠS 01/06/-: 1 *tu*$_9$ *zalag*$_2$*-ga-ne*$_2$ *mu ur-*^{ĝeš}*gigir kaš de*$_2$*-de*$_2$*-a-še*$_3$; four other priests follow in the text who receive clothes as well. A similar text of *tu*$_9$ *mu-ku*$_x$ "clothes as income/delivered" is Rochester 112, see also Rochester 105, 110, 111, 114, 115, 116, 117, 121, as well as SACT 2 289; BDTNS 050922 = Studies Leichty 288 18; BDTNS 191786 = Studies Hruška, p. 77; BDTNS 167820 = Studies Tadmor 2 209–220; BDTNS 057434 = Nisaba 11 37 (// Nisaba 11 31), all concerning priests and informative for their daily tasks in presenting offices.

51 On the temporal division of *gudu*$_4$ offices and other *bala* offices in OB Ur see Charpin (1986: 233–239, chap. 3.A).

5 Conclusions

At the end of this paper, let us return to the cultic role of the cupbearer (*sagi*). As we have seen, he brought dedications of objects as well as sacrifices of foodstuffs to the temple. He was qualified for this in two regards. As a confidant of his master or mistress, fulfilling the most intimate position at court, he could represent him or her also in front of the gods. Secondly, the performance of a sacrifice consisted of serving food and drinks to the gods, which was very similar to the cupbearer's daily job. Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, the cupbearer brought the sacrifices and dedications directly to their supposed final destination. I am not aware of any testimony pointing to the fact that he would have served only as a middleman between palace and temple.

This finding has important consequences for an understanding of religious practice at temples in the third millennium. The high percentage of dedications of objects by persons from non-ruling families during the Early Bronze Age has long been ~~noted~~ noted.[52] By analogy to the example of the cupbearer who acted for his master, I suggest that people could similarly present their offerings of foodstuffs in the temples, of course after an appropriate cleaning upon entering the temple as parallel to the handwashing before a meal. It is important in this regard to remember that the sacrifices brought by the cupbearer were always extra donations added to the regular presentation of foodstuffs from the temple's own funds. These additional deliveries were recorded in the documents of the presenter's organization, e.g. the Emunus archive, or the royal archive of Puzriš-Dagan, but the complete food offerings as they were presented were never recorded.[53] Therefore, one would not expect that personal offerings of foodstuffs were documented. How the person sacrificing some bread or beer had to be purified remains unknown, but one may suggest a ritual hand-washing corresponding to the act of washing hands before a meal (see above p. 95 the passage of Gudea Cylinder B). In light of this reconstruction, the nude person of the images libating in front of gods can no longer be identified. If the cupbearer was able to enter a temple and present an offering, then the city-ruler or king could have done the same. If the cupbearer underwent a ritual purification before that, why not the ruler as well? Therefore, the libating person could have been a priest, a cupbearer

52 For the Early Dynastic period, e.g., Braun-Holzinger (1991: 18–21, and especially p.96) for vessels from "private" citizens: after having been numerous in ED, they become rare in the Neosumerian period and disappear in the Old Babylonian documentation.

53 The temple's administration can be identified only in the documents from the Inana Temple of Nippur (Zettler [1992]) and from Ur (Sallaberger [1993: 70–71]).

as representative of the ruler or the ruler himself in the temple, thus presenting an image parallel to the formula qualifying offerings as *lugal ku*$_4$*-ra* "after the king had entered" or "in presence of the king" (see above p. 99).

The presence of non-priestly persons dedicating their donations in the temple implies a certain accessibility of a sacred precinct, but this is almost impossible to reconstruct in detail for the third millennium. Crowds of people may have filled the large courtyards at temple festivals of its main god, of his wife, and of other related deities. The consumption of sacrifice leftovers may have taken place in a more secluded part of the temple. The presentation of food as sacrifice may have been possible at various places within the temple, whether or not in front of a statue or symbol of a deity, especially if these were placed around the courtyard. In any case, the main and regular sacrifices were apparently not prepared in front of the cult statues in their inner cella, but rather in their "dining hall" (*unu*$_{2/6}$), as is evident from Gudea, in his cylinder inscriptions (A xxv 14, B xvii 7), when he refers to that room as the place of the divine meal. The antecella or a separate room is the obvious choice for this, since the god was expected to rise and to come to the meal (see above p. 95 the citation from Gudea Cylinder B vi–vii). The obvious parallels between the daily practice of a steward serving at meals and of a cult priest presenting the food offerings thus allow for a better understanding of the role of priests in early Mesopotamia.

The perspective of this paper on the *sagi*/cupbearer as a layperson, if this anachronistic expression is permitted once, had helped to see the sacred delimitation of an Early Bronze Age temple not only as a constraint of access. By contrast to this, as I have argued, there are indications that non-priestly people entered a temple for their personal food sacrifices and dedications. In this way religious practice could be embedded in daily life. The closed precinct made the temple a special place fitting for contemplation and devotion, but the existence of a precinct does not necessarily imply that it prevented people from entering the central building complex of their city or neighbourhood. The remains of dedicated objects are, however, almost the only testimony of the people's presence. The priests cared for the upkeep of the temple, and besides presenting offerings their activity also included the care for the building.

This situation did not remain unchanged in the Old Babylonian period, and more changes occurred still until the first millennium. The reduction of personal dedications may be an indicator for such changes, with another being the new character of priestly offices, which became personal prebends. With a minute differentiation of offices and the division of time, more people could participate in the cult. But was perhaps general access limited at the same time? The emergence of a more specific priestly office and the selection of

persons probably went hand in hand with the elaboration of sacred space and marking its cultic purity; apparently religion evolved more and more into a special social field after the third millennium.[54]

An individual in Early Bronze Age Sumer saw the temples in the centre of her or his city, and she or he observed the presence of the gods everywhere, even outside the temple. Most citizens worked under the patronage of a deity. Thus, the temples belonged to their daily experience, and at temple festivals the courtyards were filled with feasting people. But such individuals also entered the temple to donate objects or present food offerings to the gods, as the cupbearer did on behalf of his master. She or he was used to washing her or his hands before meals, or at least knew that this was demanded in a temple. Priests were always around, busy with the daily offerings and caring for the upkeep of the temple. They served the gods as the cupbearers did at meals with hand-washing, anointing, selecting and presenting food and drinks, while often cupbearers also offered the donations of their masters in the temples.

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54 Another example is the development of wisdom literature; see Sallaberger (2018) on the insertion of religious motifs only in the Old Babylonian version of the Instructions of Šuruppag. See also above pp. 92–93, concerning the fact that the intellectuals of the third millennium were the "scribes" and "singers," but hardly priests.

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