The social world of the Babylonian priest
Still, Bastian Johannes Ferdinand

Citation
Still, B. J. F. (2016, February 11). *The social world of the Babylonian priest*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/37767

Version:	Corrected Publisher's Version
License:	[Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)
Downloaded from:	[https://hdl.handle.net/1887/37767](#)

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page

![Universiteit Leiden logo]

Universiteit Leiden

![Leiden University Repository banner]
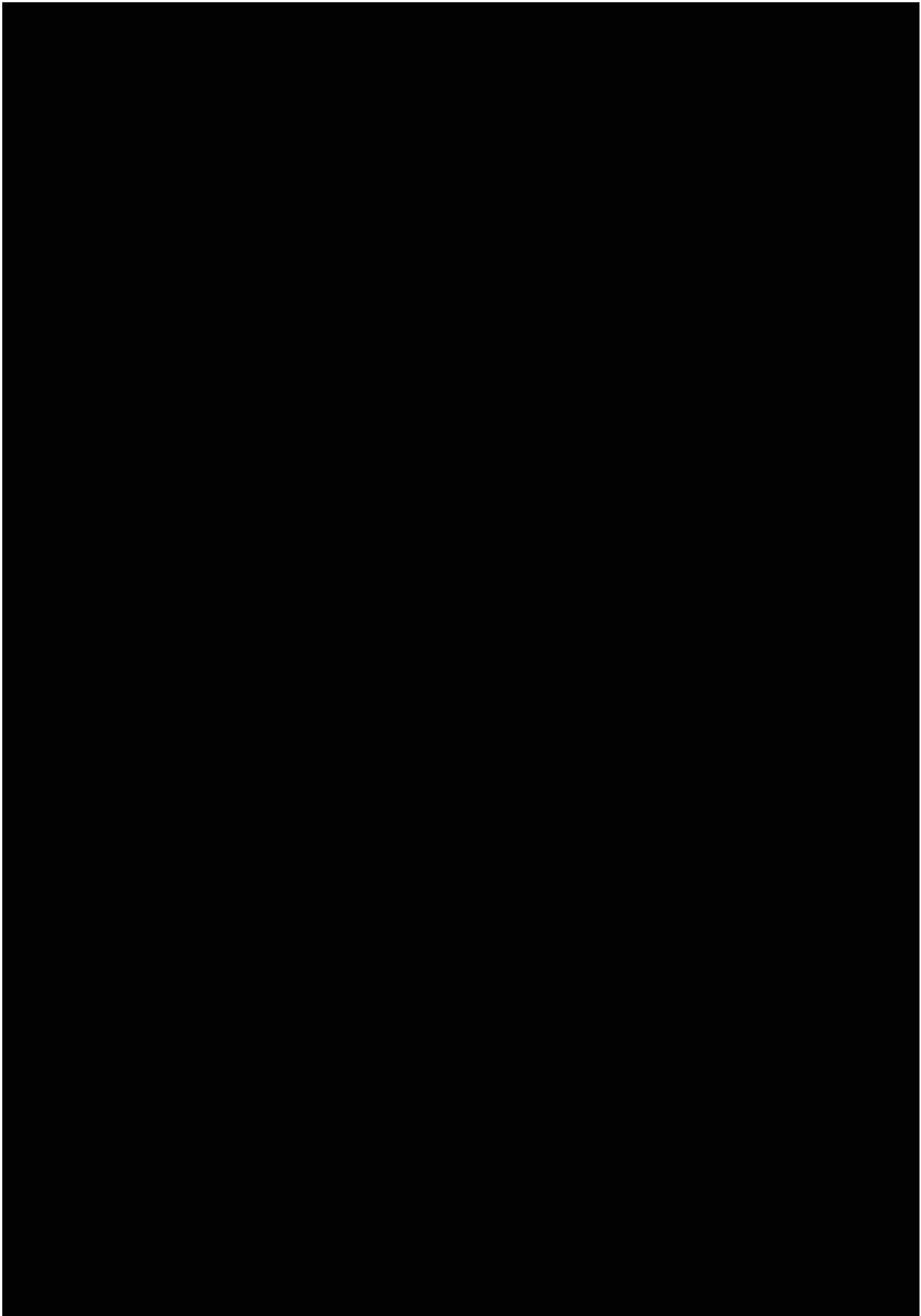
The handle http://hdl.handle.net/1887/37767 holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Still, Bastian Johannes Ferdinand
Title: The social world of the Babylonian priest
Issue Date: 2016-02-11

PART TWO

PRIESTS IN NEO-BABYLONIAN SOCIETY

5

Homophily and Interaction

Introduction

In PART ONE of this book I have looked into the social interactions that structured the priestly community of Borsippa. This included the hypergamous marriage system (Ch. 1), the distribution and management of landholdings (Ch. 2), silver lending (Ch. 3) and the formation of friendship (Ch. 4). At least three important notions emerged: first, marriage functioned as a primary building block for this community, regulating interaction both inside and outside of the temple; second, the purity-based hierarchy of the priesthood is mirrored in the social world of the priests, suggesting that social interaction was informed by the temple fabric; third, priests interacted predominantly with individuals from fellow priestly families.

The interactional pattern of the priesthood of Ezida could be summarised as follows: the vast majority of their interaction took place within the circle of temple-based families. This showed especially in the more consequential and significant types of interaction such as marriage and friendship. Yet, a not insignificant minority took place with individuals from non-priestly elite families. While their involvement in the marriage system and the formation of friendship was limited, they appeared more often in the less symbolic or intimate transactions, especially related to the management of property or silver lending. Beyond the circle of the traditional urban elite families interaction was negligible. 'Outsiders', distinguishable by the non-usage of family names and making up the vast majority of Neo-Babylonian society, are attested strikingly little. They appear only on what might be called the fringes of the interactional landscape of Borsippa's priests (the occasional creditor, seller, tenant or witness), and do not participate in the more significant affairs of the priests. The same goes for ethnic minorities. Apart from the Caro-Egyptian mercenary families who

were temporarily placed under care of the local priesthood,[723] individuals bearing West-Semitic or other non-Babylonian names are virtually absent from the documentation.

Figure 12 (below) is a schematic representation of this interactional pattern. It follows the viewpoint of the priests, which are located at the centre in black. The middle grey circle represents the larger elite stratum from Borsippa, the outermost white circle the so-called 'outsiders'. The latter basically represents the rest of Babylonian society and includes a very diverse range of individuals, poor and rich, as well as native and foreign. The inward-pointing 'breaches' represent the interaction between these social segments, and particularly how this took shape in the social world of the priests in the middle.
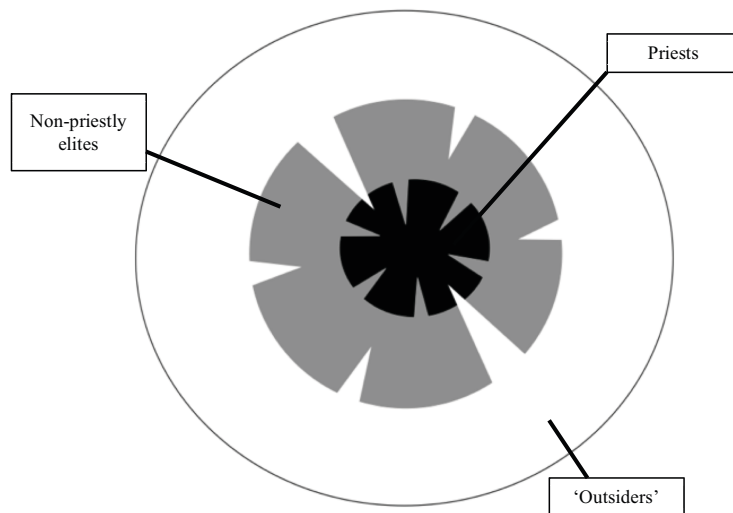

Figure 12: abstract representation of the interactional pattern of priests

In PART TWO I will take a step back and approach the phenomenon from a higher perspective. Instead of further delineating the organisation between the various temple ranks and families within the priestly community, I will attempt to situate this group as a distinct social segment within wider society. The question I would like to address in this PART TWO is how the emergence of the distinct pattern outlined above

---

[723] Waerzeggers 2006.

should be understood. Can we find possible causations behind the dynamics of interaction?

I will start by providing two different explanations of Fig. 12, which correspond to two alternative understandings of the causation behind interaction. The first scenario of causation will adopt a pragmatic and purely spatial rationale; for the second I will introduce the concept of homophily, which has been identified as a basic organising principle in human societies. Finally, and building further on the second scenario, I will show that interaction can also be approached from a more structural perspective by introducing the concepts of rentier and entrepreneur. These two typologies have been applied recently to Neo-Babylonian society in order to characterise family archives and larger social segments on the basis of economic features. I will argue that the interactional pattern of priests is in perfect congruence with the general economic mentality and objectives sustained by this social group as rentiers. Babylonian priests can thus be distinguished from other, entrepreneurial elements in society based on more than economic features alone, namely by a fundamentally different mode of interaction towards the social environment.

5.1. Spatial distribution

The existence of the particular pattern of interaction represented in Fig. 12 could be explained simply by taking it as a natural outcome of the geographic or spatial situation of our priests and the demography of their most immediate social environment. The argumentation would run as follows: the priestly families from Borsippa clustered and lived together in the old quarters in the heart of the city immediately surrounding the temple precinct, similar to the residential patterns reconstructed for other Babylonian temple towns.[724] Working and living in close proximity to each other, it is only natural that most of their interaction took place within this socially and geographically restricted circle of temple families, within which the most basic and everyday needs could be met, e.g., finding creditors, sellers, witnesses, scribes, as well as marriage partners and friends.

Yet, priests were part of a much larger circle of urban families. Living in the better parts of town will undoubtedly have brought them in contact with individuals from other established elite families that did not enjoy a professional affiliation to the

---

[724] See Ch. 6.2.1.

temple. I will show in the following Chapter 6, that on the whole these families maintained a very similar socio-economic and cultural repertoire, and priests will have had ample opportunity to come into contact with them through, for example, joint neighbourhood networks, membership of legal bodies and administrative units, attendance at public assemblies etc.

Finally, individuals from outside this social stratum were much less present in the priests' most immediate social environment. It seems reasonable to assume that it was less likely for these people to live in the traditional (and certainly not inexpensive) parts of town surrounding the temple. Moreover, one has to realise that the majority of the individuals I subsumed under 'outsiders' belonged to the lower strata of society[725]; their general inferior financial situation also meant that they were less likely to meet the standards of priests, whose needs, wants and transactions were pursued on a higher social and financial level. Yet, contact between them was unavoidable and besides the occasional witness or contract party this is perhaps most visible in the management of landed estates in the countryside where they were hired as gardeners and lived as tenants. Moreover, lacking a professional focus on the temple, non-priestly elite families – in particular entrepreneurs – are likely to have engaged with these 'outsiders' on a larger scale.

In the first instance such a descriptive, down-to-earth approach seems very felicitous, not least because it resonates easily with our own, present-day reality.[726] The downside of this interpretation, however, is that it cannot account for some important features of the pattern outlined above. Even if geographic space is an important (limiting) factor for interaction, this scenario of causation suggests that participation in society was determined solely by the spatial organisation of the social environment and its demographic configuration. It fails to explain adequately the more salient features of the interactional landscape in terms of the clearly defined hypergamous marriage circuit and the formation of friendship – especially in the latter domain one can expect individual actors to have had a greater degree of self-determination and agency, which should have translated in a more representative reflection of society and at the very least shown a greater presence of individuals from

---

[725] But also included among many others royal officials, Persian nobles, foreign merchant, and nouveau riches in general.

[726] See McPherson *et al.* 2001: 429-430, for an overview of studies on community and interaction, which pay special attention to the role of geographic or spatial factors.

non-priestly elite families. Rather than having emerged passively, I will suggest in Chapter 6 that the distinct interactional pattern materialised at least as much through a conscious, collective attitude towards the social environment and a deliberate attempt to keep the 'us' apart from 'them'.

Drawing on a particular concept from the social sciences, called homophily, a more balanced position between these two perspectives can be obtained. I will be able to include a higher degree of agency on behalf of the priests in the dynamics of their interaction, without excluding limiting forces of existing structures such as space. This concept will allow for an evaluation of causation in wholesale and theoretical terms, and resulting, I believe, in a more sophisticated account of Fig. 12.

5.2. Homophily

While the concept of homophily, also known as the *like-me* hypothesis, has a long history in the social sciences, going back to the first half of the twentieth century and the theoretical studies on interaction, the term was coined in the 1950s by Lazarfeld & Merton 1954 in their research on the formation of friendship. It was thanks to their ground-breaking work that homophily was soon picked up and further developed by various scholars working on patterns of human association in general (e.g., Laumann 1966, Verbrugge 1977, Fischer 1982). The concept has now been fully integrated in the fields of social capital studies (e.g. Nan Lin 2001) and networks analysis (e.g. McPherson *et al.* 2001) and forms an essential principle for social scientists across the board.

Homophily is the principle that 'contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people' (McPherson *et al.* 2001: 416), or more precisely, that 'social interactions tend to take place among individuals with similar lifestyles and socioeconomic characteristics' (Nan Lin 2001: 39).[727] The saying 'birds of a feather flock together,' has often been used to encapsulate the empirical pattern of this principle. Found in the widest range of ties including marriage, friendship, professional affiliation, co-membership, advice, information transfer, and permeating through sociodemographic characteristics such as ethnicity, education, age, religion,

---

[727] The realisation that similarity breeds connection, association and friendship did not escape the classical philosophers and can already be found in Aristotele's *Nichomachean Ethics*, see Irwin & Fine 1996: 274.

gender, class etc., homophily has been identified as one of the most basic and pervasive organising principles in society.

The concept of homophily is quite straightforward.[728] The point of departure is the idea of a positive reciprocal relationship between sentiment, similarity and interaction.[729] In other words, the more people interact, the more likely it is that they will share similar sentiments. Also, the more similar people are – be they famous movie stars, second graders, or members of an interest group – the more likely they are to have similar experiences, interests and desires, and the more likely it is that they will interact. Hence the basis for interaction is shared sentiment and vice versa. It is further implied that the more similar people are to each other the easier it is to interact, as fewer barriers need to be overcome. Homophilous interaction is therefore seen as the normative and least effort requiring type of interaction in society. Moreover, patterns of homophily tend to get stronger as more types of relationship exist between two actors. In other words, the degree of homophily tends to be amplified in multiplex associations rather than in simplex ones, indicating that the principle has a cumulative effect.

In order to examine the relevance of homophily in a given context, scholars now often make a distinction between 'baseline homophily' and 'inbreeding homophily'.[730] The former is the degree of homophily that would be expected by chance, that is based on the demography of the interactional pool of a given actor, which is limited by geographic space and other social structures. This ties in to the idea that the interactional pattern of the priests from Borsippa is a direct result of their geographic situation and the demography of their social environment. Inbreeding homophily is the degree of homophily measured over and above the baseline value. This is often induced by personal choice and is thus reminiscent of the idea that the interaction of priests was much more selective and done consciously within the boundaries of the social in-group.

Since census records or any other documents that can help us reconstruct the population size or demography of ancient Borsippa are lacking, it is beyond the bounds of possibility to quantify the measure of baseline versus inbreeding

---

[728] The following discussion is based on McPherson *et al.* 2001, Lin 2001 (esp. Ch. 3-4), and Lin 2008: 59-62.

[729] See especially the pioneering study of Homans 1950 on small primary groups.

[730] McPherson *et al.* 2001: 419.

homophily. Even so, the interactional patterns, especially in terms of marriage and friendship, are indicative of a high degree of inbreeding homophily within the priestly community of Borsippa. In light of this basic organising principle, causation of interaction can now be re-evaluated and adjusted based on (socioeconomic) similarity, without dismissing the factors of spatial distribution and demography. This leads to a somewhat different reading of Fig. 12.

As I will show in extenso in Chapter 6 below, priests nurtured a distinct collective social identity. The most important of its markers was undoubtedly the ownership of cultic rights, or more loosely a traditional affiliation to the temple.[731] In accordance with the principle of homophily as the normative and least effort-requiring type of interaction, the priests from Borsippa will have engaged predominantly with individuals with a similar lifestyle, i.e. individuals from temple-based families. Not only was interaction facilitated by professional and residential proximity but in fact encouraged by similarity in social, cultural, and economic terms. However, with over 80% of the marriages contracted between priestly families (this degree was even higher in the formation of friendship), there was a clear tendency in this inner circle to engage in homophilous interaction over and above the baseline that could be expected by mere chance. Since an almost identical set of families reoccurs in other kinds of interaction – always at the expense of both non-priestly elites and 'outsiders' – the hypergamous marriage circuit provides a clear outline of the 'social boundary' of this group.[732] Moreover, the multiplexity of association and similarities by its members will only have strengthened the degree of homophily within the social group and raised the probability of interaction. Hence, the outline of the black inner circle in Fig. 12 does not only represent the spatial distribution of priests in the heart of the city but also the boundary of the priests as a distinct social group.

Non-priestly elite families (represented by the larger circle in grey), appear only rarely in significant types of interaction, e.g. less than 20% in terms of marriage, while they are found much more often in dealings of secondary importance. These

---

[731] In anticipation of what will be discussed in Ch. 6, their identity was further marked by the ownership of urban and landed property (Ch. 6.2), and an adherence to traditional Babylonian norms and values, most clearly expressed through a command of the cuneiform script (Ch. 6.3) and its native language (Ch. 6.4).

[732] The existence of a so-called social boundary in the priestly community of Borsippa will be discussed in Ch. 6.

families will have been present in Borsippa in similar (if not much larger) numbers and differed from our priests primarily in the sense that they engaged in different economic activities and lacked an established affiliation with the temple. Yet, these socioeconomic differences were apparently important enough to make interaction less common. And, following the patterns of marriage and friendship, they were therefore largely excluded from the primary social circle maintained by the local priestly families. It presumably depended on specific circumstances whether or not they were drawn into the intimate in-group of the priests. All this supports the notion of interaction as being patterned by homophily (and a rigid social boundary, see Ch. 6).

Beyond this wider urban elite circle interaction became negligible as geographic and especially social distance increased dramatically. This refers to the large (white) circle of individuals belonging to other social strata of society, which made up the vast majority of Babylonia's population. These individuals were not only less likely to have lived in the city quarters surrounding the temple complex but more importantly failed to associate with most of the socioeconomic characteristics of priests. They lacked illustrious ancestries and were excluded from the temple; while they may have spoken Babylonian they will have remained illiterate. Moreover, often belonging to a lower income class these individuals owned very little, if any real estate or any silver to dispense in lending. Hence, in accordance with the principle of homophily, these individuals appear only in the liminal regions of the social world of the priests, both in terms of interaction (unimportant transactions, rarely as contract party) and in actual geographic distance (as gardeners or tenants in the countryside).

Even if the principle of homophily does not provide the absolute key to understanding the causation of interaction, it does allow us to approach the matter from a socio-theoretic perspective. It tells us that the more similar one was to the priests the more likely he or she was to interact and be drawn into their social world.

5.3. Understanding rentiers and entrepreneurs
While the principle of homophily allowed us to evaluate the interactional patterns of the priestly community of Borsippa in light of similarity and dissimilarity of their social environment, the argument could be taken one step further, and applied to another, debated topic in Neo-Babylonian studies. More than just the notion that social interactions tend to take place among individuals with similar sentiments, the principle of homophily has recently been modified in social capital studies (most

notably by Nan Lin), and might in fact help us understand much broader socioeconomic phenomena found in the Neo-Babylonian sources.

First, while the basic idea behind homophily is a positive relationship between sentiment and interaction, the social capital expert Nan Lin (2001: 39-40) has recently expanded the concept to entail a triangular reciprocal relationship between 'sentiment – interaction – resources (/network position)' without insisting on a particular cause-and-effect sequence. Here resources are understood in the broadest sense of the term and may involve material goods such as land, houses, money, and symbolic goods such as education, prestige, power, family name, titles, etc. This triangular relationship is based on the fact that lifestyle and socioeconomic characteristics are assumed to 'reflect resources embedded in individuals and their hierarchical positions in network locations'.[733] This idea correlates well with our perception of Babylonian priests, who occupied very similar positions in society, had similar economic outlooks and property portfolios, and showed a distinct predisposition to interact with their social equals.

Second, Nan Lin insists that there are two primary motives or behavioural consequences vis-à-vis (inter)action and resources: maintaining resources and gaining additional resources.[734] The first motive aims at protecting existing resources, which is best served through recognition of one's legitimacy in claiming these rights. Since it is only required that significant others share similar sentiments and acknowledge someone's legitimacy, and does not demand any particular action on behalf of the interacting partners, it is said to involve 'expressive action'. This mode of (inter)action solicits support and is meant to promote sympathy. On the other hand, the motive of gaining additional resources is best served by 'instrumental action'. That is, more than obtaining (passive) recognition of one's existing rights, the aim of interaction here is to make a profit and add new resources. Hence, it requires action on behalf of the interacting partner, who should make his resources available in order for the other to profit from them.

These two motives vis-à-vis resources correspond roughly with the two socioeconomic profiles or behaviours labelled as 'rentier' and 'entrepreneur'. Formulated in the early 20th century, most notably by Vilfredo Pareti and Max Weber,

---

[733] Lin 2001: 39.

[734] E.g., Lin 1982, and Lin 2001, especially Ch. 4.

these typologies have recently been applied to Neo-Babylonian society by M. Jursa (2004e: 121ff.).[735] While these ideal types are based largely on economic criteria, I believe that they can be significantly deepened and strengthened from a social structural perspective by introducing the concept of homophily outlined above.

Rentiers can be best described based on what they own (property portfolio) rather than what they do (business activities) for their subsistence. In Neo-Babylonian society, this economic behaviour is most clearly embodied by the priests.[736] As we will see in more detail in the following chapter, the livelihood of this social stratum was largely based on two elements normally obtained through inheritance: prebend ownership and landownership. Most of their attention was centred on their cultic duties in the temple. Being rather immobile and occupied predominantly with their duties in town, priests usually outsourced cultivation of their landholdings – and to some extent also the preparatory duties of their prebends – to third parties, and thus relied on the labour of others to be able to enjoy their main income.[737] Apart from moneylending, their involvement in other business ventures or the (monetised) business economy in general was limited. [738] Hence, rentier-priests relied predominantly on their inherited property, engaged in traditional activities, and pursued an altogether risk-free and conservative economic regime.[739] Their aim was first of all to manage and maintain the patrimony and maximise its security rather than to make large profits and add new resources.

Maximisation of profit and the acquisition of new resources is however characteristic for the entrepreneur type of behaviour. Entrepreneurs can best be described by what they do, that is, based on the business activities they pursue for their subsistence. While they came from a much more diverse background compared to the Neo-Babylonian rentiers, these individuals did usually not belong to the traditional elite stratum that owned prebends and land.[740] In fact the lack of tight links

---

[735] See now Jursa *et al.* 2010: 282-294.

[736] Note however that the same applies to non-priestly families that relied mainly on the management of their property and did not actively engage in the business economy for their subsistence.

[737] Jursa *et al.* 2010: 283.

[738] Jursa *et al.* 2010: 287f.

[739] E.g. Jursa 2013.

[740] Yet profit could of course be invested in landed property, as was the case with the Egibis, see Wunsch 2000.

to the temple is one of the primary features that circumscribes this social group.[741] Rather than being concerned with the preservation of the (landed) patrimony and relying on its income for their livelihood, these individuals and families were actively engaged in the business economy in the form of agricultural contracting, tax farming, trade, business companies etc.[742] It is assumed that the primary motivation behind these activities was a desire to maximise profit. Entrepreneurs were much more mobile compared to rentiers and pursued a much riskier but potentially profitable subsistence strategy in a highly competitive business environment.

Of course the 'rentier' and the 'entrepreneur' represent ideal types that are first and foremost useful from a heuristic point of view. In fact, even if one type of behaviour usually dominates, most Babylonian family archives show elements of both. Yet, important for us here are the two primary motives underlying these economic mentalities, namely the aim to maintain existing resources by rentiers, and the aim to gain additional resources by entrepreneurs.

In theory priests were thus primarily concerned with maintaining their existing resources, both material (wealth or property) and symbolic (social status, power, or lifestyle), which was best served by the recognition and sympathy of significant others. It should be obvious by now that the homophilous interactional pattern of the priests is perfectly consistent with the motive of maintaining resources. In the words of Nan Lin (2001: 49) '[d]efending one's resources requires the sentiment and support of those who are in the same social groups or those who are in a similar position (e.g., class) in the hierarchical structure' – and this is exactly what priests did, interacting predominantly with individuals from within their social in-group. Hence the fundamentally conservative economic mentality of priests provides an additional structural explanation for the largely normative, least effort homophilous mode of interaction one can observe for this social segment

Finally, if maintaining resources is achieved through homophily, the motive of gaining additional ones requires a different mode of interaction. We have seen that interacting with similar others will only give access to similar resources already owned. Hence, in order to gain new ones the entrepreneur is obliged to interact with

---

[741] Jursa *et al.* 2010: 288f.

[742] Jursa *et al.* 2010: 289. See on the typical activities of the Babylonian entrepreneur also Wunsch 2010: 247ff.

dissimilar individuals, i.e. engage in so-called heterophily. This form of interaction requires more effort since 'interacting partners, aware of the inequality in differential command over resources that can be brought to bear, need to assess each other's willingness to engage in exchange' (Lin 2001: 47). In the Neo-Babylonian context these partners could include powerful institutions like the temple or palace with their large agricultural or tax farming contracts, as well as for example merchants, tenants or labourers from lower strata of society. Even if much more research is needed on the dynamics of interaction of those Neo-Babylonian families that qualify as entrepreneurs, it seems that heterophily was as fundamental to their interaction and economic behaviour, as homophily was to rentiers. This can already be glimpsed from those priests who displayed a somewhat more entrepreneurial mentality compared to other members of their social group. I am thinking of Šaddinnu//Bēliya'u, who unlike most of his fellow priests engaged lower-stratum tenants on a large scale.[743] Another example is Marduk-rēmanni//Ṣāhit-ginê from Sippar. Besides owning various prebends, this man spent much of his time in the mercantile sector on the local quay where he engaged with foreign as well as lower stratum individuals on a large scale.[744]

The distinction between homophily and heterophily is obviously not always clear-cut, just as this is not the case for rentiers and entrepreneurs in general, yet, these concepts allow us to dissect Babylonian society from a particular social angle. Even if more research is needed in order to develop and apply these concepts to our sources, it should be clear that priests interacted on a fundamentally different basis with society than other more entrepreneurial elements. In other words, rentiers and entrepreneurs were not only dissimilar in terms of economic behaviour and subsistence strategy, but they can also be distinguished by two opposing modes of interaction. Moreover, this excursion tells us that phenomena like rentiers and entrepreneurs, more than just based on economic criteria can be explained from a more fundamental or structural perspective, which at the same time allows us to refine our understanding about the functioning of this ancient society as a whole.

---

[743] See above, Ch. 2.3.1. and Ch. 2.3.2.

[744] Waerzeggers 2014.

Conclusion

In this chapter we took a step back from the detailed examination of interaction within the priestly community of Borsippa and approached the interactional pattern as a whole. In order to better understand the position of priests as a distinct social segment in Neo-Babylonian society, I started out by examining possible causations behind their distinct interactional pattern. Priests engaged predominantly with members of fellow priestly families, both in mundane transactions like silver loans as in highly symbolic affairs such as marriage. Individuals from non-priestly elite families are attested significantly less often, while 'outsiders', i.e. all those who did not belong to the established urban elite segment, are almost entirely missing. How can this be explained?

A satisfying and theoretically informed interpretation of interaction was reached by introducing the concept of homophily. This principle, which poses that social interaction tends to take place among individuals with similar lifestyles and socioeconomic characteristics, has been identified as one of the most basic and pervasive organising principles in human society. Homophily represents the normative and least effort-requiring mode of interaction. That homophily played a deciding role in Borsippa's priestly circle transpires from the fact that the significant types of interaction (marriage and friendship) materialised to a disproportionate degree within the social in-group – a feature that could not be explained with a spatial argumentation alone. While non-priestly elite families were occasionally welcomed into the hypergamous marriage system and the circles of friendship, they appear more often in less significant capacities and affairs. They seem to have been kept outside of the social boundary to a large extent. This applied a fortiori to individuals from other and, predominantly, lower strata of society, which were excluded from the social world of the priests almost in its entirety. The simple, although important, conclusion is that the more similar one was to priests the more likely someone was to interact and be drawn into their social world – how similarity and dissimilarity may have been assessed by priests and others in Neo-Babylonian society will be discussed in the following chapter.