

أفكار شائعة عن الطقوس في ملحمتي جلجامش والأوديسا: دراسة مقارنة

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المخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إظهار تأثير الثقافة الشرقية على الثقافة الغربية عبر مقارنة كلا الملحمتين العالميتين: جلجامش والوديسا. عبر استخدام هاتين الملحمتين، نتاقش هذه الدراسة بعض الأعراف والعادات التي كانت سائدة اثناء ممارسة طقوس العرافة باستخدام الحيوانات، والتطهير، والولائم والتي كانت تعتبر جزءاً أساساً وطبيعياً في حياة البشر والآلهة في عالمي الشرق والغرب. وعبر اتباع الجذور التاريخية لكل طقس تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى التحدث عن إيديولوجيا ممارسة هذه الطقوس في الثقافات الشرقية، وكيف أن كل واحد من هذه الطقوس ساهم في كشف تقليد الإغريقين الأعمى لأفكار وثقافات الشرق الأوسط المتواجدة في ملحمة جلجامش لأن كل طقس كانت له أفكاره الخاصة التي كانت تعتبر النموذج المعياري لممارسته والتي تم اتباعها بحذافيرها من قبل الإغريقين كما هو ظاهر في ملحمة الوديسا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الشرق، الغرب، الأيديولوجيا، الطقوس.

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Common Concepts of Rituals in the Two Epics of *Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey*: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

This study aims to manifest the great influence of the eastern culture on the western one by comparing the two worldly epics of *Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey*. By using these two epics, this study discusses some of the common customs and habits that prevailed during practicing the extispicy, the purification, and the feasting rituals, which were considered a major and natural part in the peoples' and gods' lives in the eastern and the western worlds.

By following the historical roots of each ritual, this study also discusses the ideology of practicing these rituals in the eastern cultures, and how each one contributed to expose the Greeks' blind imitation of the concepts of the Near Eastern cultures that are found in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* because each ritual had its specific ideas that were considered the standards to be practiced, and that were followed by the Greeks to the letter as shown in *The Odyssey Epic*.

Key Words: East, West, Ideology, Rituals.

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Introduction

The ritual practices that prevailed in the mythology of the ancient times describe and give a whole understanding, through the very many texts that penetrate their literature, of the places and cultures in which they evolved. In fact, these rituals also work to define the common ideology that practitioners used to follow when practicing them because each ritual had its different common ideas that were thought to be the standards according to the beliefs of the ancient times.

This study attempts to provide a cohesive study that illustrates the permeating ideology of practicing such rituals that dominated the beliefs of the ancient Near East people, by shedding light on some common ideas that were concentrated upon during the process of practicing each ritual, and that were believed to be the norms to be performed in the ancient Near East. By following this technique and by referring back to the original dates of each arising idea of every individual practice, this study also targets to show the incredible Western repetition, by the use of *The Odyssey Epic*, of the Eastern ideology as portrayed in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

The first ritual that was practiced by the easterners was extispicy, which is a kind of divination by using animals and their entrails. This kind of divination provided a possibility to communicate with the gods to know about their wills and decisions concerning the people's future matters. Extispicy in itself represented a kind of ideology that distinguished it as a unique type of divination that forced its practitioners to perform the ritual exclusively in its right way. This system of divination had to follow certain rules as the Mesopotamian divination was systemized, and the most common ideas that were focused upon during practicing this ritual, and which will be discussed in this study, were matters concerned with the kind of the diviner and his special characteristics, the place of practicing it, and the time assigned to do it.

Because the outcomes of this kind of divination was the most valid among all other kinds of divination for the easterners, it took a major concern in their daily lives, "Among the many different divinatory methods used in Mesopotamia, the practice of extispicy stands apart. It has always been of special importance to society as it represents the only means of direct communication between mankind

and the realm of gods.”¹ These outcomes were very trustful out of the easterners’ belief that extispicy related directly with the gods who provide the diviners, who use this specific kind of divination, with an instant answer to their questions, “it was argued that extispicy was the preferred method until the end of the second millennium and the beginning of the first.”²

It was commonly believed that extispicy had to be performed by special diviners; experts, who should have some characteristics that qualify them to practice it. These experts, to be mentioned, needed to have close relationships with the gods. They also needed to have the wisdom and perfection of creation, and they had to be from the elites of the society.

The ones who practiced extispicy in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* were Gilgamesh and his mother, the goddess Ninsun, who meets all the characteristics assigned for practicing the extispicy. Both Gilgamesh and his mother had close relationships with the gods because, as it is widely known, Ninsun herself was a goddess and her son Gilgamesh was considered to be a semi-god; the matter that meets one of the conditions of practicing extispicy according to the ideology of the ancient Near East.

Another condition that required practicing real extispicy according to the mythology of ancient Mesopotamia and the ancient Near East, and that was achieved to its fullest in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was the perfection of creation. There was a practical consideration that the expert practicing the extispicy should be physically perfect; he could not perfectly do this divinatory ritual if he suffered from defective eyes, teeth and so on. Again, Ninsun and Gilgamesh can be seen as clearly applicable to this condition because their beauty was commented upon in many incidents of the epic. As for the goddess Ninsun, she was known as the “flawless cow” and described as “The Great Queen” and tablet III in the epic clearly ascertains her ideal and exceptional beauty when she was preparing and decorating herself for practicing extispicy and praying to Shamash. Concerning Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk, he was also beautiful, strong and splendid in stature. He was “Supreme over other kings, lordly in

¹ ANNUS, A., 2010- *Divination and Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World*. Chicago, Library of Congress. 45.

² BEERDEN, KIM., 2013- *Worlds Full of Signs: Ancient Greek Divination in Context*. Ed. David Frankfurter et al. Vol 176. Brill NV, Boston. 123.

appearance” and “awesome to perfection”¹- the thing that made even Ishtar, the goddess of love, fall in love with him.

Another common requirement for practicing this ritual was obtaining the perfect knowledge and wisdom to enable the diviner to practice it legally, “Extispicy or examination of the viscera of sacrificial animals, was a process closely linked with kingship and with the wisdom and knowledge needed in order to rule successfully.”² Correspondingly, in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, this idea clearly concords to both Ninsun and Gilgamesh due to the fact that Ninsun was frequently described as “the wise, all-knowing” and Gilgamesh as “bold, eminent, knowing, and wise.”³

Another common and very crucial idea about practicing extispicy is the matter of time. This kind of divination had to be performed at a specific period of time; i.e., from sunset to sunrise. It was also commonly believed that during this time, a lot of sacrifices and offerings were presented to gods to appease and satisfy them out of the belief that Shamash and the assembly of the gods stayed at night and waited for the diviners’ offerings, “The first millennium rituals collected in Zimmern, show that divination could be performed in the form of a complex ritual lasting from sunset to sunrise, in which one or more sheep were sacrificed to Shamash and other offerings were brought as well.”⁴ For more supporting evidence for this concentration on the necessity of proper timing for doing the extispicy in the ancient eastern cultures, Kim Beerden, who is a lecturer in Ancient History, stated in his book *Worlds Full of Signs*: “Some argue that the whole process was based on the idea that the future was determined when the sun appeared, after the supernatural had met during the night.”⁵

In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the concept of timing was of course focused upon to fully fulfill all the conditions related to practice extispicy properly. Although it was not stated plainly that Ninsun practiced extispicy during the night, yet all the incidents before she practiced extispicy suggest that it was the evening time; she did not

¹ CARNAHAN, Wolf., 1998- *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. London, Stanford University Press. Tablet III.

² MAUL, STEPHAN M., 2007- “Divination Culture and the Handling of the Future”. *The Babylonian World*. Ed. Gwendoly Leick, New York. 369.

³ CARNAHAN, Ibid, Tablet I

⁴ ANNUS, ibid, 163.

⁵ BEERDEN, ibid, 188.

decide to practice extispicy until she finished listening to the story of her son and his friend, Enkidu, and even after their quarrel and conciliation then it was stated that she went up to her room to practice the extispicy.

The last idea to be discussed about extispicy is about the place of practicing extispicy. According to the beliefs that prevailed in the ancient Near East cultures concerning practicing extispicy, this kind of divination had to be practiced in a temple or some great place that enjoyed a special social importance and populace. For instance, in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the goddess Ninsun and her son, the king Gilgamesh, made extispicy in The Egalmah Temple or as it was called the 'Great Palace'. That's best shown in tablet III when Gilgamesh and Enkidu were in the Egalmah temple offering some sacrifices to Shamash as a kind of practicing extispicy to have good luck and a safe journey on their way for fighting Humbaba,

“Enkidu ... in the temple of Shamash,

(and) Gilgamesh in the Egalmah.

He made an offering of cuttings ...

... the sons of the king (!) ...

Enkidu will protect the friend, will keep the comrade safe”¹

Concerning *The Odyssey*, the same concepts about practicing extispicy are repeated in a manner that cannot avert the attention of the penetration of the Eastern ideology of practicing this ritual in the culture and literature of the Greeks. Despite the Greeks did not will to admit the transmission of these ideas to their literature, and they do not comply to the idea that there is nothing called originality or uniqueness, all the ideas in *The Odyssey* that coincide with ideas of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* come to deny this idea and even topple it.

Homer, in *The Odyssey Epic*, used Penelope, Odysseus' wife, as one of the most distinguished characters to practice the extispicy, which, meets one of the requirements of practicing extispicy. Penelope in this epic was described as a wise women and she was always addressed as 'wise Penelope'. Penelope was considered wise because she was often referred to in the court to solve problems and settle matters. In this regard, and as it was mentioned previously, Penelope can be seen as parallel to Ninsun; both are wise and knowledgeable, and both are mothers that practiced extispicy for their sons; the kings of their nations.

¹ CARNAHAN, ibid, Tablet III.

The timing of practicing this ritual was also applied and followed to the end that it finally resembled the idea of timing in the Eastern cultures. In *The Odyssey Epic*, all the incidents of practicing extispicy document, either directly or indirectly, that this ritual happened after the supper time because each of Penelope, Telemachus and Antonius did extispicy and saw its results after a supper banquet that contained animal sacrifices. In other words, the diviner practiced extispicy only after he guaranteed appeasing the gods through a supper feast full of offerings and sacrifices after their names, the thing that affirms the belief that extispicy used to begin at night.

The last point of comparison that shows the great resemblance of the two epics is the idea of the place of practicing extispicy. Similarly, in *The Odyssey Epic*, extispicy was always practiced either in the temples or in the royal palaces. Penelope did extispicy in her upper room in the royal court, "she went up to the roof and set incense in front of Shamash."¹ This incident, even more surprisingly, shows how big is the resemblance between the two epics because not only both Penelope and Ninsun practiced extispicy at the court, but they also both went up to their private rooms as a refuge to be alone when praying to the gods.

Another ritual that was practiced in the Near East cultures was the purification ritual, and it can be attested that the Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the earliest literary texts that sheds the light on this ritual that requires the clean body as the main key of acceptance by the society and the gods. This Mesopotamian ritual was a real and an effective process that used to have actual and tangible effects in expelling evils, and it can represent the standard model that we can see the whole ancient Near Eastern cultures through it. "The origins of the stories and of the sacred actions with which frequently they are intimately associated, often can be traced back to historical situations and perplexing and critical occurrences."²

People in the ancient Near East allocated the purification ritual a great lot of importance out of their belief that it can expel evils and settle all their intractable matters, "The complex purification rituals evolved to ward off the evil predicted by ominous happenings are

¹ HOMER, 2002- *The Odyssey*. Lebanon, York Press. 52.

² JAMES, E.O., 1958- *Myth and Ritual in the Ancient Near East*, London, New York. 305.

geared to the repertory of the omen collections.”¹ This state of cleansing, however, involved concepts that were ideologically followed during practicing this ritual, initiating a case of wide acceptance and satisfaction for the purifier or the purified. Such concepts included the transmission of one person to a totally new position, the focus on the garments, and the astonishing and perfect beauty of the purified person.

Although this ritual was commonly and widely known among the easterners, especially the Mesopotamians, who followed the same specific standards of practicing it, they were also careful to ensure that they practiced it the right way that helped them in settling all their complicated matters, and *The Epic of Gilgamesh* comes as a manifestation that clearly embodies this idea that shows the transformation of each meant character to become indulged in a totally new situation:

“The motif of body cleaning, including the washing of hair and skin, anointment with perfumes, and the wearing of spotless garments- is woven through the epic narrative. Enkidu, a wild man who has been reared in the steppe, is cleaned and groomed as part of his transmission into human society. Ninsun, the divine mother of Gilgamesh, bathes before making a ritual offering to the Sun-god Shamash. Gilgamesh washes himself on his return from an expedition to slay the monster Humbaba.”²

Almost, in each episode of this epic, the cleansing or purification of the body gives the practitioners a new and a higher personal position that transfers and puts them in a totally new world that changed their life every time they practiced this ritual because it often emphasized a transmission accomplished directly by the divinity who can immediately offer a direct solution for their critical situations. For example, in tablet II, after Enkidu purified himself, he was promoted to become a human, and Gilgamesh returned to the people of his kingdom as the respected king with all his old magnificent stature after his long suffering journey in the wilderness. So, this ritual

¹ A. LEO, OPPENHEIM., 1977- *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*. Ed. Erica Reinder. London, Chicago UP. 226.

² HOWTHORN, A., 2017- *Body Cleaning, Social Norms, and Value in The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Frankfort, Goeth University of Frankfort and Main.

contributed to give way to the transmission to a new life, especially for kings who were the focus point in every society, "it's clear that the living king perceived his royal rigor as coming from his departed ancestors and that there were ceremonies intended to facilitate the transmission of this power."¹, and the purification ritual, whether it was by oil or water, worked to get those who practiced it at a higher significant level that changed their old life, "over and above the consecration applied to ordinary men, anointment has a place in the particular rituals by which certain men receive positions of eminence."²

Another idea related to practicing the purification ritual was the focus on the clothes and the luxurious garments worn by those who had been purified after the purification procedure. A wide range of classical ancient eastern sources touched upon and highlighted the importance of wearing specific splendid garments after the purification ritual that made the purified people look majestic and glorious. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, all the incidents that displayed the purification ritual immediately show those who were purified appearing in their best looking and in their utmost majesty. In this Babylonian epic, to be mentioned, both Enkidu and Gilgamesh were shown as wearing very splendid garments after the process of their purification; the scenes that hinted to their acquisition of higher statuses; Enkidu, when "he put on some clothes and became like a warrior"³, and Gilgamesh when he wore royal garments, "throwing off his royal clothes and putting on clean ones. He wrapped himself in regal garments and fastened the sash."⁴

Another idea that was remarkably commented upon during practicing the purification ritual was the beauty that was endowed to humans after they were purified. Beauty after the purification ritual was part and parcel of the complementary implementations that accompanied the garments' concept and that was focused upon after accomplishing this ritual as it hints to the chastity of the person as a sign of his purity and the worthiness of his new position or status. This

¹ PARDEE, DENNIS., 2002- **Ritual and Cult at Ugarit: Writings from the Ancient World 10**. Atlanta, SBL. 4.

² EDITORS OF ENCYCLOPEDIA BRITANNICA. "Anointment." Britannica. Web. N.P, N.D.

³ CARNAHAN, *ibid*, Tablet II.

⁴ CARNAHAN, *ibid*, VI.

idea also formed the corner stone of the purification standards out of the worldly standard belief that beautiful features were sings of innocence while the ugly features were signs of guilt. That is to say, they believed that when the gods loved a person, they would make him beautiful, but when they had wrath on him, they would punish him by making him look ugly and hideous, and this was clearly touched upon in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Enkidu in tablet II, for instance, was described as “a wakeful man, a singular youth, he was twice as tall as normal man”. In addition, Gilgamesh’s beauty was also hinted to after he was purified in tablet VI, “a princess Ishtar raised her eyes to the beauty of Gilgamesh.”¹ These incidents in the epic and many others, as a result, come as a clear manifestation that exposes and proves the urgent focus of the idea of beauty that depicts the mentality of the easterners at that time, and that uncovers their special keys for dealing with such worldly matters.

To be compared with *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the purification ritual in *The Odyssey Epic* also took a major part in facilitating the characters’ life matters. Similarly, as it was in the eastern cultures, the western cultures also made and thought of this ritual as a necessity for all people. In Greece, like in Mesopotamia, the purification ritual contributed to a better transmission in the person’s life leading him to a new world or situation much different from his original one. In addition, in every situation that required practicing this ritual, there was a clear concentration on the garments and beauty concepts that showed the elegant appearance of the purified person.

For example, in book three in *The Odyssey Epic*, Telemachus was purified during his journey at the citadel of Neleus, the matter that transformed him to become a grown man that was able to join the assembly of men. In other words, after he was washed and worn in splendid garments that beautified and glorified him, Telemachus had moved to the realms of adulthood and manhood, “During this sacrifice, beautiful Polycaste, the youngest grown daughter of Nestor, son of Neleus, had given Telemachus his bath, washing him and anointing him with rich olive oil before she draped him in a seemly tunic and cloak: so that he came forth from the bath-cabinet with the body of an immortal. He rejoined Nestor, the shepherd of his people, and took place by his side.”²

¹ CARNAHAN, Ibid, VI.

² HOMER, ibid, 35.

This example from *The Odyssey* comes to prove the Greeks' adoption of all the ideas related to practicing the purification ritual in the ancient Near East. As it can be seen, all the ideas of purification mentioned above are incredibly embodied and copied here to mingle in the Greek society and become a part of it despite the fact that these ideas date back to the second or the third millennia BC- far historic periods that predate long centuries the Greeks' practicing or even knowing of this ritual, and also before Homer came into appearance, which explain his great engagement with the Mesopotamian epic. "the oldest version of purification originated in the Sumerian times, probably at Larsa."¹

Through these examples, and all the other examples containing the purification ritual in the epic, it can be inferred that those are just other accounts of the Greek's repetition of similar eastern ideas; the same story along with the same concepts are repeated to form the Greeks' purification ritual, and different events are given very similar accounts that cannot be seen but just a matter of a mere copy and paste from previous existing sources, "indeed, upon a close examination of both Greece and Near Eastern rituals of purification, it becomes perfectly clear that the Greeks borrowed many elements of these rites, form the ancient Near East and adopted them to serve their own purposes."²

The third concept that depicts the western culture's imitation and reshaping of the eastern cultures is feasting; foods and drinks in the narrow sense of the word, as they come to reflect and express culturally specific meanings and norms. Throughout history, food and drink have received an increasing attention and have played a great role in covering all kinds of ceremonies, "it is not just food or drink themselves that are important but especially their consumption at a social event."³ Feasts in the ancient Near East were meant to represent power and control over nature, and they were considered greatly

¹ ULANOWSKI, KRZYSZTOF., 2014- "Mesopotamian Divination. Some Historical, Religious and Anthropological Remarks." *Miscellanea Anthropologica et Sociologica* 15 (4). 6.

² JOHNSON, RYAN., 2014- "Effigies and Exorcism: Rituals to Purify Patients and Expel Hostile Spirits in Greece and the Near East." Brandies, Massachusetts. 3.

³ POLLOCK, SUSAN., 2003- "Feasts, Funerals, and Fast Food in Early Mesopotamian States." *The Archaeology and Politics of Food and Feasting in Early States and Empires*. Ed. Tamara L. Bray. Plenum, New York. 19.

essential factors that accompanied the ceremonies, festivals, funerals, and other events that pictured a kind of civilization that predominated in the ancient ages of the East. Thus, feasts can be seen a means that is reached out to when there is a need for celebrating, commemorating, or mourning any specific or extraordinary event, "Historians argue that some feasts are designed to promote cooperation and downplay social differences, while others promote the feast givers socially, politically and economically in relation to other members of society."¹

In addition, feasting helps to show how eating or drinking some kinds of foods and drinks also contributed to a kind of transmission or transformation from one status or stage to another due to the common belief that each type of food or drink had its specific symbol and meaning in the ancient Near East; namely, ancient Mesopotamia. Feasts also come to define certain types of food and drinks that were commonly consumed by the participants to hint for a specific characteristic for humans or for gods. So, by consuming some specific kinds of foods and drinks which also worked as a symbol to identify the status of each person, some aspects of the feasting issue are examined to show the urbanized culture of the prehistoric or ancient Mesopotamia.

The Epic of Gilgamesh touches greatly upon the idea of feasting that specializes the kinds of foods and drinks for each consumer in each event. Certain feasting behaviors were both widespread and reflected in the literature of ancient Near East, and various scenes in the epic depict the importance of feasting as an integrated part of the ancient Sumerian customs, "in some respects, the study of food has deep roots in the scholarship on early Mesopotamian states and urban societies."² In tablet III in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Shamhat gives Enkidu date, wine, and bread as a sign for his transmission from an uncivilized person living in the wilds between animals to become a respectable human being that lives between people in the most civilized countries at that time.

"Enkidu ate the food until he was sated,
He drank the beer-seven jugs! --and became expansive and
sang with joy!

¹ C. TWISS, KATHERYN., 2008- "Transformation in an Early Agricultural Society: Feasting in the Southern Levantine Pre-Pottery Neolithic." *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology*. Stony Brook University, USA. 419.

² POLLOCK, *ibid*, 19.

He was elated and his face glowed!

He splashed his shaggy body with water,

And rubbed himself with oil, and turned into a human.”¹

By eating date, and bread and drinking wine, Enkidu’s life was radically transformed that he could join the elite because wine and bread, according to the mythology of the ancient Near East, were the commonly consumed materials that were specific for the gods or the highly elite people, “the harlot assumes a maternal role as she sets out to domesticate and acculturate Enkidu’s nakedness and leads him like a child to a shepherd camp. In Mesopotamian literature, the shepherd’s camp represents a significant way station on the road to civilization.”² By stating this, J. Mark ascertains the idea of civilization in Mesopotamia that was connected to feasting in one way or another, and gods and each type of people had certain kinds of foods and drinks that were typically eaten and drunk according to the ideology of the ancient Near East cultures.

Because of their extreme importance and great significance, food and drink had very deep meanings that were rooted and indulged in the mentality of the easterners in ancient Mesopotamia; i.e., they were not just meant to satisfy biological needs, and they were not just consumed to stay alive. Rather, they took far larger considerations that signify various concepts, “Feasts in Early Dynastic Mesopotamia occurred on many occasions, involving different participants and different meanings.”³ To be specific, bread, meat and wine were considered as attributes of the feast of the gods or the elites, “the simple act of partaking of bread and wine (or water) becomes a symbol of a spiritual elite, binding believers together and to God, and separating them from the world.”⁴ Therefore, by allocating specific nutrition for each group of people, food and drink can be considered as a means to differentiate between the gods or the elite and the remaining people of other classes, “in many ancient cultures, the acts

¹ CARNAHAN, *ibid*, Tablet II.

² J. MARK, JUSHUA., 2014- “**Love, Sex and Marriage in Ancient Mesopotamia.**” *World History Encyclopedia*, World History Encyclopedia, Web. 20 Feb, 2023.

³ POLLOCK, *ibid*, 21.

⁴ JAMES HEAD, RONAN., 2023- “**The Politics of Feasting in the Ancient Near East.**” *By Our Rites of Worship: Latter-Day Saint View, on Ritual in Scripture, History, and Practice.*” Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. Ed. Daniel L. Brigham, Young. 77.

of eating, sharing and offering food were imbued with complex symbolism.”¹

Wine, to be specific, had a crucial importance in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and Pardee highlighted the importance of involving wine that was intended to be drunk by the gods as a special attribute for them according to the eastern mythology of the Mesopotamians, “the text deals exclusively with supplies of wine furnished by a series of towns within the kingdom of Ugarit.” (Pardee 215), and the major part that was concentrated upon when mentioning a feast was the heavy consumption of wine in every occasion or event because wine and beer were the kind of beverages that the gods or the elites were assigned to drink. Drinking wine gives the occasion an increasing importance and adds to its significance as a special event in itself, “Feasts commonly involve- even require- the consumption of alcohol, frequently in large amounts.”²

On the other hand, feasting in the ancient western cultures also took a major role in shaping their culture and reflecting the commonly practiced customs at their time. In the western cultures; namely the Greek culture, as it is the focus point of this study, the feasting topic took a major significance in the everyday life of the people as it contributed to a process of some kind of social, economic, political, or whatever change. Similarly, as in the case of the cultures of the ancient Near East that predated the culture of the Greeks long centuries ago, feasting had a significant importance where it comes to give every kind of food and drink a particular meaning that assembles a great deal the meanings of those indicated in the ancient Near East cultures, and which manifest how greatly the west mingled in the eastern cultures, “in the early and classical Greek culture, especial terms designated those whose eating habits differed from the norm, or whose consumption of food has a particular significance.”³ Therefore, every kind of consumed food and drink has a specific meaning and symbol, the same as those discussed in the Mesopotamian culture, and which similarly contribute to a state of differentiation between various kinds of people and gods.

¹ N. KNOPPERS, GRAY; HIRSCH, ANTOINE, eds., 2004- *Egypt, Israel, and the Ancient Mediterranean World*. Leiden, Boston. 203- 204.

² C. TWISS, *ibid*, 419.

³ C. TWISS, *Ibid*, 203.

In *The Odyssey Epic*, for example, feasting can also be seen as a technique for people's transmission from one status to another, and this is clearly evident when reading between the lines of the epic that hint for the initialization or moving to a totally new realm or status when consuming a certain kind of food or drink. Like in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, feasting had a magical power of transformation or transmission from one state to another in *The Odyssey Epic*. The best example that embodies this idea was imprinted on their minds in Book 10, where Circe made a feast for Odysseus and his comrades to transform them from humanity to animals; pigs, "After they had drunk from the cups, she struck them with her wand, and straightaway hustled them to her sties, for they grew in the heads and shapes and bristles of swine, with swine-voices too."¹ This scene, which depicts the realm of mythology that exhibits the common beliefs in the Greek culture, resembles strikingly the scene that depicts the transformation of Enkidu; Enkidu was transformed from wild and animal life to humanity by the harlot while Odysseus' comrades were transformed from humanity to the wild animals' life by Circe. Although it is shown here in a quite reversed way, yet it serves the same purpose and leads to the only conclusion that ascertains the west's indulgence in the East's whole corpus of ideas and habits.

In addition, drinking some kinds of beverages and eating some kinds of food also had a significant symbolism. The feasting topic in *The Odyssey* had a great importance that made historians and archaeologists frequently talk about this matter as a great essential factor that formed the basic stone of each event that occurred in the epic. In each event of the epic, Homer was keen to show that the feasts' participants had special kinds of foods and drinks to reflect their importance in the human or divine realm. Being compared to the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, wine, bread, and meat also shaped the foods of the gods or the elite as this can distinguish them from ordinary people of the society, and from the very beginning of the epic, the author exposes the feasting tradition of the Greeks. In this scene, Athena who was disguising as Mentor in Book 1, was welcomed by Telemachus who invited her to a feast with the suitors that included bread, meat, and wine; the kinds that were also specific for the gods or

¹ HOMER, *ibid*, 107.

the elite, “accept, O guest, the friendliest greetings. Enter and taste our food: and thereafter make known to us your every need.”¹

At last, like in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, there is a great concentration on the wine matter as an essential factor that was existent in every event or ceremony. Wine, with its concentrated involvement in every event, becomes a symbol that established the feast of the elites; the idea that incredibly resembles and imitates the mentality of the eastern cultures as shown in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* that emerged before *The Odyssey* centuries ago.

In a nutshell, feasting is an ideological means that used to have powerful and transformative ways for peoples’ lives in ancient times. “the sociocultural importance of feasting has become a popular topic in archaeology addressed from a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives and in a range of areas and time periods.”²

Therefore, the idea of borrowing such practices from other cultures is not that surprising due to the widely known fact that the Greeks connected in one way or another with the ancient Near East cultures, so they took and adopted their common traditions to be of their own, “given all the other similarities that the Greek rituals of this sort have with the ancient Near East, it is not unreasonable to believe that the Greeks at Cyrene were imitating and adapting such ritual prescriptions from Mesopotamia or an intermediary culture.”³ Indeed, there cannot be any culture or civilization that evolved and developed by itself. Surely, there was a previous culture that influenced and affected it either directly or indirectly, either physically or orally, which makes it difficult to believe the idea of originality of any culture in any society because all the societies mingled together by some way or another that made it difficult to separate them,

“For all their regional diversity and historical transformation, the ancient civilizations of modern Iraq, Iran, Syria, Turkey, and some of their neighbors were linked by a long history of commerce and exchange that reaches far back into prehistoric periods. They shared the same broad stages of technological, ideological, social and political development; more importantly the adoption of the Babylonian Cuneiform script across the

¹ HOMER, Ibid, 7.

² C. TWISS, ibid, 418.

³ JOHNSON, ibid, 3.

whole region and, with it, the emergence of interconnected writing cultures, whose canon was heavily shaped by Babylonian traditions, further contributed to a certain cultural cohesiveness of the ancient Near East.”¹

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