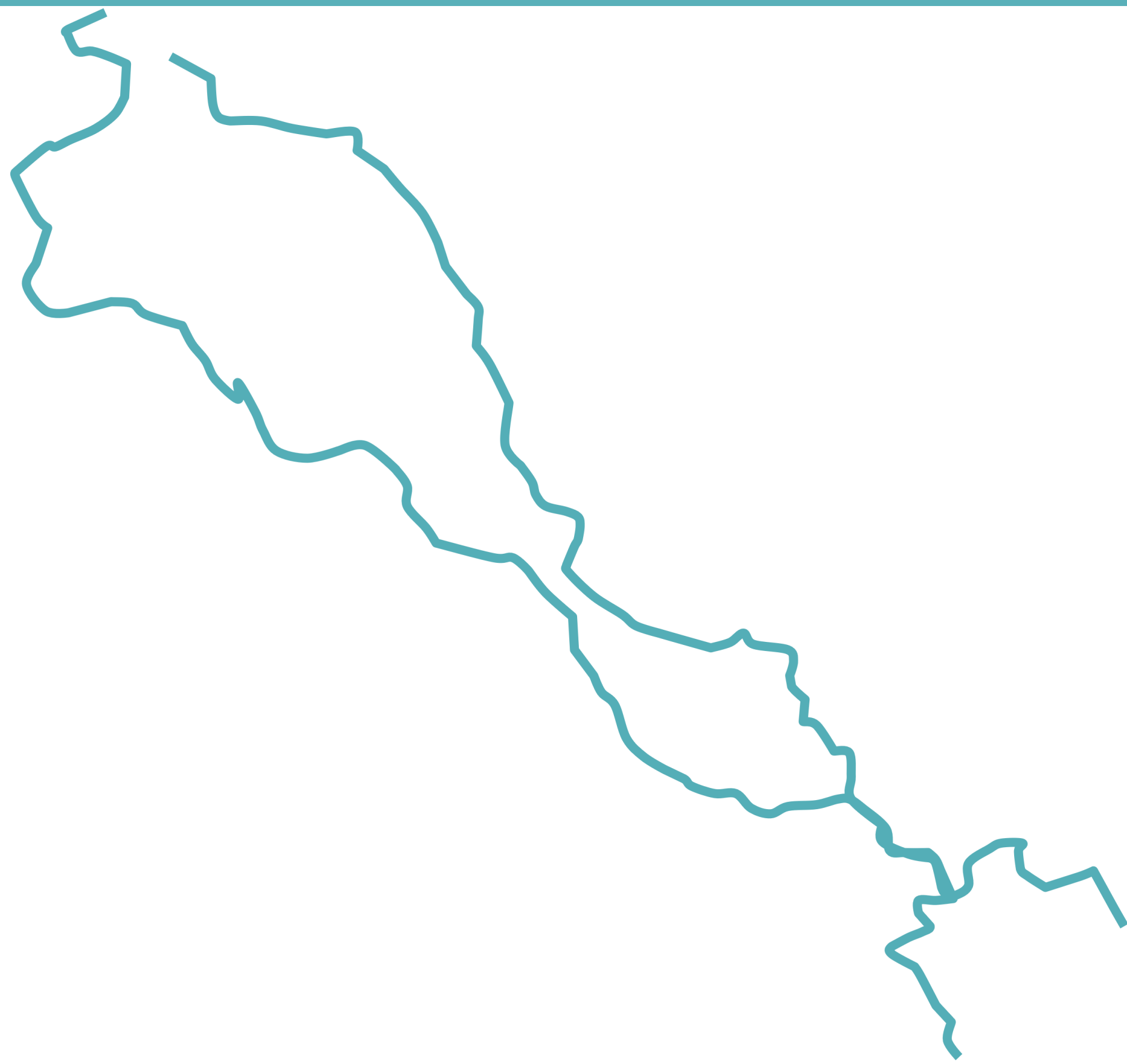


A project focused on tracing aquatic symbols and metaphors in Lower Mesopotamia religion (c.3300–1800 BCE)

Isabel Gomes de Almeida; Cristina Brito; Maria Fátima Rosa; Nina Vieira; Jaime Silva; Vera Gonçalves & Ana Satiro (CHAM, NOVA FCSH)



WATERS' approach impels an intertwined methodology, such as the "water-system" one (Tvedt, 2010), as well as relies on the survey of different typologies of religious data (textual, iconographic, material, as well as their archaeological contexts). Hence, WATERS gathers a highly cohesive and multidisciplinary research team, with historians and archaeologists specialized in ancient Mesopotamia, Studies of Religions and Environmental History, as well as historians with a background on Maritime Biology.

Aquatic *topoi* and data

Some of the aquatic elements displayed in Lower Mesopotamian religious discourses are quite well-known, such as the diluvium one, whose possible origins can be traced within the human experiences in dealing with the consequences of the Gulf and rivers' floods as well as the tempests that, throughout time, struck the region.

Yet, many other aquatic symbols and metaphors are still lacking a systematic study which correlates several typologies of data. The "ever-flowing water", for instance, was mentioned in literature as an attribute of aquatic deities, who controlled the rivers and the sea (such as Enki and Nanše); as an iconographic motif to evoke the abundancy within streams, represented by fishes swimming through them; and even applied to cultic objects used in several rituals.

Scope of Analysis

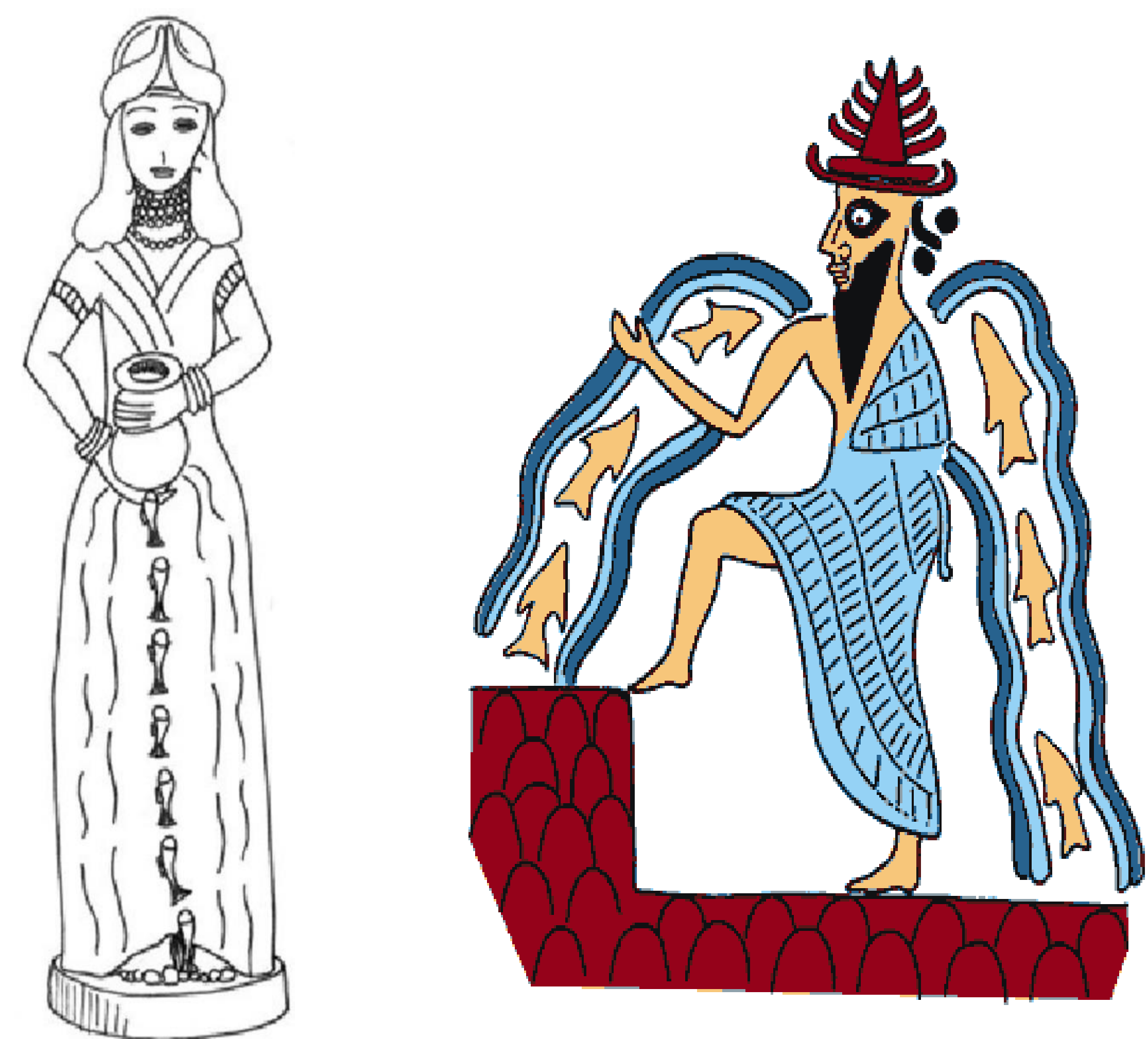
"Water symbolizes the whole of potentiality; it is (...) the source of all possible existence" (Eliade, 1958).

Emotional human responses to Nature's motions, rhythms, and changes were (and still are) quite often entangled with religious discourses. Ancient Lower Mesopotamian (modern day Iraq) ones were no exception. As these discourses were drawn upon physical reality, they can also be understood as "presenting a form of truth" about that same reality, as well as an explanation of human's place within a natural pre-established order, believed to be controlled by numinous entities/powers (Hatab, 1990; Bottéro, 2004).

Hence, religious discourses can be seen as cultural expressions elaborated by the combined creativeness of human spirit with its profound hermeneutic of the physical phenomena. Latour's (1991) seminal thesis that human's relation with Nature should be analyzed as an integrated system can and should be therefore applied to the analysis of this (and other) religious systems.

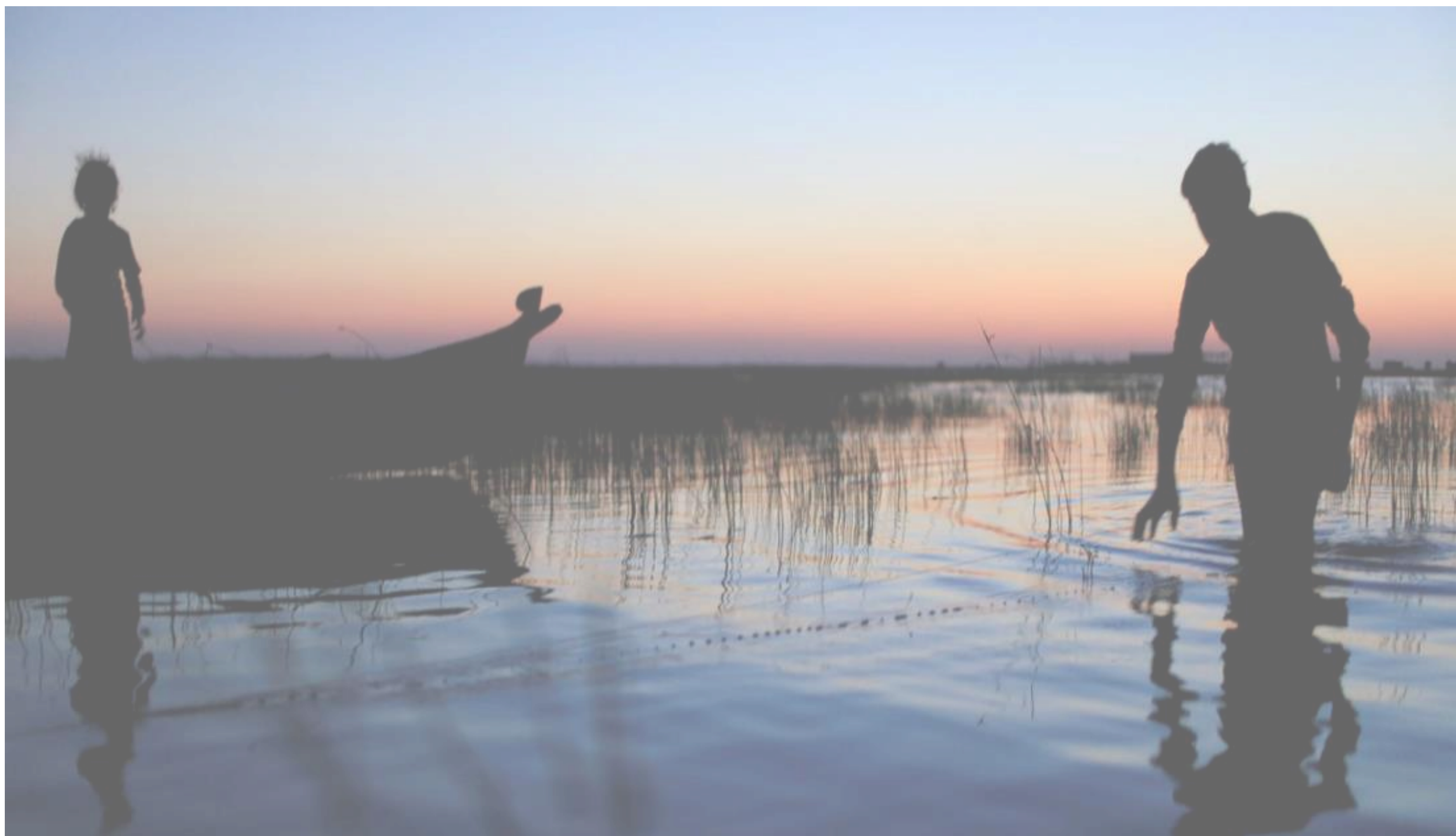
From this perspective, WATERS proposes to trace and analyze the significances of the aquatic symbols and metaphors elaborated in Lower Mesopotamia, within a wide chronological scope, intertwining the theoretic and methodological frameworks of History and Archaeology of Religions with the ones of Environmental History.

Given the imperative need of a *longue durée* analysis to better identify religious continuities and disruptions, WATERS' chronological scope stands between the rise to prominence of the first southern urbs and the fall of the meridional powers to the 1st Babylonian dynasty, a pivotal moment regarding the systematization of several local/ regional religious traditions (c. 3300-1800 BCE).



WATERS' novelty resides precisely in its unique and integrated approach to data, that goes beyond the traditional academic proposals. In fact, most of the studies about Lower Mesopotamian aquatic environments do not focus on its relationship with the religious discourses (and/or vice-versa). The focus seems to be on the economic and political spheres; and/or on the philological significances (eg. Heimpel 1987; Veldhuis 2004). Moreover, as WATER's consultant Verderame (2020) recently stressed, the several aquatic environments of Lower Mesopotamia are still very much unexplored, due to the enduring notion that this was firstly and mainly a river civilization.

WATERS constitutes a first step to further develop an interdisciplinary approach to this ancient context and thematic thus contributing to present-day societal challenges, namely by answering UN SDG 4, 13 & 14. These challenges imposed by the global climate crisis and the clashes between different religious and cultural systems can be addressed by highlighting the importance of human emotional/religious responses to Nature.



Simultaneously, this long period displays significant changes within the aquatic environments which had a profound impact on its communities. In fact, the deceleration of the Tigris and the slow pace of the Euphrates contributed to the systematic growth of the 4th millennium BCE human settlements, which soon developed into urban centres. On its turn, the progressively retreat of the Arab-Persian Gulf and the increase of a drier climate allowed for the creation of marshes and lakes, widening the estuary area (Kenneth, 2007).



Scientific goals and Methodology

WATERS' main goals address specific and entangled questions of History and Archaeology of Religions and Environmental History to:

- 1) evaluate the importance of the Lower Mesopotamian aquatic environment within the different layers of its religious system, considering its ecosystems' diversity (rivers, lakes, marshes & the Arab-Persian Gulf) as well as its flora and fauna occurrence and abundance.
- 2) assess the interactions between human and non-human agents by intertwining the religious sphere with the ecological, political, cultural, and socio-economic ones.
- 3) examine the aquatic environment changes and its impact in the religious discourses by crossing the environmental and climatic data with the permanence and/or discontinuity of aquatic motifs.

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