



THE **MOON**

A Voyage  
Through Time

Edited by Christiane Gruber

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# Foreword

July 20, 2019, marks the fiftieth anniversary of the first landing of humans on the moon. The moment Neil Armstrong stepped out of the lunar module of *Apollo 11* onto the moon's surface marked not only the beginning of future space exploration — “a giant leap for mankind” — it also symbolized the culmination point of humanity's longing, curiosity, and fascination attached to the moon over thousands of years. Around the world the silent mystery and wondrous beauty of the closest heavenly body to earth have inspired belief systems, science, and the arts, and continue to do so to this day.

*The Moon: A Voyage Through Time* celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the moon landing and is the first exhibition of its kind. It focuses on the central role the moon has played in the faith, science, and arts of the Muslim world. The exhibition brings together manuscripts, miniature paintings, scientific instruments, artifacts, and spectacular contemporary art, including Luke Jerram's mesmerizing *Moon* installation, to tell a multitude of stories about the moon's importance in inspiring spiritual growth, scientific discovery, and artistic creativity.

This publication is intended to complement the exhibition with new, interdisciplinary research. It covers a wide range of topics, examining the moon's role in the Ancient Near East; the Qur'an and Islamic literature; science; Sufi poetry; and the art of Ottoman, Mughal, and other Islamic cultures, as well as contemporary art.

The Aga Khan Museum would like to sincerely thank the authors and Christiane Gruber, co-curator of the exhibition and editor of this publication. We would also like to acknowledge and thank our lenders and the contemporary artists who participated in the exhibition: the Cleveland Museum of Art; Columbia University Libraries, New York City; Farjam Foundation, London; Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge; Morgan Library and Museum, New York City; History of Science Museum, Oxford; National Museum of World Cultures, Amsterdam; Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto; Tropenmuseum (Museum of the Tropics), Amsterdam; University of Michigan Library, Ann Arbor; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; Wereldmuseum (World Museum), Rotterdam; and Ala Ebtekar, Ayham Jabr, Canan Şenol, Luke Jerram, Shahpour Pouyan, and Mohamed Zakariya.

**Henry S. Kim**

Director and CEO

Aga Khan Museum

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The dynamic team at the Aga Khan Museum made the exhibition and publication possible. We wish to thank Sarah Beam-Borg and her team — Simon Barron, Curtis Amisich, Sarah Chate, and Ghazaleh Rabiei — for overseeing all aspects of the exhibition; registrar Megan White for securing all loans; Alessandra Cirelli and Aly Manji for handling all image-related issues; Bitu Pourvash for her research assistance; Michael Carroll and Jovanna Scorsone for their editorial and logistical supervision of the publication; and Reich + Petch for the exhibition design.

Last but not least, we extend our thanks to Michelle Al-Ferzly for serving as a curatorial assistant and contributing more than twenty entries to the catalogue. We are also most grateful to the international scholars who wrote this volume's eight landmark essays exploring the moon in Ancient Near Eastern civilizations, the Islamic faith, scientific inquiry, the portable arts, Persian Sufi poetry, Ottoman and Mughal visual and material cultures, and modern and contemporary art. This journey would not have been possible without their expert knowledge, good humour, and willingness to sail to publication in almost record time.

## **Christiane Gruber**

Guest Curator  
Professor of Islamic Art  
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

## **Ulrike Al-Khamis**

Curator  
Director of Collections and Public Programs  
Aga Khan Museum, Toronto

## Note to the Reader

**T**he transliteration of Arabic words follows the Library of Congress system as described in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, with diacritical marks removed to ease legibility. Persian and Ottoman Turkish words follow the Arabic transliteration system, but their slight variations in pronunciation are taken into consideration. Transliteration is not used for words commonly used in English such as Muhammad, Qur'an, and Hadith.

Names of individuals are followed by the years of their death (d.), regnal years (r.), or in the case of authors, the years during which their literary activities flourished (fl.) if their dates of death are unknown. When dates of death or activity are not fully established, several dates or a range of dates (ca.) are given. Moreover, the Islamic AH (*anno Hegirae*) and the Common Era (CE) dates are provided in that order, in particular when an object or painting includes a precise year of manufacture (741/1141, for example). If a date does not have dual years, then it is noted in CE. The AH calendar is lunar, while the CE calendar is solar, so at times an AH date spans two CE years. In such a case, the span of two CE years is provided.

Frequently used honorific expressions after the names of prophets, respected individuals, and God are omitted for the sake of simplicity. When the Qur'an is cited, Qur'anic chapter number and verse number(s) are given.

The authors of the texts in the Catalogue part of this book are signified by initials. What follows is a key to those initials:

**BP:** Bitā Pourvash

**CG:** Christiane Gruber

**ER:** Elizabeth Rauh

**HB:** Hamid Bohloul

**MF:** Michelle Al-Ferzly

**SB:** Sonja Brentjes

**UAK:** Ulrike Al-Khamis



# Essays

# Visualizing the Moon in the Ancient Near East

Ömür Harmanşah<sup>1</sup>

**If the sun (*Šá-maš*) stands in the halo of the moon: in all lands (people) will speak the truth; the son will speak the truth with his father; universal peace.**

— From an astrological report sent to the Assyrian king<sup>2</sup>

The moon played a major role in the ancient Middle Eastern world as a celestial body, as a material measure of time and temporality, as a site for predicting the future, and as a benevolent god of abundance, prosperity, and in certain places, even healing. In this essay, I discuss both the veneration and the visualization of the moon in Pre-Islamic (ritual) contexts to provide a visual-historical biography of the moon, which was imagined both as a divine presence and as a cosmic actor. For the sake of brevity and coherence, I will focus on the ancient Mesopotamian engagements with the moon during the Bronze and Iron Ages, and pursue the very popular cult of the moon in Hellenistic and Roman

Anatolia. In doing so, as an art historian, my biased focus is on the various apparitions of the moon on monuments, works of art, and the artifacts of visual culture, which will help me narrate its story.

Contrary to the modern scientific vision of the moon as a “lifeless, rocky satellite,”<sup>3</sup> the protagonist of this new materialist tale is no less than a major cosmic actor, a vibrant and powerful god who shaped and safeguarded the everyday life and fate of humanity. New materialism urges us to return to the matter, liberating it as much as possible from the ontological straitjacket of anthropocentric idealism, symbolism, and classification.

## The Shining Bowl: The Moon God in Early Mesopotamia

Celestial bodies played a prominent role in the mythology and cult practice of early Mesopotamian cultures. The moon god Nanna-Suen/Sîn (in his Sumerian/Akkadian names), the sun god UTU/Šamaš, and Inanna/Ištar, who was associated with Venus, had significant presence in the early centuries of urban religion in Mesopotamia in the late fourth and throughout the third millennia BCE, with the primary cult centres located in the cities of Ur, Sippar, and Uruk respectively (Fig. 1). At the port city of Ur on the southern edge of the Mesopotamian plain, Nanna-Suen’s sanctuary complex, known in Sumerian as *E-kiš-nu-ĝal* (literally, “House sending light to the earth”), was one of the largest urban institutions of its time and was managed by high priestesses who were often linked to royalty. At the height of the history of this institution during the Third Dynasty of Ur (2112–2004 BCE), the cult complex witnessed a major rebuilding project sponsored by the king Ur-Namma, including the construction of the well-known *giparu* complex (a cultic-cum-palatial compound for the high priestess) and the stepped tower-temple ziggurat dedicated to Nanna-Suen.

A full-moon-shaped calcite disk with a carved register containing figural representation and a dedicatory inscription of Enheduanna, daughter of Sargon of Agade, was excavated in several fragments in the *giparu* complex in 1927 CE (Fig. 2). The disk features a partially preserved horizontal register of a highly carved narrative relief that depicts Enheduanna making a libation offering to a stepped structure (usually presumed to represent a ziggurat) with the help of a nude male priest and two other attendants. The design of the composition is very well known from the stone wall plaques dedicated to neighbourhood temples in Early Dynastic cities of Mesopotamia, such as Nippur, Tutub, and Eshnunna, although those plaques all share the same rectangular form with a central perforation.<sup>4</sup> What makes the disk extraordinary is its unique shape, since it arguably mimics that of the full moon. Also rare is the replacement of an anthropomorphic image of the deity with an architectural monument that alludes to a ziggurat as the visual signifier of divine presence (an icon, if you will). If so, one may suggest that Nanna-Suen is vibrantly present in this image



Fig. 1: Map of early Mesopotamian cities by Anandaroop Roy from *Art of the First Cities: The Third Millennium B.C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus* © 2003 by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Reprinted by permission.

in three indexical, non-anthropomorphic ways: the writing of his name in the dedicatory inscription on the back of the disk, the full moon shape of the object, and the architectural representation of his temple as a sign of his divinity.

Visual representations of this male deity, Nanna-Suen, are extremely rare across history and principally restricted to scenes on seals, in which he is signalled via a crescent (*uškaru*).<sup>5</sup> Often, the crescent stood in for Nanna-Suen as an indexical element, especially on public monuments such as steles. In other cases, the crescent was awkwardly added to a rather generic anthropomorphic image of a male deity identified as Nanna-Suen (or *Sîn*), just because a crescent is either hovering about his body, made part of his headdress, or held in his hand. In his close relationship to his son, Šamaš, the sun god, the moon god's crescent was often syncretized with the sun god's astral, radiating symbol, creating a crescent enveloping a solar disk. Examples of this unification of the crescent moon and the sun disk are visible on the very top of the Ur-Namma stele or on the seal of Bilalama, son of Kirikiri, governor of Eshnunna, dating from the twentieth century BCE (Fig. 3).

The literary persona and the poetic imagery of the moon are even richer. Its iconography was very much related to the empirical observation of the moon for astronomical and divinatory purposes.

Due to the shape that the moon takes in waxing and waning, it was often imagined to have horns and therefore took the epithet “wild bull” in Sumerian literature.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, in hymns and astrological texts, the moon god is imagined as a shepherd herding his flock of stars

in the night sky, thereby associating Nanna-Suen with the common metaphors of pastoral power held by the kings of the time. Late third and early second millennia literary texts refer to kings as “shepherds,” i.e., benevolent rulers who care for the well-being of animal herds and maintain their



Fig. 2: Disk of Enheduanna, Early Akkadian Period (twenty-third century BCE), calcite, 25.6 cm (diameter) x 7.1 cm (thickness). Courtesy of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, image no. 295918, object no. B16665.

abundance. These kings boasted about building the cattle-pen (Sumerian, *tūr*) and sheepfold (Sumerian, *amaš*), which served as metaphors for cities and their sanctuaries.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in astrological omens, the halo of the moon is poetically described as the “cattle-pen” of Nanna-Suen, speaking to the same association with pastoral care.<sup>8</sup> His other common epithet, “the shining bowl” (Sumerian, *dilim-babbar*), may have also derived from a visual imagination based on empirical observation of the moon during particular phases, likening the celestial body to a glistening metal bowl.<sup>9</sup>



Fig. 3: Cylinder Seal of Bilalama, son of Kirikiri of Eshnunna, and modern impression. Seal: lapis lazuli, gold, and silver, 4 cm (height), 1.5 cm (diameter). Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, seal OIM A7468, impression OIM C4133.

## Harran and the Oracular Shrine of the Moon

The Mesopotamian monthly calendar was lunar and based on the daily observation of the moon. Therefore, one would expect rich visual and literary metaphors alluding to the moon’s vibrant and luminous form to be produced. As the Babylonian celestial sciences of astronomy (the making of accurate calendars) and astrology (divination based on the appearance and movement of celestial bodies) were developed in increasing complexity during the second and first millennia BCE, the central role of the moon (and the moon god) in cult practice did not vanish. The moon remained the main measure of time reckoning, everyday temporality, and predicting the future.

In the first millennium BCE, the city of Harran (ancient Ḫarrānu) near modern Urfa in southeastern Turkey rose as a major place of veneration and pilgrimage for the moon god Sîn, while Assyrian, Babylonian, and local Syro-Hittite monuments reproducing his imagery proliferated in this northern Syro-Mesopotamian region. Under Assyrian imperial rule, the holy city of Harran received “divine protection” status (*kidinnu*) as an oracular sanctuary, a very rare privilege.<sup>10</sup> The sanctuary of Sîn, known as *E-ḫul-ḫul* (“House, the joy of all the people”), was famously rebuilt by the Babylonian ruler Nabonidus (r. 556–539 BCE), whose own mother, Adad-guppi, was a priestess of Sîn in Harran all through her

life. The inscriptions on the three stelae erected by Nabonidus and his mother were discovered in the pavement of the Ayyubid Great Mosque (Ulu Cami) of Harran in 1956 CE, and they testify to this ambitious building project.<sup>11</sup> The moon god’s oracular sanctuary at Harran continued to be visited by pilgrims for many centuries into the Roman period, and the holiness of the city was maintained by the practitioners of the later monotheistic religions at the site via its association with a memorable visit by Abraham.<sup>12</sup>

Multiple stone monuments dating to the Iron Age in the region of Harran testify to the cultural and visual prominence of the moon god’s worship. The three stelae of Sîn (linked to the local Luwian moon god *Arma*) that were found at the archaeological mounds of Aşağı Yarımca and Sultantepe in the Harran Plain, and Pazarcık to the west of the Euphrates, provide us with a good understanding of the non-anthropomorphic nature of the representation of the deity (Figs. 4–6).<sup>13</sup> In these tall stone stelae with rounded tops, we see the moon god’s crescent mounted upon a post, which is adorned with tassels and raised on a double-stepped base. The Aşağı Yarımca stele has a weathered inscription in which the names of Sîn and Harran are legible.<sup>14</sup> For its part, the Sultantepe stele was found during the 1952 CE excavations on the summit of the Sultantepe mound (identified as ancient Huzirina), associated with “Building M” and its

cobbled pavement.<sup>15</sup> The inscription of the Pazarcık stele dates to the time of Adad-nerari III (r. 811–783 BCE) and details the resolution of a border dispute by this Assyrian king between the regional states of Kummuh and Gurgum. In this stele, the moon god seems to appear as the divine mediator and the witness of the dispute.

Based on the archaeological research in the region, it is now clear that not one but several temples dedicated to the moon god existed in the Harran plain and environs at sites such as Sultantepe and Aşağı Yarımca. The non-anthropomorphic representations of the moon god that are common among all these monuments mark a

distinctive form of his visualization and imagination around Harran, perhaps as a way of underlining the shared Mesopotamian visual heritage of the deity with its deep temporality. This pictorial unity suggests that it was not essential to seek novel iconographies for Sin or his equivalents in local Hittite, Luwian, and Aramaic belief systems. Above all, the continued post-antiquity legacy of Harran as a holy place for the cult of the moon and as a site of divination is significant for understanding the long-term cultural biography of such places of cultural practice.

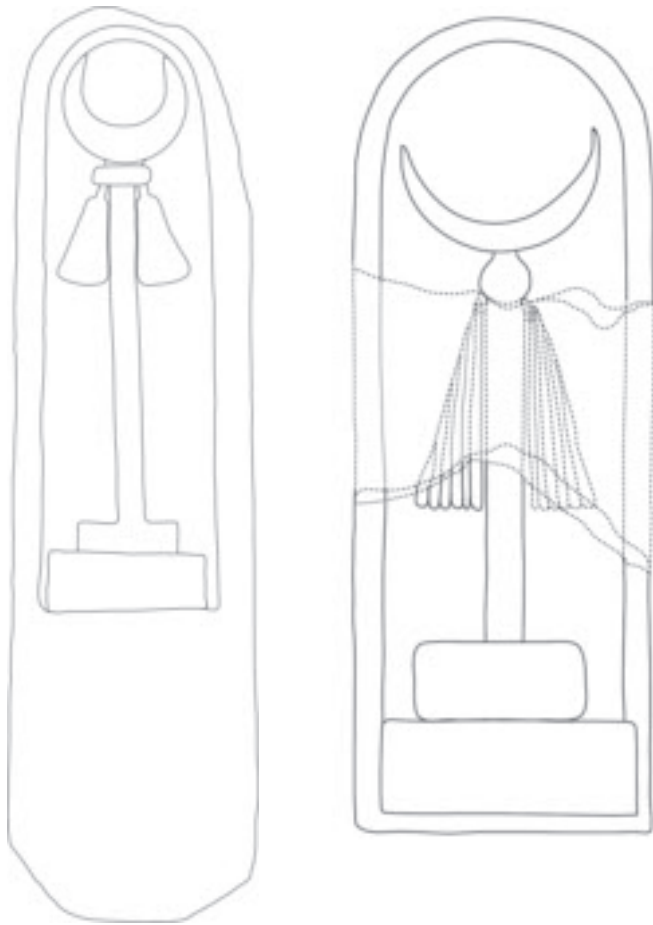


Fig. 4: Aşağı Yarımca Stele, Late Neo-Assyrian period, dedicated to the moon god, found in the Harran Plain, Aşağı Yarımca village, Harran, Şanlıurfa Province, in 1949 CE, dark grey basalt. Anatolian Civilizations Museum, Ankara. Drawing from Kemalettin Köröğlu, “Neo-Assyrian Rock Reliefs and Stelae in Anatolia,” in Köröğlu and Adalı, *The Assyrians*, fig. 9. Courtesy of Kemalettin Köröğlu and Yapı Kredi Publications.

Fig. 5: Sultantepe Stele, Late Neo-Assyrian period, dedicated to the moon god, 110 cm (height) x 36 cm (width) x 12 cm (thickness), found in two fragments in Sultantepe mound excavations in 1952 CE, associated with the building reproduced in Köröğlu, “Neo-Assyrian Rock Reliefs and Stelae in Anatolia,” fig. 10. Courtesy of Kemalettin Köröğlu and Yapı Kredi Publications.

Fig. 6: Pazarcık Inscribed Stele, dated to the time of Adad-nerari III (r. 811–783 BCE), basalt, 140 cm (height) x 44 cm (width) x 16.5 cm (thickness). Kahramanmaraş Museum, Turkey, Wikimedia Commons, photo by Klaus-Peter Simon.

## The Cult of Mên in Anatolia

The popularity of the cult of Sîn in northern Syro-Mesopotamia is perhaps comparable to the emergent cult of the moon god Mên in Hellenistic and Roman Anatolia. In the wider inner Anatolian plateau stretching from the bend of the Halys River (Kızılırmak) down to Pisidia and Pamphylia in the south and Lydia in the west between the Hermus and Meander Rivers, the cult of Mên was dominant and widespread particularly during the second and third centuries CE. We know about the cult's popularity thanks to the abundance of local inscriptions in the countryside.<sup>16</sup>

In his iconographic rendering, this male deity seems to have adopted a Phrygian heritage — as most archaizing Roman cults in Anatolia did if they wished to emphasize their deep Anatolian roots. In visual representations, he is shown wearing a Phrygian cap and outfit, while crescent-shaped, horn-like extensions emerge from his shoulders. The marble bust of Mên from the Yenimahalle neighbourhood in Ankara is an oft-cited example of such representations (Fig. 7). Here, he is depicted with a youthful face and elaborately shaped, deeply carved long hair with curls, and wears a Phrygian cap along with a military toga fastened with a fibula on the right shoulder. The discovery of inscriptions mentioning Meter (or Phrygian Kybele) and Mên, as well as coins from Ankara's Roman baths depicting Mên inside a temple, suggests that the famous Temple of Augustus in Ankara must have replaced a temple to Mên or a combined sanctuary to Meter/Kybele and Mên.<sup>17</sup>

An extraordinary gilded silver plate from Ai Khanum, an Alexandrian foundation in remote Bactria (today in northern Afghanistan), illustrates how far east this intimate relationship between the moon god and Kybele had travelled in the Hellenistic period (Fig. 8).<sup>18</sup> In this unusual scene, the *polos*-wearing Kybele faces the spectators as she rides on mountainous terrain, accompanied by winged Nike, on a chariot drawn by two lions. Her chariot approaches a stepped altar-like structure on which a priest figure makes an offering. The sun god Helios in the form of a bust and the syncretic astral image of the crescent moon and the sun disk, known from Mesopotamia, are represented as shining celestial bodies in the sky. The Greco-Bactrian art of the Alexandrian

cities in Central Asia thus reflected a mixture of Anatolian and Mesopotamian stylistic features hybridized with local and Greek visual material culture.

In the central Anatolian plateau, the best-known sanctuary of Mên is located in Pisidia, where he is known by the localized epithet Askaênos. Devotees of Mên Askaênos had to climb the steep slopes of the Gemen Korusu/Karakuyu Tepesi, three and half kilometres southeast of the modern town of Yalvaç, to reach the temple complex of Mên. The temple dates to the second century BCE, was built on top of a limestone mountain (sixteen hundred metres high), and served as an extra-urban sanctuary to the city of Pisidian Antioch.<sup>19</sup> According to Strabo (XII.8.14), the temple institution and the priesthood here controlled “sacred estates” and managed “sacred slaves” (*ιερόδουλοι*).

Mên's rectangular *temenos* (enclosure) is perched on the summit of the western ridge and features a spectacular view of the plain of Antioch. The extraordinary *temenos* wall, built with ashlar blocks of the local dark grey limestone and incorporated with local bedrock, comprises an assemblage of *anathemata*, a heart-warming collection of votive reliefs and personal petitions carved and dedicated to Mên over the centuries (Figs. 9–10). These votive carvings, both



Fig. 7: Bust of Moon God Mên, second to fourth centuries CE, found in Yenimahalle neighbourhood of Ankara, marble, 64.5 cm (height) x 46 cm (width at shoulders) x 29 cm (base diameter), right-hand crescent a restoration. Courtesy of Halil Demirdelen and Anatolian Civilizations Museum, Ankara.



Fig. 8: Ceremonial Silver Plate, Ai Khanum, Afghanistan, temple with niches, third century BCE, gilded with gold leaf, 25 cm (diameter). National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul.

free-standing *ex voto* offerings and those carved on the walls of the *temenos* or the living rock, include representations of miniature temples (*naiskos*) as well as a series of lunar crescents, sometimes bull heads and garlands, and many brief inscriptions carved inside those architectonic frames. Several of the short inscriptions record simple dedications indicating names of the devotees, their family members, and their vows. The longer dedicatory inscriptions are largely agonistic in nature and refer to athletic competitions. Bases and statues also were erected in the *temenos* for athletic victors.

Inside the *temenos* wall and raised on a stepped *crepis* of nine to ten risers was a small peripteral Ionic temple, also built of the local grey and white limestone. Outside the *temenos* walls, the sanctuary included a small temple on the eastern slope, a small stadium, and a series of stone-built, house-like structures on the lower slopes, perhaps reserved for the accommodation and banquet needs of the pilgrims.

If we follow the word of the ancient authors and the inscriptions that were found in the countryside, the cult of Mên seems to have been quite

popular and widespread, with multiple cult places across the rural landscape. Dedications were made at the Yalvaç sanctuary of Mên Askaênos by the community that linked indexical representations of the moon (as crescent) combined and framed with miniature architectural forms. This everyday visualization of the moon as divinity, to whom one petitions for a propitious future, remained non-anthropomorphic and largely indexical, aligning well with representations of the moon god Sin on Assyrian stelae and early Mesopotamian depictions of the deity on scenes of dedication.



Fig. 9: Votive carved stone offered to Mên Askaênos, Pisidian Antioch, 175–125 BCE. Courtesy of Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan Archives, 5.0180, photo by George R. Swain, 1924.



Fig. 10: Temenos wall with buttresses, Sanctuary of Mên Askaênos, Pisidian Antioch. Courtesy of Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, University of Michigan, 7.1579, photo by George R. Swain, 1924.

## From Allegory to Anthropos

To conclude this exceedingly brief history of the moon's depiction over the span of twenty-five hundred years, one can suggest that the moon's visuality reveals an ethical struggle between, on the one hand, the collective, allegorical imagination of the moon as a powerful divine actor not modelled on the image of the human, and on the other hand, the awkward political attempts to introduce the

image of the *anthropos* into the lunar imagination, as is the case for the Roman bust. In the end, the insertion of the anthropomorphic proves to be the work of political powers and the assimilating forces of imperial iconography — and not so much the collective work of the social imagination. ❁

## NOTES

1. I would like to thank Maggie Schuster, my research assistant, who has helped me with my research on the moon god and for sharing with me her excellent work on the iconography of Anahita. I am grateful to Halil Demirdelen for providing me with the high-resolution images and valuable inventory information about the Bust of Mên from the Anatolian Civilizations Museum in Ankara. Lastly, I am truly grateful to Christiane Gruber for her patience and encouragement in producing this essay.
2. From a report sent by an Assyrian *ummânû* to the Neo-Assyrian king. Hermann Hunger, *Astrological Reports to Assyrian Kings* 40 obv. 2'–4', quoted in Lorenzo Verderame, "The Halo of the Moon." In Jeanette Fincke, ed., *Divination in the Ancient Near East: A Workshop on Divination Conducted During the 54th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Würzburg, 2008* (Winona Lake, IN, 2014), 97.
3. Bernd Brunner, *Moon: A Brief History* (New Haven, 2010), viii.
4. Irene Winter, "Women in Public: Disk of Enehduanna and the Beginning of the Office of En-Priestess, and the Weight of Visual Evidence." In Jean-Marie Duran, ed., *La femme dans le proche-orient antique: compte rendu de la 23<sup>e</sup> Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale (Paris, 7–10 Juillet 1986)* (Paris, 1987), 189–201.
5. Dominique Collon, "The Near Eastern Moon God." In Diederik Meijer, ed., *Natural Phenomena: Their Meaning, Depiction and Description in the Ancient Near East* (Amsterdam, 1992), 19–37; Marten Stol, "The Moon as Seen by the Babylonians." In Meijer, ed., *Natural Phenomena* (Amsterdam, 1992), 245–275.
6. Nick Veldhuis, *A Cow of Sîn* (Leiden, 1991), 1.
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