# The role of a temple in Mesopotamia and the significance of the votive offerings

A temple is “a space or a building that houses a deity in its image”.[[1]](#footnote-1) It is constructed for religious [worship](http://www.britannica.com/topic/worship) and functions as a central place of service and expression of reverence to the god. In Mesopotamia, the temple was a home for a single deity or even for a divine family. The life of the inhabitants was organized around this divine household. The temple offered not only a practical way of managing the people’s world, but also provided an understanding of different phenomena. In Babylonia, where the temple was a core of the state, by the end of the Early Dynastic period temples had become the major owners of landed property and promoted the development of civilization.[[2]](#footnote-2) The cult of a particular deity in the temple-city-state was an expression of communal solidarity and ideological focus. The community was represented by the temple, and therefore contributions to it were a moral obligation of citizens.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Religious life is inconceivable without the performance of rituals, which could indicate the status and level of influence of the performer. “The participation of the ruler in cult and ritual was essential to the practice and display of his position in his many functions as the religious, economic, administrative, political, and military leader of the community”.[[4]](#footnote-4) Moreover, there is a strong connection between ritual and sacred place. A place achieves its significance as sacred through the repetition of ritual activity.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The king, the one who was appointed by the god to rule over a particular territory as well as a major representative of the community, was in charge of the building and maintenance of a divine house, and responsible for taking care of its inhabitants by means of offerings. Presenting devotion and piety towards a deity, the king was promised abundance and peace for his land in return. The temple and the ruler had a strong connection and were dependent on each other.

Worship, among other practices, included a gift-giving relationship between a human being and a deity. “Gifts” presented to gods by kings are called votive offerings or votive depositions. The dedication of such items creates a lasting relationship with the deity, since material objects have the ability to invoke memory. The dedicatory inscription on the donated object functions as a reminder of the royal worshipper and lends him a physical presence in the sanctuary. It provides honour and prestige both to the king and to the divine recipient. The quantity and extravagance of votive offerings indicate the glorifying motives of the ruler and distinguish a particular god from other deities, affirming his divine powers and the ruler’s respect for him.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The dedicatory gifts of royal donors include various objects such as furniture, weaponry, cultic containers, vehicles and images. Visual representations, either of a divinity or a human being, usually have an exceptional meaning. Despite their muteness, they are elements of social interaction and communication. In religion, images are effective for the reinforcement of power and ideology.[[7]](#footnote-7) A ruler’s self-image in stone or metal has a special importance. It must impress the audience and to demonstrate the ability to communicate with the god. The creation of royal statuary was a complex process that included, inter alia, systematic rituals of consecration, installation and maintenance, called “rituals of constitution”.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Votive deposits often share common features, such as religious imagery, distinctive architectural context and precious or exotic material.[[9]](#footnote-9) The latter attribute of dedicatory gifts is very important. Wood, metals and stone were scarce in Babylonia, therefore very precious. Commercial trade and wars provided acquisition not only of the raw material, but also the finished product.[[10]](#footnote-10) To present booty to the god, who supported the military campaign, or to gift an object that was made of a material coming from afar, as a result of successful trade, were admirable acts of piety, therefore mentioned in detail in royal inscriptions.[[11]](#footnote-11) The wide-ranging production of gold that appears in textual references is almost absent from archaeological records. The reason for that is quite clear – precious metals were frequently reused. They were always a subject for plundering, especially during the destruction of cities.

1. Sallaberger 2013:519. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Falkenstein 1974:5-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Postgate 1995:394. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Averbeck 2006:44. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ragavan 2012:6 . [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hemmer Gudme 2012:8-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Asher-Greve 2013:150. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Winter 2010:167. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Osborne 2004:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Potts 1989:124-125. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Moorey 1994:219-220. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)