

Introduction

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The papers in this collection were first presented at a workshop entitled *Hygiene in the Ancient Near East: Power, Privilege, Inequality* at the 68th *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* in Leiden (July 20th, 2023). The purpose of the workshop was to present the current knowledge on hygiene and cleanliness practices in the ancient Near East, with a particular focus on re-constructing the effects that these practices had at the social level. The workshop was part of the project *GALATEO - Good Attitudes for Life in Assyrian Times: Etiquette and Observance of Norms in Male and Female Groups*, which has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie (grant agreement No. 101027543).

The papers present both interpretations of the ancient data and reflections upon the central *vexata quaestio* whether notions of hygiene and purity overlapped in antiquity. The authors address this topic from different angles. Nevertheless, all papers relate to common questions and issues that revolve around a basic idea: hygiene, whether religious or lay in character (however this distinction is understood), can be a tool of power just like policy and war. Hygiene can become an exclusionary weapon to banish unclean or impure individuals and bring about a kind of ostracism (Yitzhaq Feder), whereas it can also be a beneficial instrument for those few who are deemed inherently cleansed and pure and who merit distinguishing from the masses (Evelyne Koubkova). Hygiene can also serve as a powerful religious instrument, to the point that it cannot be distinguished from daily cleansing acts. The rituals which ensure the 'purity' of some individuals have clear religious connotations although they also covertly bring about good health (Saki Kikuchi). But hygiene, like literacy, comes in various degrees, which can translate to levels of social phenomena of inequality. This is demonstrated by the fact that practices and rituals conducive to very high levels of hygiene, and thus good health and cultic purity, may require ingredients (Aino Häntinen) and facilities (Svende Bielefeld, Ludovico Portuese) which are expensive and not affordable for many. In this sense, hygiene becomes the 'secret ingredient' to health, success, and power. Finally, since the lack of hygiene could pose a threat to the wider social group, hygiene can be a tool to strengthen group identity and protect it from those individuals and things that may pollute or defile its integrity. As a result, it can also affect social rules and conventions, manners and modes of etiquette, social behaviours and relationships (Ludovico Portuese).

What emerges from all the papers in this collection is the core notion that hygiene in antiquity could be used to create power, confer privilege, and generate inequality. It is hoped that this volume will stimulate new research paths in the future which can capture the daily life of past individuals and groups who, before being political leaders and warriors, were human beings.

