

Emar's Temple Archive: A Community Witness Before a Collective Group of Deities

by Jacob Rennaker

The emergency excavation of Emar in 1972 produced a wealth of information regarding 13th century BCE inland Syria. While scholars had been limited to the cuneiform tablets found at urban centers such as Ugarit and Mari, the discoveries at Emar have allowed for a more well-rounded view of politics, economics, and religion in Syria. The texts from Emar demonstrate the diversity of Syrian cities and have introduced the scholarly world to an intriguing configuration of political and religious life. This diversity is highlighted by the texts found in the archive of the “Diviner of the Gods.” The overwhelming concentration of texts discovered in this “temple of the gods,” along with the diversity of texts found therein, suggests that the inhabitants of Emar held a religious outlook that valued a collective (as opposed to individualistic) view of their deities.

The city of Emar was known to scholars from certain Ebla tablets (dating to the late 3rd millennium BCE), as well as a few Mari tablets (dating to the 18th century BCE).¹ Based on the references from these Mari tablets, that expedition’s chief epigraphist had suggested a probable location many years earlier.² However, Emar’s excavation was finally “prompted by the Syrian government’s intention to erect a dam on the Euphrates at Tabqa.”³ The anticipation of slowly rising waters of the new lake El Assad gave scholars and archaeologists alike an impetus to locate cities that had been mentioned in the aforementioned cuneiform documents.

¹ Wayne T. Pitard, “The Archaeology of Emar,” in Mark W. Chavalas, ed., *Emar: The History, Religion, and Culture of a Syrian Town in the Late Bronze Age* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1996), p. 13.

² Pitard, “The Archaeology of Emar,” p. 13. See also Jean-Claude Margueron and Veronica Boutte, “Emar, Capital of Aštata in the Fourteenth Century BCE,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 58 (1995), p. 126.

³ Eugen J. Pentiu, *West Semitic Vocabulary in the Akkadian Texts From Emar* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001), p. 1.

Emar was situated by the great bend in the northern Euphrates, at the juncture of two trade routes that began in southeastern Mesopotamia. One route diverged to the southwest towards Syro-Palestine (via Tadmor / Palmyra), and the other continued in a northwestern direction to Anatolia and the Aegean.⁴ Because of its pivotal position, the nearby cities of Ebla and Mari vied for control over Emar. Both of these major cities exercised a degree of authority over Emar,⁵ and kept records of their correspondences with this relatively small town. The Hittite empire eventually gained control over Emar, which was conveniently located at the edge of the empire's territory.⁶ During this Hittite rule, new administrative centers and temples were built and occupied from the 14th century BCE up until the town was destroyed near the beginning of the 12th century BCE.⁷

As mentioned above, in 1972 Jean Margueron led a French team to investigate the area of Meskene Qadime,⁸ based on an earlier scholarly proposal that this was the ancient port city of Emar.⁹ On only the fourth day of excavation, workers uncovered a jar containing fourteen tablets.¹⁰ Among these tablets, several indicated that they were produced in a city named Emar.

⁴ Gary Beckman, "Emar and Its Archives," in Mark W. Chavalas, ed., *Emar: The History, Religion, and Culture of a Syrian Town in the Late Bronze Age* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1996), pp. 3-4.

⁵ Beckman, "Emar and Its Archives," p. 3.

⁶ Daniel E. Fleming, *Time at Emar* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), p. 4.

⁷ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 3.

⁸ Penttuc, *West Semitic Vocabulary in the Akkadian Texts From Emar*, p. 1.

⁹ An earlier excavation was initiated and directed by A. Raymond and L. Golvin of the French Institute of Arab Studies in Damascus. While excavating a medieval town, this team happened upon a second millennium BCE tablet in a part of the tell that was not occupied during the medieval period. This prompted a second mission, led by Margueron, that resulted in the discovery of ancient Emar. See Margueron, "Emar, Capital of Aštata in the Fourteenth Century BCE," pp. 126-127.

¹⁰ Pitard, "The Archaeology of Emar," p. 14.

Excavation seasons of six to seven weeks continued from 1972 through 1976,¹¹ yielding upwards of two thousand tablets and fragments,¹² confirming the original proposal that this was, indeed, the long forgotten city of Emar.

Following the discovery of these tablets over five years of excavation, Daniel Arnaud, the French team's epigrapher, published the Sumerian-Akkadian tablets in a four-volume series from 1985-1987 (somewhere between 10-15 years after their initial discovery).¹³ The remaining texts have not yet been published,¹⁴ but have been briefly described and will be treated below. The texts that *have* been published thus far have been dealt with in a number of articles and books.¹⁵ A full list of these texts and their treatment (grouped by text type and including commentary) is forthcoming by Arnaud.¹⁶

A wide variety of texts were discovered. The two largest categories of texts found were legal and religious. Over 350 texts dealt with legal matters, including “adoptions, debt payments, divisions of inheritance, exchanges of property, lawsuits, loans, purchases of property, and other legal documents.”¹⁷ The religious texts, over 300 in number, “describe various facets

¹¹ Penttici, *West Semitic Vocabulary in the Akkadian Texts From Emar*, p. 1.

¹² Daniel E. Fleming, “More Help from Syria: Introducing Emar to Biblical Study,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 58 (1995), p. 139. The precise number of tablets is difficult to ascertain. Fleming notes elsewhere that “when a majority of the discovered tablets are broken as at Emar, precise numbers are difficult to give even where the catalogued texts have been published” (Daniel E. Fleming, “The Rituals from Emar: Evolution of an Indigenous Tradition in Second-Millennium Syria” in Mark W. Chavalas and John L. Hayes, eds., *New Horizons in the Study of Ancient Syria* [Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1992], p. 51).

¹³ Daniel Arnaud, *Recherches au pays d'Ašata. Emar VI, tomes 1-4* (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1985-1987).

¹⁴ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 1, n. 1.

¹⁵ An introductory bibliography of scholarship on the Emar tablets is available, sorted by author (at <http://www.ieiop.com/emar/en/Autoren.html>) and by subject (at <http://www.ieiop.com/emar/es/Temas.html>).

¹⁶ Beckman, “Emar and Its Archives,” p. 9, n. 42.

¹⁷ Penttici, *West Semitic Vocabulary in the Akkadian Texts From Emar*, p. 10.

of the religious life, including unique ceremonies such as the enthronement of the *entu*-high priestess, the enthronement of the *maš^cartu*-priestess, liturgies (annual and monthly), Emar rituals, *zukru*-festival, Anatolian rituals, etc.”¹⁸ These two areas of legality and religiosity appear to have been the central concern of those keeping records at Emar.

While legal and religious matters seem to have received the most attention, a number of additional texts indicate that the record-keepers had other interests. Almost 150 tablets dealt with various economic issues, such as “inventories, cult deliveries, lists of personal names, memoranda, etc.”¹⁹ The next largest group of tablets (around 70) was lexical texts, followed by an identical number of tablets containing letters and literary texts (20).²⁰ Among the literary texts were fragments of the Gilgamesh Epic, “The Tamarisk and the Datepalm,” and a number of wisdom texts.²¹

Just as the content of these tablets were diverse, so too were the languages used to record them. Most texts were written in a “peripheral Akkadian dialect strongly marked by the local West Semitic substratum,” which was closer to the Middle Babylonian used in southern Mesopotamia than to the much more Canaanite-flavored language of the Amarna letters.²² Beckman refers to the primary form of Akkadian used at Emar as a “scribal dialect,” used primarily for practical records and ritual texts, but was likely not spoken.²³ This does not mean that the scribes at Emar were somehow less educated in the more standard forms of cuneiform

¹⁸ Pentiuc, *West Semitic Vocabulary in the Akkadian Texts From Emar*, p. 11.

¹⁹ Pentiuc, *West Semitic Vocabulary in the Akkadian Texts From Emar*, p. 10.

²⁰ Pentiuc, *West Semitic Vocabulary in the Akkadian Texts From Emar*, p. 11.

²¹ Pentiuc, *West Semitic Vocabulary in the Akkadian Texts From Emar*, p. 11.

²² Beckman, “Emar and Its Archives,” p. 7.

²³ Beckman, “Emar and Its Archives,” pp. 7-8.

writing; the traditional Akkadian and Sumerian literary languages were used in writing a number of scholarly texts.²⁴ Other texts also demonstrate the diversity of languages known in Emar. Two letters written in Hittite have been recovered, as well as a small number of divination records written in Hurrian.²⁵ This array of literary languages indicates the breadth of knowledge and interest in diverse languages of the scribes at Emar.

These diverse texts were not all found together in the same area. One relatively insignificant archive of texts was found at a building identified as the city's palace. There, excavators uncovered a small number of tablets, consisting mostly of legal documents (sale contracts, wills, and an emancipation contract).²⁶ At the southwest end of the excavation site, two temples located side by side contained a few more tablets. The smaller temple on the north side (perhaps belonging to Aštar, Baal's consort) held only five tablets, all of which listed persons.²⁷ The larger of the two temples (on the south side) contained twenty-one tablets. These texts were mostly inventories of valuables and lists of persons receiving various items, and unlike the tablets found next door, three texts explicitly mention a deity (Baal / Hadad, suggesting that this was a temple dedicated to him).²⁸ All of these archives pale in comparison to the primary archive found at Emar: the "temple of the gods."

By far, the largest numbers of tablets were found at a Late Bronze temple located at the center of the Emar excavation site. This collection of over 650 tablets was apparently the family

²⁴ Beckman, "Emar and Its Archives," p. 8.

²⁵ Beckman, "Emar and Its Archives," p. 8.

²⁶ Pitard, "The Archaeology of Emar," p. 17.

²⁷ Pitard, "The Archaeology of Emar," p. 18.

²⁸ Pitard, "The Archaeology of Emar," p. 18.

archive of the priests who presided over this temple.²⁹ The most prominent priest in these texts was a certain *Ba^cal-malik*, who was referred to as the “diviner of the gods of Emar,”³⁰ and who will receive greater attention below. This archive contained a number of Mesopotamian scribal / educational texts, among which were lexical lists, compendia for divination, incantations against demons, fragments of the Epic of Gilgamesh, and fragments of assorted wisdom literature.³¹ Alongside these Akkadian texts were a substantive collection of Mesopotamian omen and medical works translated into Hurrian.³² While the presence of such recognizably “traditional” Mesopotamian literature suggests a concern with the broader ancient Near East, the scribes responsible for this temple archive also paid special attention to much more immediate issues.

Many tablets found at the “diviner’s archive” at the temple deal with strictly local matters. Fleming notes that “roughly two thirds of these [texts dealing with local matters] derive from cult affairs in the vicinity of Emar.”³³ These texts refer to an array of separate deities and shrines, and include temple inventories of “goods belonging to the temple, lists of animals, silver and bronze objects, clothing and textiles, temple personnel, and temple vessels and utensils.”³⁴ The ritual texts constitute nearly 200 tablets within this archive, and “although these rituals are written in Akkadian, it is clear that they are not imported rituals, but are part of the local religious tradition.”³⁵ Beyond this, these local ritual texts find no parallel among texts found in

²⁹ Pitard, “The Archaeology of Emar,” p. 19.

³⁰ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 26, and Pitard, “The Archaeology of Emar,” p. 19.

³¹ Pitard, “The Archaeology of Emar,” p. 19, and Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 14.

³² Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 14.

³³ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 14.

³⁴ Pitard, “The Archaeology of Emar,” p. 19.

³⁵ Pitard, “The Archaeology of Emar,” p. 19.

Mesopotamia, Hatti, or Ugarit, indicating the unique character of the “diviner’s archive” at Emar.³⁶

While a number of these texts demonstrate the existence of a religious bureaucracy, it appears that those associated with this temple archive were also involved in non-cultic legal matters. The legal documents found in this archive “belong to Emar residents who are not connected in any consistent way.”³⁷ These texts include “sales of real estate, loans, slave buying, etc.”³⁸ Some texts “were composed to be witnessed by the Hittite viceroy at Charchemish... [and] many more were evidently produced at the palace of the local Emar king.”³⁹ Despite being composed in different areas, these texts were all somehow consolidated and stored in the “diviner’s archive.”

Tablets were found in a number of areas of the temple building. In the largest of these areas, the tablets themselves were uncovered in a state of severe disarray. This chaotic state may have resulted from the location in which the tablets were stored. Penttiuc suggests that they “might have originally been located on an upper floor.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Fleming notes that “several hundred tablets survived in the debris left from the collapse of rooms above the main sanctuary, though many of the texts sustained severe damage.”⁴¹ Both the haphazard arrangement of the tablets as well as their broken condition would suggest that the tablets were, in fact, stored at some height and subsequently fell when the building was destroyed.

³⁶ Pitard, “The Archaeology of Emar,” p. 19.

³⁷ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 15.

³⁸ Pitard, “The Archaeology of Emar,” p. 19.

³⁹ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 15.

⁴⁰ Penttiuc, *West Semitic Vocabulary in the Akkadian Texts From Emar*, p. 4.

⁴¹ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, pp. 4-5. Fleming later writes that the disarray was “most likely a result of the collapse of a work and storage space above the cella” (Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 18).

Many of the tablets found in this section of the building dealt with Mesopotamian scribal arts, including literary, ritual, and calendar texts. Among these, “literary texts preserve the colophons of scribes who did not come from Emar. By copying these colophons along with the received texts, the Emar scribes acknowledged the work of scholars outside their own city, at an earlier stage in the transmission of these texts.”⁴² This preoccupation with foreign texts is juxtaposed by the discovery of nine fragments of local legal documents,⁴³ and highlight the eclectic nature of the “diviner’s archive.”

The other primary area that contained tablets was a back room along the eastern side of the temple.⁴⁴ This collection was much smaller than the other group of tablets found in the temple, and was much more orderly. Fleming suggests that these tablets may have been stored in a relatively small space on the ground floor of the building.⁴⁵ This area contained a large percentage of the texts dealing with festivals for the community, as well as a sizable amount of private documents (suggesting that this room may have been a repository for such documents).⁴⁶ The contrast of these text types is puzzling. Fleming writes, “Practical administration of the local cult is joined to idealized preoccupation with foreign texts for divining the plans of the gods in the contents of the tablets found here. The two religious interests meet only in storage.”⁴⁷

⁴² Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 28.

⁴³ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 18. Fleming suggests that these legal documents were not originally stored in this area, but “probably arrived there as a result of destruction and disturbance of the temple” (Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 18).

⁴⁴ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 18.

⁴⁵ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 18.

⁴⁶ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 18. Fleming notes that “the festival texts are marked by separate storage as well as by the distinctive festival label” (Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 18).

⁴⁷ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, pp. 20-21.

Again, without any clear connection between these different types of tablets, the eclectic nature of the entire collection is highlighted.

Scholars find it difficult to detect a method to the madness of this odd collection. Fleming, an undisputed expert of texts at Emar, writes, “Taken as a whole, the tablets form an unexpected collection, one that would be impossible to recreate from the written contents alone.”⁴⁸ Perhaps this task would be easier if the texts had been found in the same manner in which they had been stored by the occupants of the building. Fleming wishfully writes, “Before destruction, the diverse interests of the collection may have been illuminated in part by the organization of the texts.”⁴⁹ Unfortunately, the texts were a bit scrambled, and we are left to sort through the pieces.

The only clue regarding the connection of these tablets is the individual responsible for the archive:

The common thread in the texts turns out to be a figure who calls himself a ‘diviner’ and shows some interest in the Mesopotamian traditions of divination but whose professional responsibilities do not reflect the original meaning of the title. As supervisor of a wide range of Emar shrines and rituals, he maintained a connection with many gods and identified himself with the gods of Emar as a group. The structure itself may be “the House of the Gods” that is mentioned frequently in the ritual texts.⁵⁰

This “supervision” of a number of shrines and rituals is intriguing, considering that “the religious leader housed there shows no affiliation with any single cult at Emar and cannot be identified as the ‘priest’ of some other shrine.”⁵¹ Because a number of the tablets contain detailed anointing

⁴⁸ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 18.

⁴⁹ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 18.

⁵⁰ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 13.

⁵¹ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 5.

rituals for religious figures associated with individual deities, the absence of such an association for the “diviner” responsible for this archive is noteworthy.

It is likely that “when the creator of the temple archive calls himself ‘the Diviner of the Gods,’ he lays claim to a single religious office in the service of Emar’s collective pantheon.”⁵²

Fleming observes:

A temple devoted to the entire pantheon is unexpected, but the diviner’s title [“Diviner of the Gods”] makes this the most obvious possibility... At the same time, his title suggests that the pantheon may have been collectively associated with the building that housed the archive. Several lines of evidence appear to confirm this hypothesis and require that, at the least, Emar had a place where offerings were given to “the gods” together.⁵³

The proposal that the “House of the Gods” was administered by the “Diviner of the Gods” “suggest the existence of a shrine for the gods collectively, and this solution would explain various details in the archive regarding supervision of local cultic affairs.”⁵⁴ Fleming goes on to note that “one text actually records the explicitly plural form É DINGIR^{meš}.”⁵⁵ Thus, the “House of the Gods” was a distinct location that played a significant role in the religious life of Emar’s citizens.

In regards to the relationship between the “House of the Gods” and the rest of the city, Fleming notes that “although some rites claim participation by the whole town and all its gods, the texts show only a secondary interest in the king, and this temple was not an arm of palace

⁵² Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 36.

⁵³ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 36.

⁵⁴ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 37.

⁵⁵ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 37. Given its inland location, its political position on the fringe of major empires, and its basis in a tribal environment, Emar provides an excellent parallel for understanding the religious situation of ancient Israel (see Daniel E. Fleming, “Emar: On the Road from Harran to Hebron,” in Mark W. Chavalas and K. Lawson Younger, Jr., eds., *Mesopotamia and the Bible: Comparative Explorations* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002], pp. 222-250). Perhaps their worship of a collective group of deities may shed light on the Biblical Hebrew term “אלהים.” Another possible avenue of exploration may be the association between the É DINGIR^{meš} of Emar and the “בית אלהים” mentioned in the patriarchal narratives (e.g. Gen. 28:22).

administration.”⁵⁶ Thus, the figure responsible for this archive appears to have been surprisingly independent of other religious and political establishments.

This archive contains a virtual cornucopia of texts, as “every aspect of this archive indicates a remarkable breadth of interest and influence.”⁵⁷ The “diviner” at the head of this institution “apparently enjoyed a significant degree of independence from the monarchy.”⁵⁸ This is in stark contrast to Ugarit (a mere 125 miles away) and much of the ancient Near East, where kings play a significant role in the religious rituals of their cities.⁵⁹

Despite this “significant degree of independence,” the “diviner” still had to function within a political realm. The tablets outlining rituals, for example, “reflect the political dominance of the local king and the Hittite overlords, but the administrative texts from the [temple] archive show that the diviner was employed by neither.”⁶⁰ In fact, in some instances the Hittite authorities went directly to the “diviner,” instead of dealing with the local king of Emar.⁶¹ Apparently, the “diviner” was “an important figure whose reputation reached the court of the Great Hittite king.”⁶² Perhaps the reason for this special attention was a result of the “diviner’s”

⁵⁶ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 6. Fleming later writes, “Emar’s largest archive reflects activities with some claim to represent the entire city [,] but they also remain separate from the palace” (Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 13).

⁵⁷ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 18.

⁵⁸ Beckman, “Emar and Its Archives,” p. 6.

⁵⁹ See Daniel E. Fleming, “More Help From Syria: Introducing Emar to Biblical Studies,” p. 143.

⁶⁰ Daniel E. Fleming, “Emar: On the Road from Harran to Hebron,” p. 232.

⁶¹ Beckman, “Emar and Its Archives,” p. 6.

⁶² Margueron, “Emar, Capital of Aštata in the Fourteenth Century BCE,” p. 132.

affiliation with *all* of the gods, as opposed to other priests who were only affiliated with individual gods.⁶³

It is possible that, for similar reasons, the people of Emar deposited documents in this archive. Beckman writes:

It is interesting to observe that a large proportion of these practical records were found in a single temple- that presided over by the ‘diviner’ just mentioned...- although they document the personal business of literally hundreds of different individuals. This suggests that the deity of the temple, whose identity is unfortunately still uncertain, oversaw a sort of central record office for Emar.⁶⁴

As mentioned above, the building in question may very well be the “House of the Gods.” If Beckman is correct in assuming that this archive is a “sort of central record office” overseen by the patron deity of the temple, this would imply that the gods of Emar *as a collective group* were seen as being concerned with every aspect of the city’s life.

The discovery of Emar and its archives provides scholars with invaluable information about inland Syria during the fourteenth century BCE. The eclectic nature of Emar’s largest archive- ranging from religious to literary to administrative texts- is puzzling, but the nature of the archive’s caretaker provides a clue as to the reason for such a collection of tablets. On the tablets themselves, a number of their “colophons propose the sweeping title ‘The Diviner of the Gods of Emar,’ which lays claim to the religious heritage of the city as a whole.”⁶⁵ Perhaps this archive served as a sort of collective witness before the collective gods of Emar. While there is evidence for a number of different deities worshipped in Emar at different temples and other

⁶³ This would also make sense diplomatically. Instead of aligning oneself with a priest or priestess of a particular deity, foreign administrators could avoid alienating *any* of the city’s inhabitants by aligning oneself with a religious authority who had contact with *each* of the city’s deities.

⁶⁴ Beckman, “Emar and Its Archives,” p. 9. He continues, “We can only speculate as to the purpose of such an archive, which by no means reflects common practice in the ancient Near East, where collections of records of this type were usually kept by individual families” (Beckman, “Emar and Its Archives,” p. 9).

⁶⁵ Fleming, *Time at Emar*, p. 39.

ritual sites, the “House of the Gods” was a temple with no specific affiliations to any of these deities. It may have been seen as a “neutral” theological territory where anyone in the community, regardless of their devotion to any particular deity, could approach.

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