

According to the text, after reciting an incantation that includes, “Go, do not tarry,” the performer “makes (him) enter the form.”⁹ The Ninevite Ritual Text has the artisan whisper in the ear of “that god,” [*itti ilāni*] *aḥḥēka manāta*, “You are counted among your brother gods” (Walker and Dick 2001, 94–95). When the rituals associated with the liminal phase were complete, the image was installed in its temple and given its first meal. At this point, according to Pongratz-Leisten (2011, 149), “the divine statue was perceived as a self-propelled agent.” Rather than treat such an agent as “secondary,” however, we may more accurately think of it simply as an extension of the deity’s self, with more detailed reflective accounts of the relationship of the agent to the deity contingent upon rhetorical context and exigencies.

Two aspects of these rituals that should be highlighted are the materials used and the role of the artisan. Only certain materials were considered to have qualities that were appropriate for creating the image or that could facilitate the process of enlivenment (Hurowitz 2006; Benzel 2015). Even in their raw state, for instance, pure gold and silver do not oxidize, but maintain their color and shine. This quality could very easily become associated with the enduring brilliance of deity, and thus be conceptualized either as coming from divine realms or as a more pure or suitable habitation or conduit for divine presence. This may account for the inclusion of gold and silver in the *buginnu*, and the use of gold and silver plating over cultic images. While the core of the image was composed of wood instead of precious metals, specific types of wood were still preferred. The tamarisk, called *eṣemti ilī*, “bone of the gods,” was probably most prominent (Hurowitz 2003, 5–6).¹⁰ If so, the use of a tamarisk *buginnu* and the inclusion of tamarisk in the mixture placed within it may have been intended to materially link the cultic image with the womb in which the precious materials gestated overnight.

While these materials could be considered divine in origin or especially suited to transmitting or housing divinity, whether inherently or otherwise, certain acts were required to commission them for divine inhabitation. The washing and opening of the mouth ceremonies transitioned the image from an earthly creation to a self-created divine entity, and in these larger empires, some concomitant ritual

sensory organs activated and functioning, the image is clothed, installed in its temple, and fed its first meal.”

⁹ As Walker and Dick note, this may indicate the deity is compelled to inhabit the image (cf. Winter 1992, 23), but the Sumerogram *GIŠ.ĦUR.ME* could also be read as the Akkadian *gišhuru*, which would be “magic circle,” reflecting the notion of the “magic circles of the gods” (Walker and Dick 2001, 81–82, n. 81).

¹⁰ McDowell (2015, 75) summarizes, “The tamarisk from which the *buginnu* was made ... may have been understood both as a component of the divine statue’s formation, perhaps its skeletal system, and as a cleansing and purifying agent, possibly for the womb and the gestating divine embryo.”