

**External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of František Válek.**

***“Life, Society, and Politics in Relation to Religion***

***at Ugarit in the Late Bronze Age”***

**Submitted in 2023 at the *Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies,***

***Faculty of Arts, Charles University.***

**I. Brief summary of the dissertation**

This dissertation studies the religion of the ancient Syrian kingdom of Ugarit (second half of the 2nd millennium BC) in a broad sense. It analyses in detail all the available sources, both archaeological, textual and iconographical, and deals with all the topics that these sources allow: religion in the social elites and in the daily life of the Ugaritians, religious elements in the field of law, economy and administration, in letters, in international politics... The point of view and the general methodology are always those of the history of religions, as the author himself points out: “I have tried to transfer and apply my religious studies theoretical background to the field of Assyriology” (p. 4). The textual analysis is carried out on the original texts, written in two different scripts (one alphabetic, the other logosyllabic) and two Semitic languages (Ugaritic and Akkadian).

**II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation**

In our opinion, this is an ambitious thesis, both in its overall objective and in the execution of each of its parts. The dangers of this type of research are many and varied, and the end result could have been very poor or simply superficial and full of gaps. However, the author has managed to produce a solid thesis at all levels, demonstrating a strong methodological background in the field of the history of religions, a good handling of the sources studied, and a good choice of topics to address in the research. As we shall see, the work certainly presents aspects that could be improved, but this does not detract from the overall result, which is very positive. The thesis succeeds in offering a global vision of religion in Ugarit, which is novel precisely because of the number of elements it considers and integrates into the various discussions that make up the work.

We would also like to point out other (in our opinion) positive aspects of this thesis: the author shows the scientific ambition expected of a good researcher, and also an admirable critical sense of his own work and the results obtained.

**III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects**

**1. *Structure of the argument***

The dissertation is well and clearly structured. The general introduction also correctly motivates the choices made by the author in this respect and clearly orients the reader. The

overall structure allows the author to move effectively towards the final goal of the work.

The author also made a risky decision regarding the general direction of the work, which he describes on page 5 as follows: "The scholars from the field of Assyriology should, therefore, be aware that they are reading a thesis presented in a field of religious studies. At the same time, readers from the field of religious studies should be aware that the expected audience of this thesis is Assyriologists rather than scholars of religion. This situation may occasionally lead to redundant comments and explanations either for Assyriologists or for scholars of religion". Indeed, from my point of view, there are general presentations of topics and materials that are well known to a specialist in the field of Ugaritology. However, the end result is satisfactory because these presentations are well done and will in fact help to make the material much better understood by a non-specialist in Ugarit, thus widening the potential readership. This is reinforced by another very practical aspect of the structure of the thesis, which the author describes on page 5: "It must also be noted that I have tried to make the individual chapters of the thesis readable separately". This is indeed a wise decision, which further enhances the use of the dissertation as a reference work on a wide variety of subjects.

The only thing we miss is that the conclusions (chapter 8) would not have followed again the format of chapter summaries again, thus replicating the structure of the introduction (chapter 1). It would be more interesting if, in a possible publication of the thesis, the author chose to present the conclusions in the form of an essay, which would allow the partial conclusions to be articulated in a more organic, reasoned and nuanced way.

## 2. *Formal aspects of the dissertation*

The thesis is well written and easy to read. The dissertation is very well presented from a formal point of view, and we found very few typographical errors: in note 179 (p. 41) there is an (apparently) unfinished sentence, on page 170 in the transcription of the Ugaritic text 1.41 there is (line 4) *ʿrgmn* instead of the correct *argmn*.

## 3. *Use of sources and/or material*

In general, the different types of sources studied are well presented, well treated and, where necessary, well illustrated.

The *caveat* offered by the author on page 5 ("I am far from being a full-fledged Assyriologist. My linguistic skills in Ugaritic, Akkadian, or Sumerian are limited, and my palaeographic skills are almost non-existent") seems to us too modest on his part. The textual sources are worked on the original languages and scripts and, in general, the author shows a good philological training. However, we feel that there is a certain weakness in the treatment of the Ugaritic texts, so that a careful revision of these texts would be advisable with a view to possible publication. Here are some examples:

-p. 38: In the translation of text 1.148 the various "for" should be put in brackets: this preposition is not written in the original text.

-p. 168: line 1 of text 1.39 reads *dqt . t̄<sup>f</sup> . ynt . t̄<sup>f</sup>m . dqt . t̄<sup>f</sup>m*, which the author translates as “An ewe - t̄<sup>f</sup>-sacrifice, a dove - t̄<sup>f</sup>-sacrifice, an ewe - t̄<sup>f</sup>-sacrifice”. This translation does not take into account the nuance present in the final *-m* of the second and third t̄<sup>f</sup> (written t̄<sup>f</sup>m), added by the scribe to indicate “again a t̄<sup>f</sup>-sacrifice”, “also a t̄<sup>f</sup>-sacrifice”.

-p. 169, text 4.149: In line 4 the author translates “*kd*-measure for the Hittite in Maḥadu”; this translation does not take into account the *-h directionis* attached to the end of *maḥdh*, the correct translation of which is “towards Maḥadu”; i.e. for a Hittite heading towards Maḥadu (the port of Ugarit, probably to start a sea voyage). In line 8 of the same text, the author hesitates between two possible translations, “for the Alašīyan/to Alašīya”; the correct option is undoubtedly the first, in agreement with 4, which records a jug of wine for a Hittite (two jugs of wine “for Alašīya” make no sense either).

-p. 174: 4.219:1: the author reads (note 1096) *[y]ṛn̄ . d . ntn [.] ṛk̄<sup>1</sup>sp* and translates “wine that was given in silver”. It would be more convenient to follow the reading of KTU3, *[y]ṛn̄ . d . ntn [ . b .] ṛk̄<sup>1</sup>sp*, i.e. with restitution of the preposition *b*, and translate “wine that was issued against (payment of) silver”.

-On the other hand, and since the Ugaritic language retains case endings, it would be more convenient to write the names of divinities with this ending: Ba<sup>ʿ</sup>alu (instead of Ba<sup>ʿ</sup>al, p. 38), Yarīḥu (instead of Yarīḥ, p. 38), etc. Note that whatever option the author chooses, it must be consistent throughout the work; see for example on p. 48: Ba<sup>ʿ</sup>alu (instead of Ba<sup>ʿ</sup>al on p. 38), Šapšu (this time with the nominative ending), but Yarīḥ (without the nominative ending).

However, these aspects in no way detract from the overall analysis of the texts and the conclusions drawn, including the author's good demonstration of how many texts that we classify as rituals actually use a syntax typical of purely administrative texts.

The same goes for the use of bibliography and secondary sources. As the author himself acknowledges (p. 3), “Each of the chapters or sections could have been discussed in greater detail. Every little part of it would have deserved a dissertation of its own”. This is a true statement. It is, therefore, impossible to collect and cite all the relevant bibliography for each of the many aspects and problems discussed in this dissertation. However, it must be said that the bibliography used is generally correct and adequate, and that the author has undoubtedly made a great effort in this respect. Even so, there are some important and recent works that should be cited and that perhaps appeared too late to be included in the thesis, such as, for example, the two articles by Dennis Pardee, “The 'Holy Ones' of Ugarit: The Textual Evidence”, *Semitica et Classica* 15 (2022), 39-71, and “The 'Priests' of Ugarit. The Textual Evidence”, in James K. Hoffmeier, Richard E. Averbeck, J. Caleb Howard, and Wolfgang Zwickel (eds), *Now These Records Are Ancient. Studies in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History, Language and Culture in Honor of K. Lawson Younger, Jr.*, Münster 2022, 379-420. But what is inexplicable and unjustifiable (also in the light of what has been said above about the Ugaritic texts) is that the author does not use and quote the reference grammar of the Ugaritic language: Josef Tropper, *Ugaritische Grammatik. Zweite, stark überarbeitete Auflage*, AOAT 273, Münster 2012.

The thesis makes very good use of images and illustrations. Some satellite photos (see p. 14) show that the author has really gone as far as he can in every detail of the thesis, which is rich in original material provided by the author: drawings, photographs, plans, maps, chronological tables, statistical tables, 3D reconstructions... but also a large number of photos freely provided by the Louvre Museum.

Two notes on the audiovisual material. On page 18, commenting on the *Ras Shamra Tablet Inventory*, it is stated that "This inventory is accompanied by a rich photo collection by John Ellison"; unfortunately, these photographs were removed from the Internet a few weeks ago. However, to the list of existing photos of Ugaritic tablets could be added those provided by Dennis Pardee and Pierre Bordreuil on the CD accompanying their *A Manual of Ugaritic*, Winona Lake 2009. In addition, footnote 552 on p. 98 mentions a video available on the Ras Shamra Mission website; to this video could be added another one from the same site, entitled "Les temples de l'Acropole": [www.mission-ougarit.fr/medias/videos](http://www.mission-ougarit.fr/medias/videos), which also presents, among other material, reconstructions of the temples.

Finally, we would like to point out that, in general, the author makes excellent use of both primary and secondary sources relevant to his subject, resulting in a work of high academic quality.

#### 4. *Personal contribution to the subject*

The first important contribution of the author in this thesis is the very global perspective from which he approaches the chosen research topic. Indeed, the thesis is far from being a simple compilation of information. But the author also applies a strong critical sense to each topic addressed, analysing, reflecting and offering new perspectives on material or issues already dealt with by other authors. The result is always valid and positive, offering new angles from which to examine important problems, raising good questions for future research, and always making clear the limits of his analysis and his own assessment of the results and conclusions he draws.

#### **IV. Questions for the author**

The author's doctoral thesis covers a wide range of topics. This work and effort must have given him a broad view of the current state of scholarship on the history and culture of the kingdom of Ugarit. In this context, I would like to raise the following two questions:

–In your opinion, what are the aspects of Ugaritic studies that need to be addressed more urgently and/or in greater depth?

–What are the specific areas of the dissertation that you would like to develop further in the near future and for which you think there is a real chance of success?

#### **V. Conclusion**

The author shows a great capacity for work, a good academic training, a good research

instinct, a great critical capacity, a good perception of his own strengths and weaknesses, as well as the necessary sincerity and courage to openly express his doubts and his point of view on the subjects dealt with. In our opinion, the end result is an original and scientifically satisfactory and valid work.

Accordingly, I provisionally classify the submitted dissertation as *passed*.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Juan-Pablo Vita", with a horizontal line underneath.

20<sup>th</sup> March 2024

Juan-Pablo Vita

Research Professor CSIC – Madrid