3.3 Ugarit

3.3.3.1 Burial and mourning

Mourning in Ugarit seems to have taken forms familiar from other cultures, if the Baal Cycle is any indication: Upon Baal’s death, El and Anat both wail (šḥ), put on a specific type of clothing (mizrt), and gash their faces, arms, and torsos (see CAT 1.5 vi:14–1.6 i:7). El further puts dust on his head. In the Kirta epic, the eponymous king retires to his room, weeping, after the death of his entire family (CAT 1.14 i:26–35). It is not clear whether the ensuing sacrifice on the rooftops (1.14 ii:19–24) is related to the deaths or is simply part of an effort to elicit a better fate from the gods. As for specifically royal funerary practices, the command to mourn over the throne and footstool of the dead king (CAT 1.161:13–14) suggests that a chair served as a placeholder for the deceased’s spirit, as in Mesopotamian and Hittite funerals.

3.3.3.2 The Ugaritic dead

The Ugaritic cult of the dead up to the “Spronk synthesis”

In the same year that Schaeffer published his analysis of Ugarit’s tombs, he published a synthetic study of Ugaritic texts, of which one chapter was entitled “Fertility Cult and Cult of the Dead at Ugarit.” He argued that the aforementioned text from the Baal Cycle, which speaks of pouring libations “into the midst of earth,” reflected a ritual intended to secure the goodwill of “Aliyan, son of Baal” and thereby to ensure the fertility of the trees and fields. Schaeffer compared this ritual with the Greek myth of the Danaids, who killed their husbands and were sentenced by the gods to pour water into a bottomless pot. He suggested that that task was not originally a Sisyphean punishment, but was intended to provide care for the deceased husbands.

Because many of the key texts were not available in wide publication until the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., CAT 1.20–22 and 1.161; see below), Schaeffer’s theory initially seems to have elicited little reaction. However, in the wake of new publications, in the 1970s and 1980s the study of the Ugaritic cult of the dead was taken up enthusiastically by a number of scholars. Johannes C. de Moor (1972)
theorized that “communion with the dead,” including the pouring of libations, was a major feature of the Ugaritic “New Year’s festival.” Jonas C. Greenfield and especially Marvin H. Pope were also in the vanguard of the movement.

The work of that entire generation of Ugaritologists is meticulously compiled in Klaas Spronk’s Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East (1986), initially a dissertation written under de Moor. As the title suggests, Spronk’s own interests led him to other matters, but en route his survey still represents the most ambitious attempt to argue for widespread cults of the dead throughout the ancient Near East. Given Spronk’s intellectual heritage, it is not surprising that his work on the Ugaritic texts was particularly thorough, if perhaps too far-reaching. I have cited his forebears occasionally in what follows, but a fuller sense of the literature is best gained by reading the relevant passages in Beatific Afterlife. Thus, “Spronk” becomes, for the sake of simplicity, a metonym for the accumulated views of the previous generation.

Spronk was followed three years later by Lewis, whose Cults of the Dead in Ugarit and Israel (1989) is a more limited but also more judicious treatment of the Ugaritic texts. Lewis implicitly restricted the scope of his study by focusing less on the epic/mythical texts (which had made the strongest first impression on the field) and more on ritual texts, perhaps because these were taken to be more reliable indicators of actual Ugaritic (“Canaanite”) practices. While Lewis disagreed with Spronk on certain details, his work reinforced many of Spronk’s

---

65 J. C. de Moor, New Year with Canaanites and Israelites (Kampen: Kok, 1972), 8; idem, “Rapi’uma – Rephaim,” ZAW 88 (1976): 331.
69 Lewis’s Cults of the Dead focuses on four key texts: the Ugaritic Funerary Text (CAT 1.161 = RS 34.126), the Ugaritic King List (CAT 1.113 = RS 24.257), the Duties of an Ideal Son (CAT 1.17.1.26–34), and the Dagan Stelae (CAT 6.13–14).
70 On this topic, see Sasson, “Literary Criticism, Folklore Scholarship and Ugaritic Literature.”
essential conclusions about the Ugaritians’ view of death and the dead. The following sections summarize and assess the arguments about key issues.

The rpum (et al.)

Two key Ugaritic terms for the dead are mt and rpum (cognate with Hebrew נָדֵל and רְפָאִים). As in Hebrew, the etymology of the latter term is not settled (see § 4.4.2.2), but an older theory – that the term is derived from the Semitic root rph, “sink down, be weak” – has largely been set aside in favor of a derivation from the root rp, “heal.” Thus, the typical understanding is that the dead were seen as supernatural “healers” or helpers of the living.

The rpum appear some fifty times in the Ugaritic literature, in a number of contexts. A passage from the Baal Cycle illustrates the potential interpretive problems:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{sšpš. rpim . thtk} & \quad \text{Šapsu, you rule the Rapa’uma,} \\
\text{sšpš. thtk . ilinx} & \quad \text{Šapsu, you rule the divine ones.} \\
\text{‘dk . ilm} & \quad \text{The gods are your company;} \\
\text{hn . mtm . ‘dk} & \quad \text{even the dead are your company. (CAT 1.6 vi:45–47)}
\end{align*}
\]

The interpretation of the passage depends greatly on the translation of the word mt, which can mean either “dead (person)” or “man.” Schmidt argues that the parallelism of the second couplet comprises a merismus (gods/men), but the synonymous parallelism of the couplets does not support such an interpretation. Both the rpim and the mtm are parallel to divine beings (ilinx, ilm). Schmidt would prefer to see the rpum as only semidivine, or perhaps only heroic; but while a few unclear occurrences may point to a second sense of the rpum as a class of warriors or a mytho-historical tribe (as in the Hebrew Bible; e.g., Deut 3:11–14), Spronk is probably right that in general “rp’im is a name for the deified royal ancestors who are called up from the netherworld, where they live like shades.”

---


73 Schmidt, Israel’s Beneficent Dead, 87.


75 Schmidt (Israel’s Beneficent Dead, 89–90) cites 4.232:8, 33 in this regard. However, the phrase there is bn rpim, which may shed very little light on the rpum proper. This could just as easily be a group of humans under the divine patronage of the rpum.

76 Spronk, Beatific Afterlife, 195. In the Hebrew Bible, the Rephaim frequently appear in parallel with “the dead” and in other underworld contexts (e.g., Ps 88:10; Isa 14:9; see § 4.4.2.2 below).
This conclusion draws further support from the occurrences of forms of *rp* as a theophoric element in personal names.\(^77\)

A number of texts enumerate among the gods the *ilib*, usually taken to mean “the divine ancestor.”\(^78\) Two texts from the royal cult affirm the hypothesis that at least the kings of Ugarit were thought to have been divinized after death.\(^79\) The first of these is the “Ugaritic King List” (*CAT* 1.113), of which the reverse is a list of royal ancestors preceded by the word *‘il*, “god,” for example, *‘il nqmd*.\(^80\) Considerable controversy surrounded the understanding of *‘il* in the titles of the ancestors – some scholars, such as Schmidt, argued that it simply means “the god of RN”\(^81\) or simply withheld judgment – but the 1998 publication of a syllabic version of the king list (RS 94.2518) using the Sumero-Akkadian divine determinative (i.e., reading *dingir* RN instead of *‘il* RN) erased doubts about the divinization of dead kings, even among skeptics.\(^82\) Dennis Pardee has also noted that there are check marks on both texts that seem to indicate their sacrificial usage, making it probable that they were associated with a *kispu*-type ritual. Presumably the marks were used to indicate the fulfillment of offerings for each divinized king.\(^83\) Thus, one must understand a name such as the aforementioned *‘il nqmd* to mean “the divine Niqmaddu,” and so forth.\(^84\) Not surprisingly, Lewis deemed *CAT* 1.113 “a most important piece of evidence for the existence of a cult of the dead at Ugarit.”\(^85\)

The second text attesting to the divinization of royal dead is *CAT* 1.161, sometimes known as the “Liturgy of the Shades,” or simply as the “Ugaritic Royal Funerary Text.” This document is entitled *spr dbh˙ z˙lm*, “document of the sacrifice

---

\(^{77}\) Frauke Grøndahl, *Die Personennamen der Texte aus Ugarit* (Studia Pohl 1; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967), 180.

\(^{78}\) 1.47:2; 1.118:1; etc. See discussion of 1.17 i:26 below.


\(^{80}\) The obverse is fragmentary, but appears to indicate a musical ritual involving drum and pipes.

\(^{81}\) Schmidt, *Israel’s Beneficent Dead*, 69–70.

\(^{82}\) D. Arnaud, “Prolégomènes à la rédaction d’une histoire d’Ougarit II: Les bordereaux des rois divinizés,” *Studi Miceni ed Egeo-Anatolici* 41 (1998): 153–73; Dennis Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit* (WAW 10; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature 2002), 199. In addition to the data unique to the Akkadian tablet, Pardee grants that it is *prima facie* unlikely that each king in a dynasty would have a different god and that a text intended to honor all these different gods would leave them all unnamed (*Ritual and Cult at Ugarit*, 195).

\(^{83}\) Similar marks are found by the names of the kings in the Akkadian “Genealogy of the Hammurapi Dynasty” (see § 1.4.1 above).

\(^{84}\) Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit*, 200. Pardee worries about the use of the unusual “genitive of identification,” but it may also be an appositional nominative; and furthermore the phrase can be understood as a simple calque of the Akkadian.

\(^{85}\) Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 49.
of the shades.”86 It includes a partial list of deceased rulers of Ugarit, and appears to have been written either for the thirteenth-century king Niqmaddu III in anticipation of his death, or for his heir, ‘Ammurapi. In it, the rpim qdmym (“ancient Rephaim”) are summoned, some by name. The text calls for mourning over the throne (ks’) and footstool of the king. Next, the sun god, Šapšu, is summoned and instructed to order the deceased king to follow the Rephaim and “descend into the earth and lower (himself) into the dust.” Numerous sacrifices are then commanded, and the text closes with prayers of well-being for the new king, ‘Ammurapi, for his queen, for their household, and for the city.

The funerary ritual reflected in CAT 1.161 is seemingly intended to assure the descent of Niqmaddu to his place among the royal dead. At a minimum, the liturgy establishes that Ugaritians understood their dead kings to be divinized and to “participate” in cultic activities. Although it is not stated in the text, the kings seem to have functioned as guarantors of the royal succession and protectors of the city – an inference from the closing lines, which invoke blessings for the new king and queen, and for Ugarit. Thus, the ritual seems to function similarly to the kispu; although it is not clear that the offerings (lines 27–30) are intended for the dead kings, the kings are named for a second time immediately beforehand (lines 23–26). Spronk perceived that “all deceased members of the dynasty of Ugarit are invoked. The ancestors receive sacrifices: they are believed to bless the living king in return.”87 The invocation of the dead ancestors and the request for blessing are structurally parallel to the Mesopotamian “Genealogy of the Hammurapi Dynasty” (see § 1.4.1).88

86 The understanding of the term zlm is controverted; thankfully, it is not of first importance to the reconstruction of the Ugaritic cult of the dead, since it does not occur in the other texts under discussion. My translation understands zlm as “shade,” which occurs a number of times in Ugaritic, including in the phrase zlm (“shadow of death,” CAT 1.4 vii:55; cf. Ps 23:4). Further support for this theory is found in the Akk. title muselli silli, “raiser of shades,” which occurs in a lexical list shortly after muselli etimmu, “raiser of ghosts” (Jean Bottéro, “La mythologie de la mort en Mesopotamie ancienne,” in Death in Mesopotamia, 45 n. 28). “Shadow” carries the connotation of protection in numerous Semitic languages (Ps 91:1; etc.); thus, the “shades” may also be viewed “protectors” of the dynasty in this case. There are two other major possibilities that have been advanced for zlm: (1) that it is from a root of the same spelling, cognate with Akk. salamu, “to be dark,” thus a “nocturnal sacrifice” (Lewis, Cults of the Dead, 7, 10–12); or (2) that it means “statue,” cognate with Akk. salmu. There are indeed a number of Mesopotamian and Hittite rituals in which a dead king is symbolized by a statue, and the reference to the throne in CAT 1.161:20 particularly sounds like the Hittite Royal Funerary Ritual. However, such a word for “statue” is not otherwise attested in Ugaritic. In any case, none of these conclusions, if adopted, would greatly alter one’s understanding of the text as a whole. For a fuller survey of the proponents of each theory, see Schmidt, Israel’s Beneficent Dead, 109–10.

87 Spronk, Beatific Afterlife, 191.

Lewis argues that CAT 1.161 depicts “only part of a seemingly elaborate cult of the dead in ancient Ugarit.”⁸⁹ He imagines a ritual stretching over seven days,⁹⁰ as is the case with a number of instances of mourning in the Hebrew Bible.⁹¹ In line with his assumption that this is a kispu, he describes the heir ‘Ammurapi as a paqidu, “caretaker,” a role attested in the Mesopotamian mortuary cult (§ 1.4.1), but not actually given by the text.⁹²

Up to this point, Spronk and Lewis are in agreement, but Spronk’s treatment becomes more ambitious. The first major point on which they diverge needs only brief mention because it has not fared well in the discussion of the Ugaritic death cult subsequent to Spronk’s work. The passage in question occurs in the Aqhat epic (CAT 1.17 i:26–34, cf. ii:1–8, ii:16–23). In it, Baal asks El to grant Dan’el a son to perform various duties for him:

… so that his son might be in the house,
   A descendant within his palace;
Someone to set up the stela (skn) of his divine ancestor (ilibh),
   in the sanctuary the votive emblem of his clan;
To send up from the earth his smoke,
   From the dust the protector of his place;
To shut up the jaws of his detractors,
   to drive out anyone who would do him in;
To take his hand when he is drunk;
   to bear him up [when] he is full of wine;
To eat his spelt-offering in the temple of Baal,
   his portion in the temple of El;
To resurface his roof on a [mud]dy day,
   to wash his outfit on a muddy day.⁹³

Pope and others dubbed this text “The Duties of an Ideal Son,” and concluded that it describes mortuary rites – an understandable reading in light of the references to sacrifices and stelae, and also to mud (Ug. tit), a widely recognized component of underworld imagery. Pope thought that a number of these were duties of the ideal son in the role of a caretaker of his deceased ancestors,⁹⁴ albeit

⁹⁰ On the basis of the sevenfold offerings at the end of the text. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 96.
⁹¹ E.g., Gen 50:10; 1 Sam 31:13; 1 Chr 10:12; Jdt 16:24; Sir 22:12.
⁹² Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 34–35. Pitard is surprised that not all the ancestors are named, if it truly is a sacrifice for the ancestors, but Lewis and Spronk think they are included in the more general invocations.
⁹³ After Pardee’s translation in *COS* 1.103.
⁹⁴ Pope, “Cult of the Dead at Ugarit,” 226–28; see also R. R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 121 n. 182, who perceived that “mortuary rites” performed by a son for a father were in view here. This view finds some support in Egyptian texts that delineate mortuary responsibilities, such as the Coffin Text in which a son says to a deceased father, “I ... am here as an advocate in the tribunal of men, / setting up your boundary stone, holding together your despondent ones, / and serving as your image on earth, /
expressed mostly in metaphorical terms. W. F. Albright suggested that the “smoke” (ṣqrh) in line 28 represents the soul of the father, in parallel with ḏmr, the “protector” summoned from the dust in the next line. Pope also believed that the phrase “full of wine” indicated a drunken funerary banquet. Following these interpretations, Spronk concluded that when the tablets are arranged properly, the epic recounts “the tragedy of Daniel who longed for a son to take care of the ancestor-cult after his death, but who is now forced to perform similar rituals himself with regard to his son.” However, Dan’el asked Baal for a son to help him while he is living, not after he is dead. It is also not clear why many of the duties should be presented metaphorically. Lewis concludes that only ṅšb skn ilibh in line 26 (“one who sets up the stele of his divine ancestor”) pertains to mortuary duties. Given the lack of clear support from other texts for the idea that the rest of the duties are mortuary in nature, it is probably better not to assume that they are. Therefore the text makes only a minor contribution to one’s understanding of the cult of the dead, by attesting the use of mortuary stelae to represent ancestors.

Given the prominence of the rpum in reconstructions of Ugaritic beliefs about the dead, the “Rapiuma texts” (CAT 1.20–22) are significant; unfortunately they have also proved very difficult to interpret. The first tablet (1.20) begins: [rp] um . tdbh – an invitation to the rpum to do something, variously interpreted as “take part in sacrifice,” “sacrifice,” or “feast.” The text is broken, but at the end of lines 1–3, the terms rpum, ḫlnym, and mtmtn are clearly parallel. The last term, mtmtn, has proved especially tricky to interpret, although a construct chain (“men of the dead”/“dead men”) seems likely, thus one has a wordplay on the two senses of mt.
112

3. Death and the Dead in Syria-Palestine outside Israel and Judah

rp|um. The Rephaim shall feast
§|b|d . ilnym. the spirits { sev}enfold
] kmtmtm. [ ] like the ancient dead. It is probably the same figures who are invited to drink in line 7. Thus, the divinized dead are summoned to a sort of banquet. These are generally thought to be related to the Aqhat legend, both because CAT 1.21–22 are by the same scribal hand as the Aqhat tablets (CAT 1.17–19), and because in the Aqhat story Dan’el is repeatedly referred to as mt rpi, “man of the Rapiu.” If they are to be appended to the foregoing narrative, then these texts tell of Dan’el summoning the rpum to a mortuary banquet for his dead son.

The question is: How many other references to the rpum are there in these so-called Rapi’uma texts? Spronk associates numerous other entities in CAT 1.20–22 with the rpum, so that all of the following become names for the divinized dead: ’ilm (1.20 i:1, etc.), ah˘ m (“brothers,” 1.22 i:5), gzrm (“heroes,” 1.22 i:7) mlkm (“(dead) kings,” 1.22 i:10), zbl (“prince”, 1.22 i:10), ‘llmy (“whose child?”, i.e., uncared-for spirits, 1.22 i:7), and ‘brm (“those who cross over,” 1.22 i:15). These equations in turn lead to an ever-widening array of texts that supposedly refer to the divinized dead under various other names: šnym (“those-of-heaven,” 1.19 iv:24), d’iy (“kite,” 1.108:8), dmrm (“protector,” 1.17 i:28), hl mlk (“host of Malik,” 1.41:48; 1.87:52), qbs dtm (“community of Ditan,” 1.15 iii:4, 15), ilm kbkbm (“star-gods,” 1.43:2–3), and gtrm (1.43:9, 17). He sometimes achieves these identifications by reconstructing references to the rpum in

understanding, “the dead(est) of the dead” (so also Spronk, Beatific Afterlife, 164). Del Olmo Lete, reading km tmtm, translates “when you die.” A minority contradictory view is expressed by Conrad L’Heureux, who argues for the reading amtm and denies that the rpum are the dead (Rank among the Canaanite Gods: El, Ba’al, and the Repha’im (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979), 130–31.

The term rpum may be restored here with some confidence, on the basis of its occurrences in parallelism with ilnym in other passages, e.g., 1.21:3–4.

Cf. Lewis’s translation, Ugaritic Narrative Poetry, 197.


Others, however, assume that it is El, because of his banquet for the gods in CAT 1.114 (see below). In that case, since 1.114 has rather little reference to the dead or the underworld, the relationship of the Rephaim texts to the cult of the dead would be much more tenuous, relying only on the terms rpum, mtntm and mrz’y (cf. 1.21:5, 9).

See J.F. Healey, “Malku : MLKM : Annunaki,” UF 7 (1975): 235–58 and idem, “MLKM/RPUM and the Kispum,” UF 10 (1978): 89–91. In the first article, based primarily on a syllabic god list from Ugarit, Healey concluded that the mlkm in Ugarit “probably represent a … group of spiritual or demonic powers” (238). Although akin to the Annunaki of the Mesopotamian netherworld, they were not yet formally identified with the gods of the underworld. The second article argues that the mlkm and the rpum refer to the same group of people, exclusively dead kings (91).
texts where they are not otherwise mentioned.\textsuperscript{108} Another of his procedures is to note that the \textit{rpum} may be portrayed as “fluttering” like birds,\textsuperscript{109} and then to hunt for other occurrences of bird imagery that can be incorporated into the understanding of the \textit{rpum}. The reason for the multiplicity of names, in Spronk’s view, is that each captures a different aspect of the dead, e.g.: “Whereas \textit{rp’um} is an indication of the deified dead as ‘healers,’ \textit{mlkm} may have denoted their state as kings in the netherworld.”\textsuperscript{110} Without examples of the two terms in parallel usage, however, such equations are problematic. The same methodological flaws plague his discussion of the leaders of the \textit{rpum}:\textsuperscript{111} Spronk’s net is probably cast too wide. In a polytheistic culture, why is it necessary for one group of divine beings to be so ubiquitous? More likely there were various groups of semidivinities, as in Mesopotamian and Egyptian demonology. It seems better not to read the \textit{rpum} into texts where they are not found, but rather to assume that divine beings by other names are just that.

Spronk’s argument about the resurrection of the dead at Ugarit is also tenuous. The best support for it comes from the Aqhat epic: When Anat tries to acquire Aqhat’s bow, she famously says, “Ask for life, and I will give it to you / For immortality, and I’ll make it yours” (\textit{CAT} 1.17 vi:26–28). She continues: “I’ll make you count the years with Baal / with the sons of the El will you count months” (lines 28–29). She seems to compare this offer of life to one made by Baal:

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item For example, compare Spronk’s reconstruction of 1.108:17 (\textit{Beatific Afterlife}, 179) with the text in \textit{CAT}, where the word \textit{rpum} is missing entirely.
\item Spronk understands the occurrences of \textit{ndd} for \textit{rpum} (e.g., \textit{CAT} 1.20 i:2 and 1.21:4) as an image of the dead “fluttering” like startled birds. DUL (“go, move, launch”) and other translators offer more sober translations. There is truth to the idea that the dead are frequently portrayed as birds; see Christopher B. Hays, “Chirps from the Dust: The Affliction of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4:30 in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context,” \textit{JBL} 126 (2007): passim.
\item Spronk, \textit{Beatific Afterlife}, 188.
\item Spronk, like a number of others, assumes that Baal is the leader of the \textit{rpum}, based on his title \textit{rpu b’l} in \textit{CAT} 1.22 i:8. However, it is not so clear that the god \textit{rpu mlk ‘lm} named in 1.108:1 is the same. Rapiu, who appears as early as Mari, is generally taken to be a distinct deity and may in fact be independent of the \textit{rpum} (Simon B. Parker, “The Ugaritic Deity Rapi’u,” \textit{UF} 4 [1972]: 97–104). The problem is compounded when Spronk uses one conjecture to prove another, as when he judges that the parallel double deities in 1.108:2, Gathar-and-Yaqar (\textit{gt¯r.w yqr}), are both among “the famous ancestors of the dynasty of Ugarit,” who are summoned from the netherworld along with Baal and Ditan (1:15 iii:4, 15). The parallel phrases \textit{rpi.ars˙ // qbs˙.ddn} (e.g., 1.161:2–3) do make it likely that Didanu (or Ditanu) was perceived as a heroic, semi-divine ancestor. However, Spronk takes the phrase \textit{adn ilm.rbm} (“Lord of the Great Gods”), which occurs alongside Ditanu in 1.124, to refer to Baal and thus connects the entire text to the cult of the dead, so that it becomes a ritual in which the healing powers of the \textit{rpum} are invoked (Spronk, \textit{Beatific Afterlife}, 193–95). This is too ambitious; a reasonable position would be to limit the conversation about the powers of the dead to texts including certain important keywords such as \textit{rpum}, \textit{ilm ars}, and \textit{mt}. It is quite possible to talk about healing and judging (or about Baal) without any reference to cults of the dead.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
As Baal, when he revives, invites to a feast and offers him drink…

He invites the living one to a feast and offers him drink…

So I will give life to noble Aqhat. (lines 30–33) 112

A recently published seal from Tell Afis may attest a similar conviction, since it bears the name b'lhw'w, arguably to be translated “Baal gives life.” 113 These texts reflect the fact that, like their congers elsewhere (see §§ 1.4.3, 4.4.4), Ugaritic deities could be said to give or restore life.

Spronk, however, goes somewhat further. Combining this Aqhat passage with the idea that the dying and rising episodes in the Baal Cycle (see above) reflect a yearly cycle, he reconstructs a Ugaritic festival at which Baal’s revivification and that of the rpum were celebrated. Such a festival, however, is only a conjecture, and his other primary example is not instructive. 114 Anat’s promise to Aqhat appears to indicate simply the idea of feasting with the gods in the mortuary cult, as is attested in, e.g., the Panammuwa inscription (§ 3.4). 115 It is telling that Aqhat

---

112 The translation is mine; for similar views, see DUL 188 (‘ṣr), 379 (ḥwy), 840 (ṣqy); Parker, Ugaritic Narrative Poetry, 61; H. L. Ginsberg, ANET, 151. Other views include that of Pardee, who sees the revived one as “like Ba’lu (who), when he comes (back) to life, feasts: / they give a feast to the living one, give him drink” (COS 1.103; p. 347). Clearly this turns on Pardee’s interpretation of the Ugaritic cult of the dead, which is discussed below. It is not clear how he derives a plural translation (“they give a feast”) from the second occurrence of y’ṣr, unless he deems it an impersonal construction. This seems to me an unnecessary move. Another conflicting view, that Baal “is served” by those whom he revives, has been espoused by K. van der Toorn (“Funerary Rituals and Beatific Afterlife in Ugaritic Texts and in the Bible,” BO 48 [1991]: 46) and de Moor (Cuneiform Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit, 238).


114 Much of Spronk’s argument hangs on CAT 1.22 i:6–7, where he reads: tm.yt̲bš.šm.’il.n̲.ttm / yt̲(i)št̲.brk̲n.šm.’il.g̲zrm (“the name of El revivified the dead; / the blessings of the name of El revivified the heroes”). On this basis, he argues that the Rephaim “are revivified with Baal to take part in the New Year’s festival celebrating Baal’s return to life” (Spronk, Beatific Afterlife, 195; cf. 155–56, 205). In twice reading ytbš, he assumes that there exists an Ugaritic cognate of the S-stem of the Akk. verb ḫašša, “to bring into being, create.” Spronk cites de Moor on this point. They seem to have changed their mind a year later when, in another publication, they called the form a D-stem of ḫbš and translated it “give substance” (Cuneiform Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit,175). However, this philological proposal is problematic. Neither root has any other attestation in Ugaritic or any other West Semitic language. And in any case, in the second line above (line 7), the text reads y’bš, rather than ytbš (Wyatt, Religious Texts from Ugarit, 321 n. 37). Indeed, Pitard corrects line 7 to y’bš (“A New Edition of the Rapi’uma Texts,” BASOR 285 [1992]: 56–57), and he is followed by Lewis (Ugaritic Narrative Poetry, 203). The root ḫš is itself scarcely understood (DUL offers: “?”), and neither Wyatt nor Lewis translates it. In sum, this passage is an exceedingly shaky foundation on which to found a theory. See critique by Smith and Bloch-Smith, “Death and Afterlife in Ugarit and Israel,” 279.

115 This theme is commonly attested from the Middle Kingdom onward in Egypt, which was
himself is not impressed by the offer; he seems to sense that participation in the
cult of the dead is not the same as true eternal life or resurrection. Aqhat’s
comment may represent a skeptical tendency in Ugaritic thought, but it may also
point to a significant theological distinction. The Ugaritic dead were no more
truly restored to life by the cult of the dead than Mesopotamian ghosts were by
the kispu.

A final question about the Ugaritic rpum: Who could aspire to become one,
and to feast with the gods? Although it now seems assured that at least dead kings
could be called gods in Ugarit, the question of the divinization of nonroyal dead
is not clearly answered by the extant Ugaritic texts. Lewis finds it most likely that
any dead person could become an ʿīlu, not only royalty, based on the aforementioned Baal Cycle text 1.6 vi.46–47, which uses īlm and mttm in parallel fash-
ion. Also supporting a broader interpretation of mttm as “divinized dead” are
the numerous ritual texts in which the ʿināšū ʿilīma (“people of the gods”)/“divine
people”) receive offerings. On the one hand, based on the extant textual cor-
pus, it seems safer to conclude with Spronk that “only a limited number of
persons share in the blessing of belonging to the rpʿum.” If terms such as mlkm
t (“kings”) and ġzrm ( ʿheroesc”) indeed refer to the rpum, then they seem to de-
scribe the rpum as an elite class. On the other hand, one can hardly expect proof
of the divinity of the common Ugaritic dead, given the almost exclusively elite
provenance of the surviving texts. It seems at least possible—and I find it prob-
able—that a “democratization of death” took place in the West Semitic context as
it did in Egypt, as “elite emulation” took its course.

The Ugaritic marzihu

An aspect of Ugaritic culture closely linked to the rpum is the marzihu (mrzʿ or
mrzh). At a material level, the marzihu was an association that owned real estate,
including houses (CAT 3.9:4), storehouses (3.9:5) and vineyards (4.642:3, RS 18.01:5), all of which could be rented, presumably for banqueting or festivals.\footnote{121} The contract in CAT 3.9 suggests that it was collectively owned by “members” (\textit{mt mrzh}).\footnote{122} The term \textit{marzi\textbar u} also applied to banqueting functions held at the property.

The ritual and mythological significance of the \textit{mrzh} is in dispute, however. In one of the \textit{rpm} texts (CAT 1.21), the \textit{rpm} are invited to a \textit{marzi\textbar u}\footnote{123} that involved sacrificing and banqueting, so it has often been assumed that the \textit{marzi\textbar u} is inherently linked to the cult of the dead, especially in light of the association of the Hebrew \textit{marze\textbar ah} with mourning practices in Jer 16:5–7.\footnote{124} (On the biblical \textit{marze\textbar ah}, see § 4.4.1.3 below)

In 1960, André Caquot was among the first to make the broad connections among the Ugaritic \textit{mrzh}, the Mesopotamian/Syrian \textit{kispu}, and the sacrifice for the spirit of Panammuwa in KAI 214 (§ 3.4).\footnote{125} Greenfield followed,\footnote{126} and Pope enthusiastically agreed, consolidating some earlier comments in a 1980 article which adjudged: “Despite unfounded skepticism in some quarters, there is scant reason to doubt that the West Semitic Marze\textbar ah was a feast for and with the departed ancestors.”\footnote{127} According to Pope, the Ugaritic Rephaim were “the spirits, ghosts, or shades of the departed deified ancestors who are wined and dined in communal meals with the family, the revered ancestors and the great gods. This funeral feast, corresponding to the Mesopotamian kispu, was ... the Marze\textbar ah of the Bible.”\footnote{128} Spronk offered the somewhat more nuanced view that \textit{mrzh} was “a cultic society in which communion with the dead could be practised.”\footnote{129}

As with the \textit{rpm}, the \textit{marzi\textbar u} is prone to expand in the minds of scholars without methodological controls. CAT 1.114 mentions a feast for the gods hosted by El at which he encourages them to get drunk and then leads the way himself, to the point that, in lines 21–22:

\begin{quote}
\begin{tabular}{ll}
\textit{b l\textbar rh w t\textbar nth . ql. il . km mt} & He has fallen into his own dung and urine like a dead man; \\
\textit{il . k yr\textbar d}m . ar\textbar s} & El is like those who descend into the earth
\end{tabular}
\end{quote}

\footnote{121} Patrick D. Miller, “The Mrzh Text,” in \textit{The Claremont Ras Shamra Tablets} (ed. L. R. Fisher; AnOr 48; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1971), 37–48.\footnote{122} Also attested in an Akkadian text as \textit{amil marzi\textbar hi} (RS 14.14).\footnote{123} The term used in CAT 1.21:1 (and restored in line 9) is \textit{mrz’\textbar y}, but there is scarcely any disagreement that it is equivalent to \textit{mrzh}.\footnote{124} Pope, “Cult of the Dead at Ugarit,” \textit{passim}.\footnote{125} Caquot, “Les Rephaim Ougaritiques,” 93.\footnote{126} Greenfield, “Un rite religieux aram\textbar e\textbar en,” 47.\footnote{127} Pope, “Cult of the Dead at Ugarit,” 242; see also idem, “Le mrzh à Ougarit,” 141–43: “la nature essentielle du \textit{marze\textbar ah} [est] comme banquet pour les morts aussi bien que pour les vivants” (143). Much the same summary is given by Astour in “Nether World and Its Denizens at Ugarit,” 227–38.\footnote{128} Pope, “Cult of the Dead at Ugarit,” 241.\footnote{129} Spronk, \textit{Beatific Afterlife}, 202, emphasis added.
In the Baal Cycle, Mot is referred to as a “beloved of El” (ydd il, CAT 1.4 vii:46) and elsewhere as a bn ilm (“son of El/god[s],” CAT 1.6 vi:26–27), but his battle with Baal probably should not be understood as a sibling rivalry. His status as a bn ilm more likely refers to his divinity, just as Heb. ִי need not reflect literal sonship. Having said that, it is not clear that Mot was a god like other gods. His name is attested neither in cultic texts, nor in pantheon lists, nor in theophoric elements in the Ugaritic onomasticon – this makes him “the only major deity mentioned in [the Baal Cycle] to be totally absent” from these contexts. In short, it appears that he received no offerings, unlike other ancient Near Eastern gods of the underworld, such as the Annunaki, Šamaš, Dagan, and Osiris. For this reason, it has been suggested that Mot simply represents death personified or even that the name Mot is an epithet of some other god.

Mot has certain key aspects in common with demons, being a feared and harmful divine figure without a cult. There are two further texts (CAT 1.23, 1.127) that would strengthen the case for Mot’s demonic aspect, if the Ugaritic word mt in each is to be interpreted as a divine name. Unfortunately, the word for “man, warrior” is spelled the same way. Thus, for example, the liver omen in CAT 1.127:29 contains the protasis “if mt attacks the city…”, leaving open either possibility. Similarly, in CAT 1.23:8, a figure with the name mt.w-šr takes his place at a banquet of the gods. Insofar as he carries “in his hand a staff of bereavement, in his hand a staff of widowhood” (1.23:8–9), mt.w-šr has often been taken to mean something like “Death-and-Evil.” More recently, there seems to have been a scholarly movement to banish Death here, in favor of the translation “Warrior-Prince” or “lord-and-master”; however, in his recent monograph on the text, Mark S. Smith translates “Death the Ruler.” Since

---


164 Healey, *DDD*, 598–599.

165 Mark Smith considers Mot a “peripheral deity,” like, for example, Tiamat or Yamm – a group that characteristically poses a threat and receives no cult (*The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, 27–31). Demons are of course not always harmful (e.g., the Mesopotamian Pazazu has an apotropaic function), but I am speaking of the majority of cases.


167 De Moor, *Cuneiform Anthology of Religious Texts from Ugarit*, 120 n. 15.

168 Dennis Pardee, *COS* 1.87 n. 13.


“Death the Ruler” is pruned, bound, and felled like a vine in lines 9–11 – evocative of the grinding and sowing of Mot in the Baal Cycle – it seems that this text too relates the victory of the “beneficial gods” over the forces of death and chaos.\(^\text{171}\)

Finally, Mot is named in a personal letter (\textit{CAT} 2.10); in describing a plague on crops, the author says, “the hand of the gods is here, very strong, like Mot.”\(^\text{172}\) Despite these additional texts, Mot remains enigmatic: as an antagonistic and adversarial figure, he stands closer to the realm of demons than that of gods. If indeed Mot played a demonic role, the difficulties in defining him may be because the the demonology reflected in the Ugaritic texts is somewhat muted. Demons are attested in only a handful of apotropaic texts (and perhaps elsewhere as servants of the major gods); they do not seem to be connected with the dead.\(^\text{173}\)

Other deities are also associated with the underworld at Ugarit: Šapsu, the sun-goddess, seems to function as a guide to the afterlife for the deceased king in \textit{CAT} 1.161, as in the Hittite Funerary Texts, and not unlike the way the sun god’s bark carried the deceased in Egyptian mythology.\(^\text{174}\) The Baal Cycle reflects a similar role, when, at Anat’s request, Šapsu carries the dead Baal to the tomb and buries him with the “divinities of the underworld” (\textit{b ħrt ilm arṣ}; \textit{CAT} 1.6 i:13–18).\(^\text{175}\) Later in the same myth, as noted above, the Rapiuma are placed under her control.\(^\text{176}\) Theodore Lewis concluded that Šapsu “plays a most important role in the underworld and in the cult of the dead,”\(^\text{177}\) in part by “making sure that the libations and offerings reach the deceased.”\(^\text{178}\) He saw the role of Mesopotamian Šamaš as an important mythological cognate. Šamaš has titles such as \textit{sar/bēl}

---

\(^{171}\) Smith, \textit{Feast of the Goodly Gods}, 158–59. A final text, \textit{CAT} 1.82, includes a reference to Mot in line 5, but the context is difficult to interpret. The text may be an apotropaic incantation including protection against Mot, although de Moor and Sprook perceive a reference to a covenant with Mot: “More on Demons in Ugarit (\textit{KTU} 1.82),” \textit{UF} 16 (1984): 239–40.

\(^{172}\) \textit{yd / ilm.p.kmtmt / z.mid}


\(^{174}\) Here one might follow Lewis’s interpretation regarding the word \textit{išhn} in 1.161:18. Formerly translated as “Burn hot!” from the root \textit{šhn}, it is instead taken by him from the root \textit{šh}, “to bow down, sink down” (Lewis, \textit{Cults of the Dead}, 22–23). Pitard takes \textit{išhn} as a G cohortative: “Let me be warm”: “If this is the correct understanding of the verb, then the prayer is rather asking for Sapšu’s presence in the netherworld” (“Ugaritic Funerary Text, 71). In fact, Sapšu’s role may not be so different whether she is descending with the dead king or lighting his way.

\(^{175}\) For \textit{arṣ} = “underworld,” see \textit{DUL}, 107–8.

\(^{176}\) \textit{CAT} 1.6 vi:45–46: \textit{šps ṭḥtk rp’im} (O Šapsu, the Rapiuma are under you”) On this contested passage, see further below. Also J. F. Healey, “The Sun Deity and the Underworld in Mesopotamia and Ugarit,” in \textit{Death in Mesopotamia}, 239–42.

\(^{177}\) Lewis, \textit{Cults of the Dead}, 35.

\(^{178}\) Lewis, \textit{Cults of the Dead}, 38.
etimmi ("ruler/lord of ghosts") and bel miti ("lord of the dead"). Although the idea of a nightly descent into the netherworld by Šapšu is scarcely attested at Ugarit, Lewis assumed that she does just that, as the Egyptian Re and the Mesopotamian sun deities do.\(^{179}\) Šapšu’s commerce with the dead may also have led to the perception that she played a role in healing.\(^{180}\)

Dagan seems to have held a prominent place in Ugaritic religion, but his precise roles and aspects are less than clear. He may have received funerary offerings or conveyed them to the dead,\(^{181}\) as at Mari.\(^{182}\) The texts in question are a pair of stelae (CAT 6.13–14) with inscriptions incorporating Dagan and the term pgr, cognate with the Akkadian pagru and Biblical Hebrew יָד (both "corpse").\(^{183}\) The stelae in question read:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{skn} & . \text{ d šlyt} & \text{The stela which Taryelli}
\text{tryl} & . \text{ l dgn . pgr} & \text{dedicated to Dagan of the dead:}
\text{[š] w alp l akl} & \text{A sheep and an ox for the food offering.}
\end{align*}
\]

and

\[
\begin{align*}
pgr & . \text{ d šlyt} & \text{The pgr which Uzeni}
\text{zn} & . \text{ l dgn . b'lh} & \text{dedicated to Dagan, his lord:}
\text{[š w a|p b mhrtt} & \text{A sheep and an ox for the [offering?].}\(^{184}\)
\end{align*}
\]

Is pgr here a technical term for a type of sacrifice for the dead, in which case the stelae support the existence of a mortuary cult?\(^{185}\) Or does it simply mean the "corpse (of the sacrificed animal)," in which case there may be no association with the cult of the dead? It is hard to be certain. Even so, the identification of

---

179 Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 46.
181 Dagan is accorded a high place in pantheon lists and may have been the object of one of the two primary temples in Ugarit (the other belonging to Baal). Baal is called bn dgn ("son of Dagan"), but Dagan’s aspects and relationships to other gods are not clear; see Healey, *DDD*, "Dagon." In support of Dagan’s having an original underworld aspect in Mesopotamia, see J. J. M. Roberts, *The Earliest Semitic Pantheon: A Study of the Semitic Deities Attested in Mesopotamia before Ur III* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 18–19.
182 On Dagan as recipient of funerary offerings at Mari, see ARM III 40, II 90; on Dagan as bel pagreê, see ARM X 63:15.
184 I have largely followed the restorations and translations of Lewis, *Cults of the Dead*, 75. However, DUL (337–38) takes mhrtt to mean "(farm) work" (from h-rt). Healey read mhrtm(!), "for total dedication" ("The Ugaritic Dead," 30).
Dagan as bel pagre at Mari, along with Šapšu’s association with the pgr (CAT 1.102:12) may suggest that there is a relationship to the cult of the dead here. Spronk is probably correct that “the pgr-offering was a special sacrifice for deities with an underworld character.” It is not clear, however, what effect the pgr-sacrifices were intended to have.

Réšeph, a god widely worshiped throughout the ancient Near East and Mediterranean, was a god of battle and sickness at Ugarit, whose “arrows brought plague and pestilence.” He also had an underworld aspect as the gatekeeper of the netherworld in an Ugaritic ritual text, and he is identified in bilingual god lists with Nergal, a primary Mesopotamia chthonic god.

Finally, there is the lightly attested mlk (Maliku? “King [of the underworld]?”), known from two snake charms (CAT 1.100, 1.107), a record of cultic rations (RS 1986.2235:17’), and as a theophoric element in Ugaritic personal names. One can theorize an underworld aspect of mlk since in both Old Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian god lists, “Maliku is held to be equivalent of “Nergal.” (On the relationship of this deity to the biblical Molek, see § 4.4.3.2.1)

There is relatively little description of the underworld itself in Ugaritic texts. Here again, nearly all the direct information comes from the Baal Cycle. The entrance to Mot’s home is at the base of two mountains with obscure names, trqzz and trmg. In CAT 1.4 viii 1–14, Baal sends his messengers to Mot, telling them to lift up the two mountains and then descend to Mot’s “capital city,” which goes by three names: hmry, mk, and hh, which seem to reflect three aspects of

---


187 He goes too far when he claims, however, that “the pgr-offering is meant as a substitute for the one who offers it to Dagan or to Shapash: to be rescued from death a substitute is offered.” (Spronk, Beatific Afterlife, 151).

188 Day, Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan, 197. For very extensive bibliography on Réšeph, see ibid. n. 34.

189 CAT 1.78:3–4: Šps Špgr (“Šapšu, Réšeph is her gatekeeper”).

190 Paolo Xella, “Reseph,” DDD 2, 701.


192 There is also the reference to rpu . mlk . ‘lm (“Rapiu, eternal king”) – is this connected to the references to a god Maliku? See Hans-Peter Müller, “Malik,” DDD 2, 540.


195 Likely related to mhmr, the gullet of Mot (1.5 i 7–8); cf. DUL, Pardee COS 1.86 n. 215.
the underworld: “cesspool/muddy pit,” “sinking down/collapsing,” and “mire/hole.” As in every ancient Near Eastern culture, the netherworld is describable at the most basic level as similar to the conditions of the grave: it is dirty, and it is located down below. Its inhabitants are called “sons of darkness” (bn zlnmt; 1.4 vii:55), so presumably it is dark, as in Mesopotamia. In addition to lying at the edge of the earth, the netherworld could also be described as under the earth. Indeed, the Ugaritic word arš means both “earth” and “underworld” (e.g., 1.161:21; 1.5 vi:10; and frequently in the Baal Cycle).

Apart from this passage and its direct parallels in the Baal Cycle, however, there is practically no description of the Ugaritic underworld to compare with the extensive treatments in the Mesopotamian and Egyptian literature. Even in the Baal Cycle, the text has much more to say about “the pastureland, the beauty on the edge of death’s realm” (CAT 1.5 vi:6–7) – perhaps analogous to the Egyptian “Field of Reeds” (see § 2.4.3), and the Greeks’ Elysian Fields – than about death’s realm itself. Despite the significance of death in the Aqhat and Kirta epics, and in cultic text such as the “Liturgy for the Shades” (CAT 1.161), in none of these contexts has any fully developed mythology about the underworld (or about Mot, for that matter) survived. Recalling the flourishing of such mythology in later periods in Assyria and Egypt, one wonders whether perhaps a diachronic element is in play here; Ugarit had disappeared long before the first millennium, when Thorkild Jacobsen perceived an increased interest in the underworld (see § 1.4).

3.4 Between Ugarit and Israel

In assessing the relationship between the beliefs and practices of Ugarit and those of ancient Israel and Judah, one is not confined entirely to speculation. The intervening period saw changes in burial practices, as cremation burials in urns and stone funerary stelae that showed the deceased receiving offerings increased in popularity in first-millennium Syria. 198

196 DUL offers “large puddle, bog” for mk but with no apparent support apart from parallelism with hmry and hh. Instead, it apparently derives from the root m-k-k.

197 Cf. Baruch Margalit, A Matter of ‘Life’ and ‘Death’: A Study of the Baal-Mot Epic (CTA 4–5–6) (AOAT 206; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1980), 125–28. For the opposing view, see Spronk, Beatific Afterlife, 204; also Marjo C. A. Korpel, A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1990), 349. It does not make sense to say, as Spronk does, that these phrases are euphemisms intended to “avoid describing the horror awaiting” Baal in the underworld (Beatific Afterlife, 204 n. 3). Simply because the dead needed care and could become angry and dangerous does not mean that the underworld was uniformly horrifying. The very point of proper care for the dead was to avoid the horrors of the afterlife (see § 2.4.3).

198 Peter M. M. G. Akkermans and Glenn M. Schwartz, The Archaeology of Syria: From Con-
Although this text makes no mention of the rpu, or other mythological aspects of the dead, this passage is used to connect it, too, to the cult of the dead. “This could also explain why the drunken El is compared to the dead,” wrote Spronk. “If the communion of the living with the dead was experienced as a reality, the participants could change roles. The living were like the dead and the dead were brought to life.” 130 Also from this text Spronk and his forebears concluded that the marzihu typically involved drunkenness like the Greek thiasos. 131 Against these synthetic conclusions, it needs to be clarified that (1) neither the rpu nor the dead are among the attendees; only the ilm are mentioned, along with certain gods of the pantheon (Anat, Athtart); (2) the feast in 1.114 is initially called a sd (“feast,” line 2), and only later is El portrayed “in his mrzh” (line 15); and (3) although the marzihu may have typically owned vineyards, there is no other mention of drunkenness at a marzihu in the Ugaritic texts, nor is there any clear reference anywhere to sexual practices associated with it.

The best conclusion one can draw is that the cult of the dead was a significant but not necessary facet of the marzihu; it was also possible to “commune” with other divine beings at such an institution. 132 (The marzēnā in Nabatean religion seems to have been quite analogous in this respect, judging from later Aramaic texts and archaeological data. 133) Drinking was a feature of many religious rituals in the ancient Near East; it was not uniquely associated with the cult of the dead.

A “minimalist” backlash

Spronk’s monograph stands as an impressive synthesis of the work of a whole generation of Ugaritologists. However, it very quickly came under critique for the ambitiousness of its claims. I have already referred to the review article of Mark S. Smith and Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, which objected to Spronk’s reconstruction of a New Year’s revivification festival, to the large number of other terms he thought referred to the rpu, and to his tendency to correlate Ugarit

---

130 Spronk, Beatific Afterlife, 202.
131 Spronk, Beatific Afterlife, 202. See Pope’s extensive comparative essay on the Ugaritic mrzh and other mortuary/funerary banquets, drawing largely from Greco-Roman and rabbinic writings, in Song of Songs: A New Translation with Commentary (Anchor Bible 7C; New York: Doubleday, 1977), 210–29. In light of rabbinic and Hellenistic portrayals of funerary banquets, Pope further theorized sexual connotations for the mrzh. Spronk picks up this theme and ties it in with the mrzh’s (speculative) link to New Year’s Festival (following de Moor’s New Year with Canaanites and Israelites).
and Israel too closely. Those cautions did not go far enough for other scholars, however. The middle of the 1990s saw a wave of “minimalist” interpretations of the cult of the dead that sought to rein in the excesses of “maximalists” such as Spronk. Pitard, who had compared the Ugaritic Funerary Text to the kispu in an earlier article on CAT 1.161, later arrived at a much more skeptical position. His aforementioned revision of the archaeological data (see § 3.3.2) was among the first serious challenges to the consensus. In that article’s summary, he wrote that without the support of material culture, none of these literary sources provide unambiguous evidence for the practice of giving regular water/food offerings to the dead at Ugarit. Although this cannot be taken as a sure indicator that such offerings were not regularly made, it is now clear that one must be very cautious about discussing such activities at Ugarit. There is simply less evidence about Ugaritic funerary practices and beliefs concerning afterlife than has been generally supposed.

Pitard followed this article with a similarly negative assessment of the value of the burial data from Israel, Judah, and Ebla for proving cults of the dead in those locales. While he saw significant parallels between Ugaritic and biblical mourning rites and did not rule out cults of the dead, he judged that the Ugaritic texts are “more ambiguous and impenetrable than earlier thought.” “We as scholars need to be more careful than we often are in how we interpret archaeological evidence,” he concluded.

Pardee has been extraordinarily cautious in his treatment of the texts, and the minimalist/maximalist framing is his coinage. Writing in 1996, he sought to disentangle the threads of texts that had been woven together by Pope, Spronk, et al. into the tapestry that was the “Ugaritic cult of the dead.” Although the discovery of RS 94.2158 changed Pardee’s view of the occurrence of a royal mortuary cult – he now acknowledges the kispu aspect of the King List and would seem to be edging away from some of his earlier “minimalism” – some of his earlier cautions remain pertinent. Perhaps most significantly, Pardee sought to reduce the fund of terms that refer to the dead. There are only three terms that he accepts as referring to the Ugaritic dead: rpum (“shades”), mlkm (“deceased kings”), and

---

134 Smith and Bloch-Smith, “Death and Afterlife in Ugarit and Israel.”
139 The transference of the term “minimalist” from the debate over the history of Israel seems appropriate in light of the apparent influence of Philip R. Davies’s In Search of Ancient Israel (JSOTSup 148; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) on Pardee’s understanding of “the cult of the dead” as a scholarly construct.
140 Pardee, Ritual and Cult at Ugarit, 199–201.
ins ilm (reflecting whatever part of the human race is divinized). Although one would expect at least the mlkm in royal ritual texts, only rpum is ever found “in the texts reflecting the regular Ugaritic cult.” 141

In regard to the marzihu, 142 Pardee did not think that any of the data from Ugarit justify “a connection between the marzihu and the mortuary cult.” 143 The primary feature of the marzihu was drinking, not cultic activities; the accounts of divinities at a marzihu were simply projections of the human sphere onto the divine. 144 Similarly, he argues that there was no essential connection between the rpum and the marzihu; the Rapiuma Texts are merely a singular literary invention, and the assumption that the marzihu was the regular meeting place of the dead ancestors is “maximalism at its worst.” 145

Roughly concurrent with the work of Pitard and Pardee was Schmidt’s Israel’s Beneficent Dead, published in 1994 as an enlarged version of an Oxford dissertation. On the one hand, Schmidt’s survey of the ancient Near Eastern evidence regarding death cults is admirably thorough. He also helpfully advocates for clear use of terminology for the rituals in question; he insists particularly on the funerary-versus-mortuary distinction already mentioned. On the other hand, his entire study is controlled by a questionable thesis: that death-cult practices came to Judah only under the Neo-Assyrians and that therefore any account of them in Israel or Judah prior to the Neo-Assyrian period is a literary invention under Mesopotamian influence. Quite apart from the way in which this theory would flatten the complex compositional history of the Hebrew Bible, Schmidt does not seem to have persuaded many of his peers that the Syro-Palestinian material is bereft of evidence for cults of the dead.

One of Schmidt’s central and repeated arguments is that texts referring to the care and feeding of the dead reflect the neediness and powerlessness of the dead rather than a concern to propitiate them, under the assumption of their power. Jo Ann Scurlock has refuted this argument. 146 “[C]ontra Schmidt,” she writes:

---

141 Pardee, “Minimalist View,” 284. It is not clear why Pardee excludes CAT 1.39, which in his own translation reflects sacrifices for the ins ilm (Pardee, Ritual and Cult at Ugarit, 69). See del Olmo Lete’s interpretation below.
142 Pardee, “Minimalist View,” 278 n. 6; cf. Schmidt, Israel’s Beneficent Dead, 62–66; Pardee calls into question CAT’s reading mrz’y in the Rapi’uma text 1.21:1 and argues that there are phonological problems in equating mrz’y with mrzh. However, this might be understood as a sort of “reverse loan” from Akkadian, since syllabic equivalents of mrzh naturally do not include the h; e.g., bit amil “mar-za-i” (RS 15.70, 15.80). John Huehnergard attributes this to an “inter-vocalic voicing of /h/ to [’]” (Ugaritic Vocabulary in Syllabic Transcription [HSS 32; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987], 178); cf. Spronk, Beatific Afterlife, 197.
143 Pardee, “Minimalist View,” 277.
144 Pardee, “Minimalist View,” 278.
145 Pardee, “Minimalist View,” 279.
the need of the dead for “care and feeding” does not imply that they “have no power to affect the living in a beneficial (or, one might add, harmful) way.” To a polytheist, to say that a spirit needs to be fed, clothed, and washed is to imply, not that he is useless to mankind, but on the contrary that mankind is thereby given the opportunity to enlist him as a friend, and conversely that, once a relationship has been established, it is necessary to keep providing for him lest he become angry. ... It by no means followed that there was no point in seeking their assistance or that there was no reason to fear their wrath.147

This is supported by the Mesopotamian *kispu* (§ 1.4.1) and the Egyptian Letters to the Dead (§ 2.4.2), in which the living concerned themselves with the perceived needs of the dead in the hope of enlisting their active help. In other words, a text such as *CAT* 1.161, which calls for blessings for the *rpum*, does so not primarily out of concern for their (diminished) well-being, but out of the assumption that they have the power to affect the lot of the living – for good or ill.

Another fundamental flaw in Schmidt’s argument was revealed when the aforementioned syllabic version of the King List was published, confirming the divinization of dead kings. This datum not only undercuts his contention that *CAT* 1.113 names a single dynastic god who is associated successively with a number of dead kings; it also invalidates his finding of “the absence of the explicit deification of dead kings at Ugarit.”148 Schmidt perceived the “crucial” nature of this point,149 and it now clearly works against his argument.

In the end, Schmidt is swimming in a sea of contradictory data.150 In fact, his book is that rare one that might convince readers of the opposite of its thesis owing to the essential honesty and thoroughness of its presentation. This negative summary may seem unfair to a work of such impressive industry and depth of detail as Schmidt’s, but he is now often the only dissenting voice cited in this conversation. To my knowledge, he is the only major scholar presently arguing in a categorical way against the Ugaritic belief in the power of the dead.

Despite the reservations expressed by Schmidt, Pardee, and Pitard, it does not seem likely that the Ugaritic cult of the dead will be reduced to the small scale that they would prefer. A recent major synthesis such as G. del Olmo Lete’s *Canaanite*...
Religion (revised 1997) not only declined to follow their skepticism regarding the texts already prominent in the conversation, but consolidated the scholarship on a number of additional texts, creating a still more complex reconstruction of the royal cult of the dead that involved a garden that served as a royal pantheon, and necromantic consultations. Nick Wyatt is another active scholar of Ugarit who is essentially positive on the main points of the cult of the dead.

The controversy has recently flared up again in two lengthy articles in the past two volumes of Ugarit-Forschungen, in which (with enough patience on the part of the reader) the root of the disagreement becomes quite clear: it is an issue of comparative methodology. Del Olmo Lete protests: “my position is ... solidly based on the ‘royal ideology,’ on the significance of the ancestor cult in the whole Ancient Near East and on the unique importance of the king as supreme officiant.” He objects to what he perceives as Pardée’s willful ignorance about many hypothetical matters. Pardée, for his part, clarifies that he does think there was both a funerary and a mortuary cult at Ugarit, but adds that he prefers not to say too much about them while “awaiting the discovery of texts that would allow us to learn the real frequency of the rite (or rites) and the details thereof.” He protests that del Olmo Lete “knew before he began examining the texts what they would say,” and that his model abolishes the specificity of Ugaritic religion. In the end, Pardée’s reading is more careful and better substantiated, but it seems quite likely that a number of details of the ancestor cult need to be filled in the manner of del Olmo Lete.

---

151 Among the texts to which del Olmo Lete draws new attention is CAT 1.39, a ritual text including sacrifices to the ins ilm on “the night of Šapsu pgr” (on pgr as a sacrifice for the dead, see § 3.3.3.3). Del Olmo Lete also reaffirms existing theories about the “month of gn” as referring to a “garden” that functioned as a royal pantheon. The tablet CAT 1.106 gives instructions for a ritual stretching over twenty-five days that, in del Olmo Lete’s view, takes place largely in the royal mausoleum (see further at § 4.4.1.1). This text, which has affinities also with other rituals of the same month, culminates with “a giving of reply” (CAT 1.106:31; Canaanite Religion, 232. The similar texts include CAT 1.105 and 1.112). This leads del Olmo Lete to conclude, “The cult of the royal dead ... goes in two directions – offering and reply – and supposes constant communication between ‘the living’ and ‘the dead.’” He also finds necromantic aspects in CAT 1.41:46, 1.87:49–50, 1.104 and 1.124 (Canaanite Religion, 246). This emphasis on the necromantic aspects of the cult of the dead is a distinctive point of del Olmo Lete’s treatment. Like Spronk and de Moor’s New Year’s festival, del Olmo Lete’s royal funerary cult is an ambitious synthesis. Whether or not future scholarship follows him in the details of his argument, it will be hard to ignore its cumulative force.


In a related vein, some have tried to argue against an Ugaritic belief in a supernatural afterlife based on the culture’s pessimistic traditions, especially as epitomized by the oft-cited confession of Aqhat: “The death of everyman I shall die / Like all mortals, I shall die”; CAT 1.17 vi.34–38). Such traditions hardly preclude a widespread belief in afterlife. Similar sorts of pessimistic literature are well known to have come from Mesopotamia (“Dialogue between a Man and His God,” Gilgamesh’s quest for eternal life, etc.), Egypt (“A Dispute between a Man and His Ba,” the Harper’s Songs, etc.) and Israel (Ecclesiastes, Job). It is not at all surprising that Ugarit should have preserved contrasting traditions as well.

3.3.3.3 The Ugaritic underworld and its deities

In Ugaritic myth, the god Mot (“Death”) is a spectacular figure but also a mysterious one. He is known primarily from his horrifying turn in the Baal Cycle, in which he is provoked to conflict by Baal’s boasting. Mot initially defeats and swallows up the mighty Baal. Indeed, Mot’s foremost characteristic in the text is his prodigious appetite and huge, devouring maw. He warns Baal:

“My throat consumes in heaps;
yes indeed, I eat by double handfuls
And my seven portions are in a bowl
and they mix (into my) cup a (whole) river.”

Mot is also described as being able to stretch “[one lip to] the earth, (the other) lip to the heavens ... (his) tongue to the stars.” A very similar account with slightly different details is found in CAT 1.133. The image of Death as swallowing finds some cognates in the myths of Egypt (in the underworld serpent Apophis; see § 2.4.3) and Israel (see §§ 4.4.3.2; 5.2.2.1; 5.2.4.1).

After Baal is swallowed up and seemingly killed, his sister Anat comes and kills Mot – she splits, pulverizes, and roasts him, then sows him into the field like grain (CAT 1.6 ii.30–35) – at which point Baal is freed and returns to life. Then Mot himself also returns for a final battle against Baal, at the end of which Mot capitulates. This account of martial conflict between a god of death and another god is essentially *sui generis* in the ancient Near East, although certain aspects similar to it may be noted in the Hurrian Kumarbi myths and in a few biblical texts.

---

158 On Egypt and Israel, see Shannon Burkes, *Death in Qohelet and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period* (SBLDS 170; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 45–80, 157–69.
159 CAT 1.5 i 18–22: npš.bl t / hm.r ptnt b kl / ydy.hrhm.rb / ydyt.b ššt.hm.kysk / nhr.kl
160 CAT 1.5 ii 2–3: [špt.l a]šr, špt.l šmm / [yšt.]ššn b kkbm ...
161 Agricultural interpretations of this passage are common, but John F. Healey cogently argues against these (“Mot,” *DDD*, 599–600). The agricultural metaphor simply describes the destruction of Mot; his flesh is eaten by birds, a common ancient curse; cf. Gen 40:19; 1 Sam 17:44; 1 Kgs 21:24; Jer 7:33; etc.