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Local Traditions in the Ancient World

The Akītu festival was a local tradition celebrating the Babylonian New Year, in the month

Nisannu at the start of the calendar year. In the beginning of the first millennium, the festival

legitimised and confirmed both the divine kingship of the god Marduk and the earthly

kingship of the Babylonian king, and included elaborate purification ceremonies, processions

of the divine statues through the city and a gathering in the main temple in Babylon (Zgoll

(2006); Linssen (2004), 68-86; Pongratz Leisten (1997), 83-101). This paper addresses the question to which extent this local religious and political tradition continued in the Persian, and specifically the Hellenistic, period. On the one hand we have several Hellenistic sources pointing to the continued importance of the Akītu festival (Akītu Programme; BCHP 12 (Seleucus III Chronicle); Astronomical Diaries, Vol. II, No. -204 C, ll. 14-19). On the other hand, it is disputed by scholars to what extent these sources reflect the original Babylonian religious traditions for centuries or whether they are in fact a Hellenistic fiction creating the nostalgic image of a glorious past (Waerzeggers (2011), 731-732; Smith (1976), 1-11). This paper aims to come to a closer understanding of these ambiguous sources by focussing on the tension between local identity and resistance, and royal propaganda use of local traditions to consolidate imperial power.