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# A COMPANION TO THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

SECOND EDITION

*Edited by*

Daniel C. Snell

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# Introduction

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What has changed since 2005? Quite a lot, and it is not possible easily to summarize what we have learned in the interim. I will say that politically in the region there has been great upheaval, and the people of the region have suffered immeasurably, both through physical displacement and psychological trauma. Still, the basic insights into the ancient history of the region have not been altered. In fact, with political changes some of the areas hitherto lightly explored have come into sharper focus, and of course others which once served as a basis for our understandings have been devastated by wars and terrorist groups and cannot soon be expected to inform us again.

Such political change has affected the history of inquiry into the Ancient Near East since the nineteenth century, and that trend will likely continue. It is both a challenge and a delight to note the new knowledge we have found. and to try to share it with a broad community of students and scholars.

Much in our 2005 publication remains valid, and the omission here of particular essays does not mean they have been superseded. Decisions about what not to include were difficult, and many of the essays which were particularly valuable deserve to be consulted in the earlier edition. I surveyed undergraduates using the 2005 edition about their favorite essays, and they agreed that those that were most accessibly written and on crucial topics for today, such as ethnicity and identity, were of most interest. And yet some of these have for various reasons been omitted. New publications still build on those bases.

Why a new edition, though? For me the motivation derived from glowing peer reviews for the suggestion of a second edition. Scholars within and outside the fields which we tried to survey found the first edition to be the first thing to which they turned; they found it very useful. Of course, since 2005, online resources have grown in importance and in value, but a handy guide will always be of use.

Here I have solicited revisions from many of the earlier authors, and in some cases there are considerable revisions. In others, there are none at all. In all we have here six with no revisions, and ten partly or substantially revised. In addition we have 13 totally new essays, which we hope will broaden the scope of our endeavor. I hope students will still consult the

2005 volume for those essays which, for reasons of space, we could not reprint. We did not reprise the chronological survey at the beginning of that volume, nor did we revise or reprint the essays on architecture, the city, and Mesopotamian medicine. But they were particularly valuable, and students I taught liked my efforts on the perception of the individual and on democracy, which likewise are not redone here. Or were they simply being kind?

Here I want to call attention to some important changes for this second edition, as well as highlighting the essays that have not changed or have not changed much. A prime example of change is that two of our colleagues, Henri Limet and Jorge Silva Castillo, have passed away, and their work on ethnicity and nomadism must be supplemented by new scholars. We miss the breadth of understanding and kindness which these two scholars showed their peers, and we recommend their work for continued dialogue.

My divisions are not the same as in the 2005 edition, and there is no question but that things might have been arranged differently. In particular “Thought” and “Culture” might be combined, and elements of my “Inheritances” certainly involve both thought and culture. As ever, much has been omitted. When composing the index to the earlier volume, I found myself thinking what a great tome this would be if it really explained the topics covered instead of, all too often, merely mentioning them. But, unlike on the internet, space is at a premium, and students will be encouraged to go beyond our thoughts here, especially in the works at the end of this introduction; these are studies referred to in multiple essays.

## The Big Picture

Most interesting is the fact that Mario Liverani decided not to update his historical introduction. Certainly the basic facts and chronology remain the same, although some essays discussed below may over time change our focus from the achievements of states to the feelings and categories revealed by others with access to writing. We have found out a lot since 2005, but not so much as to change Liverani’s views of the whole.

Augusta McMahon was unable to rework her seminal chapter on the move from having settled village communities to having states. Her insights continue to be important to our understanding of the epoch-making developments in the period from 10,000 BCE, when the Ice Age ended, down to 3000 BCE when we clearly see functioning states in southern Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. We cannot trace all the changes these developments brought about, but it is still important to underline her insight that being settled, not moving about every season but farming right where you were, advanced the acquisition of things, animals, and artifacts, and that acquisition compounded the reluctance to move even when political and physical environmental changes might otherwise have prompted moving. We are still surrounded by, and still love, our things, and they may keep us psychologically centered, but they may also keep us stuck where we are.

## The Physical World

Marie-Henriette Gates has written a major revision of her essay on archaeology and history, indicating the way forward toward a new synthesis partly based on information gained through digital thinking and scientific analysis. This essay may mark the end of an

alienation between the dirt archaeologists and the historians; so at least she hopes. She also, as before, places our efforts in the context of modern history and the continuing dearth of money for archaeological research efforts.

Carlos Cordova decided not to update what he sees as a very general introduction to the environmental problems in the Ancient Near East, and his clear prose is a good guide to the issues. In particular he notes deforestation began very early, and the cedars of Lebanon continued in memory longer than on the ground.

## The Social World

Ann Macy Roth's "Gender Roles in Ancient Egypt" updates her essay with a new bibliography and insights. The basic finding is the same; Egypt was a patriarchal society where women's influence was not always easy to see.

Sarah Melville has revisited her essay on royal women and power in Mesopotamia and again shown that women occasionally found themselves in control if they were closely related to powerful men who were absent or dead. Women who endured childbirth were at great risk of mortality themselves, but the relative luxury of palace life preserved some women to old age and great consequent influence.

A new and valuable addition is John P. Nielsen's "The Family in the Ancient Near East," bringing anthropological insight to the texts. This basic unit of human organization was assumed, of course, in earlier studies, but it is helpful to have Nielsen's systematic analysis of the institutions underlying the realities of the ancient peoples.

Ann Porter has contributed a sophisticated analysis of nomadism in the Ancient Near East, informed by her own archaeological investigation of the sometimes elusive people who kept moving out of the way of developing states but memorably also intervened in them. In doing so she has clarified terminology and explained that nomads, though constantly present in one form or another in Ancient Near Eastern history, are not of only one kind, and their behavior may be vexing to some city people, but certainly not to all. She rejects the term "tribe" as unhelpful and concentrates instead on the associations that may have political meanings but more basically have family meanings. And especially she shows that identities rooted in families are not incompatible with larger identities rooted in states.

Christopher Monroe has updated his reflections on money and trade, adding new insights from recent publications and reflecting the consensus that all over the Near East we are dealing with mixed economies. This means that some institutions distributed and redistributed their goods to their employees and to the poor, while other people were buying and selling to maximize profit. The question of the existence of a functioning market has, in his view, been settled in the positive, though in many places it may not have been the important force that it later became. Transportation costs could be prohibitive, and the flow of information was inevitably spotty about what was needed where. And merchants, or moneymen (and women) who made it their business to figure out such things, were frequently held in low esteem by the hard-living sensible farmers who created the surpluses that allowed merchants to cater to elite consumption.

Bruce Wells decided not to update his discussion of Ancient Near Eastern law and practice, and it remains a very helpful introduction, supplemented by his own publications.

David Warburton argues in his reworked contribution on “Working” that the Ancient Near Eastern economies developed tremendous surpluses, unprecedented in the region. But these successes only benefitted the elites in Egypt and Mesopotamia, and the working poor were always kept at a level of consumption far below poverty levels anywhere in the world today. These were not necessarily societies dominated by the work of slaves, but if you were among the poor, the oppression was unremitting even if you were in some respects free.

John Robertson has revised his chapter on social tensions, which was groundbreaking in 2005 and is more so in the new version. He is particularly insightful about the ethnic and religious conflicts which seem to have grown in intensity in our own time because of new media, but such tensions may not have been so significant in the ancient past.

Steven Grosby’s new “Borders and States” emphasizes the continuity between the ancient and the modern in the realm of definition. Grosby argues that, in spite of the lack of border patrols and walls and the other trappings of modern states, the basic ideas were there already, at least among the literate scribes that gave us the texts which have been preserved. The extent to which the scribes’ assumptions may have been shared among others is unknown, and it probably varied with experience, especially of interstate conflicts and tensions. And these definitely feed into our understandings of identity among ancient peoples.

Philip Jones brings his essay on “Divine and Non-Divine Kingship” up to date, incorporating many recent studies into this basic problem. He points out that divine kingship is more a problem for us than for the ancients, and divinity may not have quite meant what it means to us now.

## Thought

Benjamin Foster updates his witty examination of how Mesopotamians thought they obtained knowledge, noting finally that van de Mieroop’s new study of philosophy points in the same direction.

The Egyptologist Susan Tower Hollis has a new essay on “Literature of Ancient Egypt and the Ancient Near East.” To survey this area is almost an impossible task, but she presents sensitive readings of far-flung groups of texts which tend to appeal both to the ancients and to us.

An exciting addition also is Marc Van De Mieroop’s accessible summary of his new book on “Ancient Near Eastern Philosophy.” Van De Mieroop argues that the framework for looking at the world which we call philosophy, and which we unthinkingly take from the Greek texts, has an analog in the Mesopotamian concern for the similarities observed in nature and especially within texts. His work has been interrogated as perhaps not having an exact analogy in today’s philosophical thought, and yet the turn toward texts in modern philosophy does seem to be foreshadowed by the Mesopotamian thinkers.

Francesca Rochberg helpfully revises her answers to several questions about how the Mesopotamians thought about the cosmos and how it worked on the basis of their observations. The answers are pretty much the same as in her earlier effort, but the bibliography is richer.

Nicole Brisch's new essay on "Ancient Mesopotamian Religion" carefully surveys the kinds of information we have about this important area of life, but notes that religion probably was not a category in Mesopotamian thought. She emphasizes that mythology, the stories about the gods, frequently reverts to the theme of overcoming chaos by constructing order. In modern narratives the emphasis tends to be on good versus evil (compare any cop shows at hand!), and this difference from our tastes probably reflects the greater perceived fragility of Mesopotamian religious and even physical life in contrast to our modern sense of wellbeing threatened by evil. For Hittite religion, Gary Beckman's essay in the 2005 edition should be consulted.

## Culture

John Huehnergard in his new contribution elegantly introduces the various languages we find in the Ancient Near East and gives a writing sample for some of them. The progress in our understanding in recent years has been remarkable, especially for the little attested languages.

Marian Feldman decided to reprint her very readable introduction to the high points of Mesopotamian art, along with her illustrations from the earlier volume. Hers is a very accessible tour of some of the classical pieces and an invitation to serious thinking about art and artists in these cultures.

Tanya Pommerening contributes a cogent summary of the types of information available from papyri and potsherds about Egyptian medicine, underlining the use both of therapeutic techniques including prescriptions, along with what seem to us to be magical incantations. There seems to have been a sharing of medical knowledge among the various professions, and though she is careful not to argue for a comparative perspective to modern efforts, her approach does make the reader appreciate the sophistication of Egyptian practice. As many of my older colleagues may appreciate, she quotes the insight, probably not to be generalized, that "It is the vessels of [a patient's] two knees in which death begins."

Among the new essays is a brilliant exposition by the Neo-Assyrian expert Sarah C. Melville on "Warfare in Mesopotamia." We have omitted Anthony J. Spalinger's 2005 "Warfare in Ancient Egypt." Read together, these two essays give a remarkable picture of developments over the three millennia of our concern. The new insight from Melville's work is the importance of mobile warfare when an earlier impression in scholarship was of siege work only.

## Inheritances

Peter Daniels reprises his discussion of how we came to know the scripts and languages of the Ancient Near East in the heroic age of decipherment in the middle of the nineteenth century CE and since. His entertaining notes have much food for thought as well as further research.

And David Sperling has reprinted his reflection on monotheism and Ancient Israel from the earlier volume. I have found his exposition especially accessible on how it might have developed that polytheism led to monotheism as we see it in Israel.

Mark Chavalas helpfully guides us through the many new discoveries of cuneiform tablets found since 2000 CE, noting the proliferation of information especially from Turkey and Iraq. Scholars have not yet exploited all the finds to the extent that they deserve, but they point to a more detailed and nuanced view of the Ancient Near Eastern world which may give us deeper understanding even of the Bible. Noteworthy is the new collection of texts recording the activities of the exiled Judahites in Iraq in the exile of 586 BCE.

A most valuable new contribution is Donald Malcolm Reid's "Pharaonic Heritage in Modern Egypt." He traces the concern for the ancient world among Egyptian intellectuals since the nineteenth century CE and in popular culture down to our day. I have tried to get learned Syrians or Iraqis to try something similar for their own cultural area and failed; certainly that is an area that will be of broad interest if someone could undertake the study.

I have not succeeded in finding a scholar to survey the modern legacies of wars and upheavals in the region. We may hope that the current sobering evaluation will be gradually reversed by the efforts to preserve and uncover more of the brilliant archaeological heritage still extant. But it is important to remember exactly how much recent political upheavals have destroyed, and how difficult recent years have been for the modern heirs of the Ancient Near East.

As always, the scholarly community owes to those living in the region support both physical and financial, and intellectually we must continue to train Middle Eastern scholars who can interpret the ancient past to their peoples. The one sure way to avoid imputation of pernicious Eurocentric influence, sometimes sloppily termed "Orientalism," is to ensure native voices have access to resources and methods that will allow them to interpret the past as sophisticatedly as we think we are trying to do.

## A Word of Thanks

This work is again intended to address the advanced undergraduate and the beginning graduate student, and also scholars from outside the field who wish to gain an exposure to current thought about the history of the Ancient Near East, and we also want to give a helpful bibliography on particular areas. We have not covered all aspects of what went on over 3000 very formative years in the region, and inevitably we have been guided by the winds and trends of scholarship. I thank the kind colleagues who have made time to contribute to this second edition of the *Companion*. I also want to thank the scholars who have pointed me to the work of younger researchers. All deserve my ardent thanks and the thanks of all who in later time pick up this tome and find it helpful, even if it only illustrates the folly of the present age.

I would also like to thank the Honors College of the University of Oklahoma, Norman, for support of my research assistant, Emma Culver, over several semesters, as she helped me beg and cajole, organize and deconstruct, ferret out and rethink what you find here. Will she be a lawyer or a history scholar? Maybe both, we may hope!

As before, Dr Katie Barwick-Snell tolerated all the agonizing connected with the production of this work, reading drafts for clarity and accessibility. I am as usual in her

debt; I would like to blame someone for any remaining errors and inconcinnities (that is, lack of suitability or congruence, inelegance), but I am afraid I cannot think of anyone more to blame than myself.

Daniel C. Snell  
Norman, Oklahoma, USA  
January 2019

## A Note on References

We have deviated from our earlier practice and printed the bibliography for each article with the essay. This is by popular demand from the authors and will serve to ease circulation of their essays. This practice may lead to some slight duplication of references, but not really very much. Below we have gathered the references that recur frequently, and if the reader cannot find the resource within the references appended to each essay, it will be found here.

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PART I

# THE BIG PICTURE

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## CHAPTER ONE

# A History of the Ancient Near East

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*Mario Liverani*

## Unity and Diversity

The history of the Ancient Near Eastern civilizations is very long; its timespan from the late fourth to the late first millennium BCE is equal to or even longer than the rest of history, from the collapse of the Near Eastern cultures to our own time. It is correct to use the label “the first half of history.” We could even say “of our history,” because this long trajectory is now considered part and even the very foundation of our own “Western” history – not like other more remote civilizations in India or China or elsewhere.

The reasons for the Western appropriation of the Ancient Near Eastern cultures and history were especially important at the time of their rediscovery. These included the colonialist ideology and practice of the nineteenth century, the interest of the Christian world in Biblical antiquities, coupled with the Islamic disregard for pre-Islamic heritage. In recent decades these motivations have faded, and they are no longer primary to the community of scholars. Yet Biblical connections are still widely of concern to popular audiences, and so the interest in the history of the Ancient Near East is something more serious than curiosity about a remote and alien past.

Our Western civilization acknowledges a privileged role for Greek civilization in generating the foundational values of freedom, democracy, individual personality, economic enterprise, rational thought and science, and the aesthetics of the visual arts and poetry. But our indebtedness to the Ancient Near Eastern civilizations in the material foundations of culture (urban life, political organization, administration, writing) and in the field of religion remains important.

But is the Ancient Near East a unified subject for historical inquiry? The area is characterized by a notable diversity in natural environments (hills and steppe-lands, river valleys and Mediterranean countryside), by different peoples and languages (Semites and Indo-Europeans and others), by various ways of life (urban to nomadic) and modes of production (from agriculture and pastoralism to specialized crafts and complex financial

dealings), by different complicated writing systems, by social diversity in access to resources, communication, and decision-making – so that a unitary treatment may seem unjustified. Nevertheless, when compared with other centers of civilization (including the contiguous centers of Egypt, the Indus Valley, the Aegean basin, and Central Asia), and especially when contrasted to the periphery between the centers of the major civilizations, the Ancient Near East seems compact enough to allow for a unified treatment because of intensive cross-fertilization. But such a treatment must not neglect the specific features of the regional sub-units of Lower Mesopotamia, Upper Mesopotamia, the Levant (areas bordering the eastern Mediterranean), Anatolia (modern Turkey), and southwestern Iran.

The history of the region, as far as it can be reconstructed from written and archaeological records, follows a trajectory that is diverse in details but unitary in its major features. The relevance of the environmental factors, the introduction of technological improvements, and socio-economic development, can be followed all over the area with similar patterns.

Environmental constraints, painstaking production of food, the difficult access to basic resources, and the consequent low levels of demographic growth, were all factors that contributed to the slow development of the Ancient Near Eastern civilizations. We are accustomed to appreciating the large cities and the monumental temples and palaces, the elegant artistic and literary compositions, and the great polities and “empires” as something obviously resulting from high levels of civilization. We should never forget, however, that such accomplishments were the result of painstaking labor and of forced allocation of the limited resources then available, and that the periodic crises were not an accident but a structural feature in the system.

In fact, the ancient history of the Near East can be summarized as a cyclic sequence of growth and collapse, a sequence that is apparent also in the preservation of the documentary record. The periods of major development – with burgeoning polities, big cities, important monuments, extensive archives, and rich craftsmanship – are separated by “dark ages” of localism and fragmentation. We have to consider that the ups and downs are mostly pertinent to the upper classes, to the political structures, and to the complex urban economy, while the common peasantry in rural villages and pastoral units continued their basic struggle for survival. The ups and downs are the result of a different equilibrium between the two opposed strategies of development and of survival, typically located in the royal palace and in the village, and carried on by the political elite and by the local community. The strategy of development required a leaching of resources from the local communities that was detrimental to the local strategy of survival, and therefore could be carried on only during limited periods, in selected areas, and under specific circumstances, allowing the political elites to impose their will through the exercise of power and through shared ideologies.

Notwithstanding these constraints, we see a long-lasting tendency toward enlargement in the scale of the political units, improvement in the technologies of production (and also of destruction), widening of the geographical horizons, and also the increasing role of individual personalities. The most objective and concrete proxy for expansion, however, namely demographic development, seemed to remain more subject to the recurrent fluctuations than to a positive trend.

## The Urban Revolution, about 3500–2800 BCE

The beginning of the historical trajectory was marked by a phenomenon of tremendous relevance, currently assumed to mark the shift from prehistory to history in the proper sense. The phenomenon can be labeled in various ways. We can use the label “urban revolution,” if we want to underscore demography and settlement forms, or the “First Urbanization” if we take into account the subsequent cycles of urbanization. We can speak of the origin of the state or the early state, if we prefer to underscore the political aspects. We can also emphasize the beginning of a marked socio-economic stratification, and of specialized crafts, if we want to underscore the mode of production. We can also use the term “origin of complexity,” if we try to subsume all the various aspects under a unifying concept. The origin of writing has also been considered to mark the beginning of true and proper history, because of the old-fashioned idea that there is no history before the availability of written sources. But now that such an idea is considered simplistic or wrong, we still can consider writing the most evident and symbolic culmination of the entire process.

The “revolution” took place in Lower Mesopotamia, now southern Iraq, and was the result of particular technological improvements and socio-political strategies. The agricultural production of barley underwent a notable, possibly tenfold, increase thanks to the construction of water reservoirs and irrigation canals, of long fields adjacent to the canals watered by them, and thanks to the use of the plow, of animal power, of carts, of threshing sledges, of clay sickles, and of improved storage facilities. The agricultural revolution could not have taken place without the managerial activity of central agencies, the temples, which were able to overcome the purely local strategy of survival carried on by the rural villages.

The technological improvements alone, however, could generate no “revolution” at all if the food-producers had devoted the entire surplus to their own consumption. The role of the central agency was decisive in diverting most of the surplus to social use: both for financing the common structures (irrigation networks, temple building, defensive walls), and for the maintenance of the specialized craftsmen and the sociopolitical elite. The “redistributive” economy of the early state, centered on the temples, was not based on the procedure of taxation, that is, the extraction of a part of the product from the producers’ families or local communities, but basically on the procedure of forced labor or corvée work imposed on local communities to work the temple lands. In this way the central agency, the owner of the best irrigated lands, could transfer to the local communities most of the social costs, paying just the rations for the workmen but not their families in limited periods of harvest and other seasonally concentrated operations.

The result of the technological improvements was a rate of seed to crop of around 1:25 in comparison to 1:5 outside the river valleys. The result of the central management was that only a third of the crop covered the expenditures of seed for the next year, rations for workmen and animals, and two-thirds went to the central agency for the social uses described above. Also the breeding of sheep and goats for the production of wool underwent a tremendous increase under temple management, again thanks to technology (the weaving loom) and social exploitation (slave women and children concentrated in temple factories). The administration of an economy based on unequal transfers of product, rations, and services generated writing. Already available tools (tokens, seals, clay sealings) were coordinated to produce round clay seals we call bullae, then “numerical” tablets, and

finally proper clay tablets with numbers and logographic icons for the various items to be recorded. The “archaic texts” from the city of Uruk levels IV–III attest to the organization of scribes, schools, and archives.

The transition from the Late Chalcolithic (the Ubaid culture in Mesopotamia) to the early urban economy around 4000 BCE went hand in hand with the sudden increase in the size and structure of the city and of the temples. As for the cities, the transition from the small villages and hamlets of the Ubaid period (under one hectare or 2.47 acres in size) to the walled cities like Uruk (70 hectares or 172.9 acres) is quite impressive. Inside the cities, the small shrines of the Ubaid period, which were devoted to cultic use only, became large buildings including shops and stores besides the sanctuary of the god, along with the apartments of the clergy and the administrative personnel. The social changes were as important: beside the rural communities, based on family structures and communal self-government, a ruling class emerged as the necessary premise, but also the result, of the centralized administration of the economy.

The Uruk culture is so called because of the archaeological discoveries at that site. In Uruk the entire complex of Eanna (with the adjacent Anu temple) has been excavated, while the contemporary levels in other Lower Mesopotamian sites remain hardly touched by digging. The only other important center of the same period in the lowlands is Susa in Iranian Khuzistan. The impression that Uruk could have been the most important center in the period is probably correct, since it is supported by memories preserved in the later mythological and epic literature of Sumer.

The paramount role of the temple in the Uruk period was the obvious result of the strongly unequal relationships that the complex structure of the early state introduced into society. The elite could successfully exploit the rural population only by convincing them that their work was intended to support the god, his house, and his properties. A religious mobilization was necessary in order to keep the unequal relationships effective and enduring. No purely physical constraint could have been effective, but the ideological constraint made the exploitation tolerable. The priestly leadership also had the effect of depriving the kinship groups of their role and thwarted their ambitions for prestige; the priests moved the whole community toward an impersonal management.

Outside the core area, Uruk culture spread in a wide periphery, by means of various types of colonies and outposts. Upper Mesopotamia was colonized both along the Euphrates (at Habuba Kabira and Jebel Aruda) and the Tigris (at Nineveh) and in the Syrian Jazira (at Hamukar and Tell Brak). The most remote colonies were located along access routes to the highlands of Anatolia (at Samsat and Hassek Hoyuk) and on the Iranian plateau (at Godin Tepe). Important local cities were also influenced by the Uruk culture in their autonomous development (Arslan Tepe is the best known site of this type). Trade and access to highland resources (copper and timber in Anatolia, tin and semi-precious stones in Iran) were most probably the main factors for the spread of the Uruk colonies, and the resultant “regional system” brought different ecosystems and cultural traditions into reciprocal relationships. During the same period, the Early Dynastic civilization of Egypt underwent a similar process of state formation and urbanization, but remained separate from Mesopotamian civilization, except for isolated contacts.

The collapse of the entire system came abruptly at the beginning of the third millennium. Most colonies were abandoned in Upper Mesopotamia and in the highlands. The destruction

of the Uruk period complex at Arslan Tepe is really impressive, and the burial of a Trans-Caucasian chief on the top of the ruins may hint at the role of the pastoral mountaineers as responsible for the disaster. But the crisis is also visible in Lower Mesopotamia, with no northern intrusion, so that we can doubt whether the nomads were the primary factor in the collapse; they may just have profited from an internal structural crisis. In any case, the unitary horizon of the Uruk period was followed by the emergence of various local cultures: the Jemdet Nasr culture in Lower Mesopotamia, the Proto-Elamite in Susiana, the Ninevite V in Upper Mesopotamia, and others in Eastern Anatolia and in Iran. All of them are characterized by a decline of city life in the river valleys, or even by a total reversion to village life in the periphery. The “first cycle of urbanization” had come to its end.

## The Second Urbanization, about 2800–2000 BCE

The new cycle of urbanization encompassed an enlarged horizon and was based on a deeper rooting in the society. The urban cultures spread again from Lower Mesopotamia in the so-called Early Dynastic period, about 2800–2350 BCE, to include Upper Mesopotamia, the Levant, Anatolia, and Elam. The spread of cuneiform writing in most of these regions, except Anatolia and Palestine, makes the interconnections more visible. The adjacent areas also underwent similar processes of growth and consolidation in Old Kingdom Egypt, in the Early Harappan civilization of the Indus Valley, and in northeastern Iran and Central Asia. All these areas were linked together by trade contacts and cultural cross-fertilization.

The large size of the area involved and the spread of writing made the ethnic diversity much clearer than in the previous period. Lower Mesopotamia hosted two different linguistic groups: the Sumerians prevailed in the south, or Sumer, and the Semites in the north, or Akkad. The two groups, although coexisting in the same polities, differed not only in language and other cultural traits (for example, the style of figurative arts) but also in basic social and political features. The heritage of the temple-city was characteristic of Sumer, while in the Semitic area the influence of the kinship groups and pastoral tribes was more visible. In Upper Mesopotamia the prevailing population was Hurrian, and in Susiana and Anshan, the later Fars, it was Elamite. In Syria, an early stage of the later northwest Semitic dialects was represented by Eblaite. For Anatolia we lack direct evidence, but the analysis of later languages and personal names makes us believe that the area was inhabited by Hattians and other non-Indo-European peoples.

The typical polity was the city-state in the densely inhabited regions of the lowlands, and probably some kind of “ethnic” state among the mountaineers and the steppe-dwellers. In the Sumerian south, the city-state was basically a “temple-city” as already described in the Uruk period, although the royal palace acquired a separate political role, leaving to the temples the role of managerial agencies of the economy in addition to their cultic role. The city leader in the south was usually a “priest-king” (*e n*), or a “city administrator” (*e n s i*), the ideology leaving the role of the true sovereign to the city god. The temple-city was in theory the property of the god, and was in practice a state centered on the city and dominating a rural landscape of some 10 to 20 km or 6 to 12 miles in radius. The major Sumerian city-states of the period were Ur (whose “Royal Cemetery” provides the most brilliant image of wealth and craftsmanship), Uruk, Eridu, Umma, Lagash, Adab, and

Shuruppak. Between the Sumerian south and the Akkadian north, the city of Nippur played a special role as seat of the leading god of the Sumerian pantheon, Enlil – a role of providing political legitimacy to kings who held the city and of providing a symbol of cultural unity for Sumer in the theory that only one king could be paramount at any one time. At an early stage of development, in Early Dynastic II, a “league” of Sumerian cities seems to have played an important political role. More often, competition for agricultural lands could spark wars among neighboring cities, and the long war between Lagash and Umma in Early Dynastic III is well known from the royal inscriptions of Lagash. But the equilibrium between the various city-states seems to have been resistant to imbalance.

In the area of Akkad, city-states like Eshnunna or Akshak seem to have shared the southern model. But the most important city, Kish, was formed differently, with a neat prevalence of the palace over the temple, with a larger territory, with a warlike king (*I u g a l* “big man”), and clear expansionistic intent. It is possible that ethnicity had some influence in generating the two different models, but certainly the ecological and economic basis was also a factor. In the north pastoralism was more important, and agriculture was less dependent on irrigation, with local systems of square fields prevailing over the temple-run sets of elongated fields in the south. The modified model also spread to Upper Mesopotamia: along the middle Tigris (at Assur) and the Middle Euphrates (at Mari), in the Jazira (at Tell Brak/Nagar and other centers), and in Syria (at Ebla).

Various administrative archives have been recovered, both in the south (Ur “archaic” in Early Dynastic II, about 2700–2600; Fara in Early Dynastic IIIa, about 2600–2450; and especially Lagash in Early Dynastic IIIb, about 2450–2350), and more recently in the north (Mari, Tell Beydar) and Syria (Ebla, about 2500–2350). The two major archives, Lagash and Ebla, have been correctly contrasted as representing different socio-economic systems. In fact the economy of Lagash was managed through a system of temples, by a class of priestly administrators, and was mostly based on intensive agriculture. Ebla was managed by the palace, with an important role left to the representatives of kin groups and local communities, and it was based on mixed agricultural and pastoral production and on long-distance trade in metals and textiles. The temples at Ebla were devoted to cultic activities and ceremonial redistribution, but nothing comparable to the administrative redistribution of the Sumerian temples.

The competition among the various trade networks was an important factor. Apart from local exchange in city markets and fairs, long-distance trade was especially important in the cities located between the river valleys and their periphery from which most of the raw materials came: Susa trading with the Iranian plateau, Assur with the upper Tigris and Anatolia, Abarsal with the upper Euphrates, Mari and Ebla with Syria. Trade was carried on with caravans of donkeys by merchants dependent on and financed by central agencies. Relationships between merchants and palace or temple were of the “administrative” kind, with fixed prices and a system of yearly accounts, the value of the imported goods being balanced against the value of entrusted goods. But when outside the area of control of the central agency, the merchants were free to negotiate for profit, and could also use their money for loans at interest and loans with personal guarantees.

The competition in trade networks was a factor in the struggles between the most important city-states, especially during the final phase of the Early Dynastic III. In some cases the competition was settled by agreement and delimitation of the respective networks, as in the

treaty between Ebla and Abarsal, and in other cases by recourse to war as between Mari and Ebla. The rise of a new polity in central Mesopotamia, Akkad as heir of Kish, brought about a series of destructive wars. Some of them, under the first ruler of Akkad, Sargon (2335–2279), were intended to conquer the Sumerian south and gave origin to the first regional state that included the entire Lower Mesopotamian river region. After that, more wars were intended to acquire control of the trade network, and were directed against Susa (Iranian network), against Magan (Gulf network), against Mari and Ebla, both of them destroyed by Naram-Sin (2254–2218), the most important king of Akkad. The celebrative inscriptions and monuments of the Akkadian kings were the expression of a new idea of “heroic” kingship and of enlarged territorial control. The deification of Naram-Sin clearly contrasted with the old Sumerian ideology of the city leader as administrative representative of the god. Later legends and epic compositions, while reserving to Sargon the image of the pious and successful king, blamed Naram-Sin for hubris and disaster.

The Akkad dynasty did not survive for long, and the decline started after Naram-Sin. A major factor was the pressure of the outer nomads, both from the mountaineers (Gutians and Lullubi in the Zagros Mountains) and the steppe tribes (Martu, better known as Amorites). Archaeology also gives a picture of decline of the splendid civilizations of the Early Bronze age, in Anatolia, in the Levant, in Iran, and the Gulf area. We get the impression that the “second urbanization” reached its peak around 2300, and then started a fast decline. The massive intrusions of the Gutians (about 2200) and the Martu (about 2000) in middle and lower Mesopotamia were part of this scenario. In Egypt, the fragmented socio-political order in the first “Intermediate Period” was roughly contemporary. In the Levant, the so-called “Intermediate (Early/Middle Bronze) Period” showed an archaeological picture dominated by pastoralism and decline of urban life. As usual, the periphery was more decisively affected, while the main core of urbanization, in lower Mesopotamia, could better resist the troubles.

The last century of the third millennium, when the crisis was already well advanced in the peripheral areas, was dominated in the river valleys by the third dynasty of Ur (2112–2004), which represented the most efficient and stable state organization that Mesopotamia ever experienced, in earlier or later times. In a short period, under Ur-Nammu, Shulgi, Amar-Sin, and Shu-Sin, the Ur kings were able to revitalize Sumerian culture and religious ideology, and to extend the model of the temple-city to a wider region in which the former city-states were transformed into provinces. Instead of celebrative monuments, they left temple buildings, including the famous temple-towers or ziggurats, irrigation canals, and defensive walls. They unified prices and measures inside their kingdom, and provided it with a law-code and a land register. They produced a uniform and efficient bureaucratic record of the economy with the most detailed accounting procedures: crop estimates before harvest, estimates of growth for herds and flocks, balanced accounts for merchants, all based on administrative conventions and fixed rates. Cultic literature and royal hymns flourished during the “Neo-Sumerian renaissance,” while cities and countryside in the core of the empire flourished in peace and order.

However, the effect of external troubles could not be avoided forever. In spite of various expeditions carried on in Subartu (Upper Mesopotamia) and on the Zagros piedmont, and in spite of the “Martu-wall” erected from Tigris to Euphrates in order to stop, or at least to check, the infiltration of the West Semitic nomads, the Martu finally succeeded in penetrating in substantial numbers into Mesopotamia, possibly driven out of their

homeland in the Syrian steppe by an unfavorable climatic change. The Martu conquered and ravaged all the provinces, and Ur was left without revenues and protection. The capital city was finally besieged and conquered by the Elamites. The name of the last Ur king, Ibbi-Sin, remained in the handbooks of Babylonian omens as a symbol of disaster.

## The Regional System, about 2000–1200 BCE

The cycle of the “Third Urbanization” was quite long (about 2000–1200 BCE) and included both the Middle and the Late Bronze periods in archaeological terminology as applied to the Levant and Anatolia; these periods followed each other with no obvious break. The geographic scene was wider than in the previous cycle, but while some areas remained flourishing during the entire period (Egypt from Middle to New Kingdom; the Aegean civilization from the first Minoan palaces to the Mycenaean period), others underwent an evident decline toward the mid-second millennium (the Indus Valley and Central Asian civilizations).

This decline – from Middle to Late Bronze – in amount and distribution of settlements (an obvious proxy for demographic estimates) also affected some areas in the Near East. In Syria and Upper Mesopotamia many large settlements in the semi-arid lands were abandoned, and population concentrated in the areas better provided with water from rainfall or rivers, so that a long-term drier trend can be suspected of being responsible for these general developments.

In contrast to the “Second Urbanization,” which had been clearly centered on Lower Mesopotamia as the area of origin of the basic cultural features and also as the seat of the major political powers, the “Third Urbanization” was much more multicentric and balanced in technological levels, in socio-political organization, and in military power. The role of Syria and Upper Mesopotamia, and eventually also of a mountain area like Anatolia, became paramount, marking the shift from a monocentric arrangement with a clear center/periphery contrast to a “regional system” of competing and interacting “peer” polities. The previous periphery became part of the inner system, mountains and steppe were fully integrated into the multidirectional exchange of resources, and peoples formerly considered barbarian became accepted partners.

The entire system, stretching from Egypt and the Aegean in the west to Elam and the Gulf in the east, coalesced into half a dozen regional states. Starting from a marked fragmentation at the very beginning of the period, a process of unification took place during the Middle Bronze period (about 2000–1600), to reach its final shape during the Late Bronze period (about 1600–1200). The regional states (the extent of which ranged from 200 000 to 500 000 km<sup>2</sup>, or 77 220 to 193 050 square miles, roughly from the size of Great Britain to that of France) were: Egypt, the Hittite kingdom in Anatolia, the Hurrian state of Mitanni and later the Middle Assyrian kingdom in Upper Mesopotamia, Kassite Babylonia in Lower Mesopotamia, and Elam on the Iranian plateau.

The minor polities were annexed or integrated into the major powers in two ways: either direct annexation or indirect rule. In some areas, mostly in the river valleys, the former independent kingdoms were annexed as provinces of a conquering kingdom. This process was clear in Lower Mesopotamia and culminated in the annexation by Babylonia under Hammurabi (1792–1750) of the rival kingdoms of Eshnunna and Larsa,

which had previously annexed Isin and Uruk, and Mari. Also Assyria developed from a city-state (Assur) to a regional power, structured in a series of provinces and finally (fourteenth–thirteenth centuries) encompassed all of Upper Mesopotamia. In central Anatolia, a series of competing city-states (nineteenth–eighteenth centuries) was unified by the Old Hittite kingdom (seventeenth century). In other areas of Syria, Palestine, southern and western Anatolia, and the mountain lands of Armenia and the Zagros, the local polities, be they formal kingdoms in the urbanized area or chiefdoms in the hills, remained autonomous but not independent, becoming vassals of the major powers, namely of Egypt in Palestine and southern Syria, of Mitanni and later Hatti in northern Syria, and of Hatti also in western Anatolia. The extent of the local kingdoms varied from the small city-states in Palestine and on the Lebanese coast (about 2000 km<sup>2</sup> or 772 square miles) to the larger ones in Syria and Anatolia (about 6000 km<sup>2</sup> or 2316 square miles).

The leaders of the regional states conceived political relations as based on a hierarchy of “great kings” (the regional powers) and “small kings” (the local city states), the latter being “servants” of the former, their “masters.” In some cases, especially under Mitanni and Hittite rule, formal treaties were required in order to define clearly the duties of the two parties, basically a duty of loyalty from the vassal king toward his master, and of protection from the master toward the vassal. Treaties were also written to regulate specific problems of border, refugees, and compensation. Egypt did not engage in direct military control, only requiring an oath of loyalty from its vassals. Treaties between great kings were rare: treaties between Hatti and Kizzuwatna in southeastern Anatolia were formally reciprocal but masked an uneven relation. Only the treaty between the Hittite king Hattushili and the Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II (about 1270) was really conceived in terms of equality.

Diplomatic relations inside and among the regional states were better documented when important archives were preserved. This was especially the case of the “Mari age” (seventeenth century) for Upper Mesopotamia, and of the “Amarna age” (fourteenth century) for the Levant. But the Hittite and Middle-Assyrian archives also provide useful information. The diplomatic language in letters and treaties of the time was Babylonian, and cuneiform writing was also used in most of the area for internal court and administrative records. Interpreters, messengers, and ambassadors carried out diplomatic missions, which were based on the exchange of messages, gifts, and women.

Letters had to express “brotherhood,” friendly attitudes, wishes of good health for the partner and information about the good health of the sender, and at a formal level the exchange of greetings was the most important message. Letters were normally accompanied by gifts, in order to express generosity and to please the other king. Both to give and to receive gifts increased prestige in the eyes of the kings and of the public. The ideology of gifts based on disinterest and on more valuable return gifts was formally expressed, but actually contradicted by miserable bargains and obvious greed.

Gifts were just the tip of the iceberg when compared to normal trade exchange. It has been calculated that the largest amount of copper sent as a gift from the king of Cyprus to the pharaoh was just 5% of the copper found in a single cargo shipwrecked off the coast of Turkey. And we know from the Old Assyrian trade documents that a 5% gift was requested by the Anatolian kings to allow the Assyrian merchants to practice their trade activities in the kingdom. Of course, gifts were personalized and had a social or political aim, while trade was carried on for profit, and in order to get resources not available locally. In both

cases, gold came from Egypt, copper from Cyprus, tin and lapis lazuli from faraway Afghanistan, while textiles mostly moved from the urbanized areas to the periphery.

Trade procedures were very well attested in the archives of the Old Assyrian merchants, found at Kültepe, ancient Kanish, in central Anatolia in the nineteenth century. These were the most detailed commercial archives of the entire ancient world – similar for their relevance to our understanding of trade to the documents of the Cairo *genizah* for the Levantine trade of medieval times. The Kanish archives were unique, but the amount and modalities of trade they revealed should have been quite similar in many other cases as well. The Assyrian merchants, organized in family firms, and moving with donkey caravans, exported textiles produced at Assur or Babylonia and tin from Iran, and got back silver to be reinvested in more textiles and tin, and their big profits largely covered taxes and risks.

Exchange of women was quite important at the political level. We know of two different systems, one centralized and the other reciprocal. The centralized movement of women was attested in the Mari archives and also in the Hittite kingdom. The great king gave his daughters in marriage to the small vassal kings in order to increase their loyalty and to ensure the local throne to a descendant of the great king. The Egyptian pharaoh used the centralized system in reverse, by requesting women from the Levantine vassals and from the Asiatic great kings, but never offered his daughters to them, just to increase his own prestige. The reciprocal system was widely practiced by the Asiatic kings, giving and receiving daughters to and from neighboring kings – a system known through the entire period but better documented from the Amarna and Hittite archives. In addition to wives, professionals including artists, scribes, doctors, and magicians also circulated among the royal palaces of the Late Bronze period, increasing cross-fertilization in the cultural sphere.

Inside the various kingdoms, the political ideology and the related socio-economic measures underwent a notable change from the Middle to the Late Bronze period. In the first phase, the most evident feature was paternalism, that is, a view of the king as a “good shepherd” for his people, attentive to the needs of his subjects, and interested in turn in winning the consent of a large free population outside of the limited palace circles. The paternalistic attitude was possibly related to the tribal origin of most royal dynasties in Mesopotamia and Syria, who were the descendants of the Amorite invaders at the turn of the millennium. In any case, the attitude materialized into law codes (the famous code of Hammurabi is just the largest and best preserved in a series) and into royal edicts regulating the remission of debts, and therefore resulting in the liberation of enslaved debtors and in the restitution of land to families.

Toward the middle of the second millennium, the attitude shifted toward a different model of kingship. Also in this case it is possible that the new ideology was linked with the prominence of hill peoples like the Kassites, Hurrians, and Hittites, but even more directly with technological changes. The introduction of the horse and the two-wheeled chariot as the most important war machines changed not only war tactics but also the socio-political relations. The new aristocracy of chariot warriors (the *maryannu*) could condition the behavior of kings, giving rise to a “heroic” attitude whereby the king’s prestige was based on his personal merits, rather than on justice and tradition, and this also led to more strained socio-economic relations. The royal edicts of debt remission were no longer proclaimed, debt slavery increased, landed properties concentrated in the hands of creditors, and the basic support for the king was no longer the free population but palace circles and the warrior aristocracy.

Socio-economic relations had already undergone an important change at the beginning of the second millennium, when workers under corvée (forced labor), used widely during the Early Bronze, were replaced by hired workers. Of course, the corvée system was based on the existence of substantial village communities, while hired manpower came from a large dispossessed peasantry. Yet during the Middle Bronze the idea that free families had the right to keep their ancestral lands, and individuals had the right to keep their free status, was still quite strong. The royal edicts reflected this idea. Land could be sold only to relatives, in order to remain in the family; sons had a right to inherit family land which brothers often farmed together. The increased practice of adoption undermined the traditional system, by accepting the alien buyer into the family in order to overcome the time-honored rules and traditions about not selling land outside the family. In the Late Bronze, as an effect of the new ideology, inheritance became something to be earned and won, property could be sold outside of the family, the hierarchy of brothers became ineffective, and the number of dispossessed people increased.

This growing socio-economic harshness, along with the long-term demographic and agricultural decline due to climatic worsening in the semi-arid belt and due to deterioration of the irrigation system in the river valleys, was the precondition for the final crisis of the Bronze Age. This culminated in an external shock, the invasion of the “Sea Peoples” at the beginning of the twelfth century. The invaders of Mediterranean origin destroyed the Aegean, Anatolian, and Levantine coastal cities, and reached the Egyptian Delta about 1180 BCE. A few years later the Phrygian invaders in central Anatolia, where the Hittite kingdom collapsed completely, reached the Upper Tigris area. A parallel movement took place on the southern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, where the Libyan tribes moved from the Sahara region to invade the Nile valley. All these movements, probably caused by a sharp climatic drying about 1200 BCE, drastically changed the political and urban system in the area west of the Euphrates. The former regional powers of Hatti and Egypt disappeared, city life and local royal dynasties remained in just a few cases on the Phoenician coast and in some Neo-Hittite kingdoms, and room was left for intruders of pastoral origin, the Arameans and related peoples. The entire socio-political order had to be built anew along different lines. East of the Euphrates, in contrast, the regional powers of Assyria, Babylonia, and Elam were unaffected by the western intruders, although they suffered from Aramean pressure, and were able to continue their life along traditional lines.

## The Early Iron Age, about 1200–750 BCE

West of the Euphrates, the serious crisis of the twelfth century had to be surmounted by increasing the basis for productive activities and for political consensus. Various technological improvements were effective to this end. The collapse of the palace-centered scribal schools left freedom for the emergence of the alphabet from the Levantine belt. This writing system was a much more accessible tool that produced a kind of democratization of writing competence. The disruption of international trade in copper and tin made it necessary to have recourse to iron production, for which raw material was more widespread, and making iron was easier than bronze. Agricultural exploitation extended to landscapes that were marginal during the Late Bronze period, into the hills, thanks to wood clearing and

terrace building, and in the arid belt, thanks to deeper wells and wadi-bed water capturing systems. Irrigation, previously limited to the large alluvial plains, became a factor also in mountain valleys, because of the Iranian *qanat* (artificial underground water channels), and in the mountain/desert contact areas, because of the huge dams of Southern Arabia. Large desert spaces were opened to more intensive frequentation and use in the breeding of camels in the Iranian plateau and in Central Asia, and dromedaries in the Syro-Arabian desert.

Other changes took place in the area of socio-economic and socio-political relations. After the collapse of cities and palaces in the Levant and Anatolia and also in the Aegean area, the difference between small towns and fortified villages became less marked. The increased size of the pastoral tribes generated new political relations based on common descent, language, and religion—contrasting with the Bronze Age polities based on dependence on a royal palace.

Two kinds of polities characterized the western half of the Near East in the Iron Age: city-states, the direct heirs of the “small kingdoms” of the Late Bronze especially along the coast, and ethnic states especially in the arid belt of Arameans and related peoples and in the hilly areas of the Phrygians in Anatolia, and the Medes and related peoples in Iran. The new royal dynasties reserved a larger political role for collective bodies of elders and assemblies who had previously devoted their time to judicial matters. Royal ideology reverted to a “paternalistic” model stressing justice and protection of the kin-based social structures. Trade and crafts, previously centered on palaces, were left to the free enterprise of private firms or individuals. The independent states of the Levant became centers of a lively artistic and commercial life.

Breeding of camels and dromedaries and parallel improvement in nautical techniques opened enlarged horizons in the Mediterranean Sea, along the caravan roads from Syria to Central and Southern Arabia, and along the caravan roads from the Zagros to Central Asia. Trade routes were centered on the new polities, the city-states of Phoenicia and Greece, the ethnic states of Media and Arabia, and the routes avoided the traditional states of Egypt and Mesopotamia which kept their roles as major areas of demographic concentration and markets.

The remaining regional states underwent a phase of decline, but were able to reach a new equilibrium. In northern Mesopotamia, Assyria had to suffer from Aramean intrusions and was reduced to its original core in the twelfth and eleventh centuries. But it kept alive the idea that its theoretical borders were those once reached by the Middle Assyrian kings Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243–1207) and Tiglath-pileser I (1114–1076) – that is, from the Zagros Mountains to the Euphrates. The reconquest took up the tenth and ninth centuries, with Assyrian kings leading military campaigns inside Assyrian territory, a process culminating with Assurnasirpal II (883–859), who recovered the entire area to the old borders and celebrated his military success in annals of unprecedented length. Assurnasirpal was also important as builder of a new capital city, Kalkhu, Calah in the Bible, with a palace decorated with impressive sculptured slabs.

His successor Shalmaneser III (858–824) started a new policy of an “imperial” kind, by invading outer regions in Syria (the Aramean city-states), in southeastern Anatolia (the Neo-Hittite states), in Armenia (the new kingdom of Urartu), and in the Zagros Mountains (the rising ethnic states of Mannea in northwest Iran and Media). For a while it seemed that nobody could stop the growth of Assyria, neither the small city-states in the west, nor

the ethnic states in the north, nor the enfeebled Babylonian kingdom in the south. But the growth had been too fast, and competition arose inside Assyria itself. The major governors of the western provinces tried to acquire a position of virtual independence. Half a century of “feudal” fragmentation halted the imperial expansion, and the smaller states west of the Euphrates were able to keep their independence and restore equilibrium in the area.

The case of Babylonia was different. After the end of the Kassite dynasty, and after the brilliant reign of Nebuchadnezzar I (1125–1104), the kingdom suffered from Elamite and Assyrian forays, and from nomadic infiltration of the Arameans along the corridor between the Tigris and the Zagros, and later also of the Chaldeans along the lower Euphrates. But the main problem was the disruption of the irrigation system, bringing about a demographic and economic decline. The central power was unable to follow the Assyrian model and recover control of the whole area. Various dynasties of different origin, including Chaldeans, were in control of limited parts of Lower Mesopotamia. The Aramean and Chaldean intruders did not establish independent kingdoms as in Syria, but were not subjugated as in Assyria, and they became components of the political scene. Beyond Babylonia, Elam was strong enough to become a permanent actor in Mesopotamian affairs.

In a sense, the fate of Babylonia was similar to that of Egypt. Egypt was also unable either to reject or to absorb its Libyan invaders, and it fragmented into various dynasties mostly of Libyan origin. It was threatened by Nubia playing the same role as Elam in Babylonia, and it was no longer a factor on the international scene.

## **Empires, about 750–330 BCE**

The situation changed in the mid-eighth century. The state of fragmentation and equilibrium was broken by the sudden expansion of the only major power left, namely Assyria, along the lines already indicated by Shalmaneser III, but on a wider scale and with more stable results. Tiglath-pileser III (744–727) defeated Urartu and its Neo-Hittite allies and conquered most of Syria and northern Palestine. He then penetrated deeply into Media, finally defeated the Chaldean tribes and proclaimed himself king of Babylon. The empire was organized in small provinces with no possibility for “feudal” fragmentation, and the celebrative apparatus of both texts and images proliferated.

The borders of the empire were extended farther under Shalmaneser V (726–722), Sargon II (721–705), and Sennacherib (704–681), but in different ways in various directions. In the West, the Levant was almost completely annexed except for a few minor and marginal vassal kingdoms like Judah. In Anatolia, the Neo-Hittite kingdoms were also annexed, while Sargon’s attempt to conquer the central plateau (Tabal, later Cappadocia) was short-lived. In the North, Urartu was defeated but remained independent, and Sargon’s attempt to extend the provincial system to Media was also brief. Babylonia, which recovered independence under Merodach-baladan, was the scene of important fights between Assyria, Elam, and the Chaldean chiefs, until Sennacherib opted for the final solution of total destruction that brought about serious reaction because of the religious and cultural prestige of the city. The Assyrian capital cities, the ephemeral Dur-Sharrukin, built by Sargon, and Nineveh, finally selected by Sennacherib as metropolis of the empire, were embellished by huge palaces and refined sculptures.

When Esarhaddon (680–669) became king, Assyria apparently had no rival, and the dream of a “universal empire” had come true; the effort of military expansion could end. The only surviving polities belonged to two distinct types. On the one hand three “great kingdoms” were still independent: Egypt, Elam, and Urartu. On the other hand, the tribal polities in the highlands, the Medes, and on the arid steppe, the Arabs, were unified in large confederations. The conquest of the great kingdoms was more prestigious, and they became the major targets for Esarhaddon and for his son Assurbanipal (668–631). Egypt was conquered, but it proved impossible for Assyria – with the logistics of the time – to annex a region so distant, large, and populous. Elam was conquered and its capital city Susa destroyed, but that allowed for the growth of a new power, Persia, in the same area.

As for the Medes and the Arabs, conquering them proved impossible because of logistic problems and because they lacked a political structure suited to being reused as provincial divisions of the empire. The tool of the loyalty oath was therefore applied as a sufficient act of subordination. The “ethnic” periphery of the empire remained basically independent, and was viewed as ideologically irrelevant from the point of view of an empire based on royal palaces, urban centers, formal administration, and an agricultural economy.

The huge royal palaces of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal in Nineveh, the expensive celebrative programs in architecture, visual arts, and inscriptions, and the enlarged royal court including large numbers of officials and officers, astrologers, and scribes, were supported by an economy that during the conquest phase was partly based on booty and tribute. But during the phase of Assyrian-imposed peace it could only depend on internal production. Wars, destructions, and deportations intended to break local resistance and to provide manpower opened large voids in the productive structure of the empire, and the attempt to colonize marginal lands proved ineffective. Establishment of the empire had been based on the physical and cultural destruction of the annexed areas; the maintenance of the empire proved a very hard task on such a depleted productive basis.

After Assurbanipal, 20 years of wars over succession to the throne were sufficient to bring the empire to its final collapse. The external shock came from two different directions. The Chaldeans of Babylonia and the Medes united their forces to defeat the empire, to destroy the capital cities, and to transform the center of the civilized world into a wasteland. The two conquering powers were quite different and exploited their victory in different ways.

The Medes, the heirs of the pastoral tribes of the Zagros that had been attacked and oppressed for centuries by the Assyrian empire, put all their enraged energy into the destruction of Assur and Nineveh. They themselves later disappeared from the political scene, reverting to a tribal organization and even abandoning the ceremonial centers built during the Assyrian period. They were happy enough to exert their hegemony on the peoples of the highlands.

The Chaldean kings Nabopolassar (625–605) and Nebuchadnezzar II (604–562) inherited the lowlands and the urbanized part of the empire, and basically inherited the Assyrian imperial strategy. They conquered the entire Levant, including Judah, and the sieges of Tyre and Jerusalem remained famous in later historiography. Then they defeated the Egyptians, deported the vanquished populations, and devoted most of their resources to rebuilding the capital city of Babylon as the most populous and splendid metropolis of the time. They also tried to restore lower Mesopotamian agriculture to high levels of productivity.

The mental map of the “universal empire,” however, was not so satisfactory in the Chaldean version as it had been in the Assyrian version. Besides Babylonia, the political system included a major state like Egypt (Saite dynasty), a growing state like Persia (heir of Elam), and the Anatolian kingdoms of Lydia, Tabal/Cappadocia, Armenia, and Khilakku/Cilicia. The ethnic confederacies of the Medes and the Northern Arabs were no longer an outer periphery, but they became an integral part of the system. Farther away, the Greek cities and the South Arabian caravan cities were also becoming more and more linked through trade and mercenary military service to the Near Eastern world. The system remained mostly stable during half a century, although the Medes included Armenia and Cappadocia under their hegemony, and the last king of Babylonia (Nabonidus, 555–539) conquered North Arabia at the very end of the period.

The age was significant from a cultural point of view. It is the core of the so-called “Axial Age,” with the rise of the monotheistic religions of Judaism and Zoroastrianism, the activity of the major Israelite prophets in the Babylonian exile, and the blooming of the Greek “archaic” civilization with the Ionian philosophers, poets, and artists, and the formative period of democratic ideologies. It is significant that the major innovations took place not in the area of the traditional states of Babylonia and Egypt, but rather in the new ethnic states and city-states, and that the most accelerated change took place in the century of disruption between the decline of the Assyrian empire starting about 630 and the consolidation of the Persian empire about 540.

The Persian empire of the Achaemenid dynasty was not the heir of the loose Median confederacy, but rather of the Elamite tradition. Persia was virtually congruent with Elam in its narrow definition, and the Persian administration at Persepolis used the Elamite language and script for its archives. The empire was founded by Cyrus II, called the Great, who defeated the Medes in 550, annexed most of the Iranian plateau, and then conquered Lydia in 547, and Babylonia in 539, while the date of annexation of Bactria and Sogdiana, the “outer Iran” of Central Asia, remains unclear. His successor Cambyses annexed Egypt in 525, approximating again the mental map of the “universal empire” to the inhabited world of his time.

The conquest of Babylonia marked the end of independent Mesopotamian history, at least from the political point of view, since the seat of power shifted to Iran. However, the material basis of civilization remained largely unchanged. No technical innovations mark the new period, and Babylonian irrigation agriculture bloomed spectacularly in the last part of the Chaldean period and the beginning of the Achaemenid period without any breaks. Also the cultural tradition remained unchanged during the Persian period. The Babylonian scribes continued to use their own script and language, and the Babylonian deities were still worshiped in the same temples. Astrologers continued to record the position of the stars and the historical events according to their time-honored tradition, and Akkadian literary texts, omen collections, and lexicographical lists were still copied in the schools as before.

The Persian empire was in a sense a synthesis of different traditions, among which the Babylonian tradition was predominant. The empire inherited from Assyria the very idea of empire, and the basic features of the celebrative apparatus. It inherited from Elam the federal system of governance that had been typical of the Iranian peoples for a long time. And it inherited from Media important features of court life, and probably the Zoroastrian religion. The empire included the Babylonian temple-cities and the Phoenician city-states as different but equally acceptable centers for running the economy. At a symbolic level, it is significant

that the celebrative inscription of Darius I (521–486) was written in three different languages, Babylonian, Elamite, and the new Persian script, and that the seat of the court shifted seasonally between the highland cities of Ecbatana, modern Hamadan, and Persepolis and the lowlands cities of Susa and Babylon, as a formal acknowledgment of the role that the four regions of Elam, Babylonia, Media, and Persia played in the building of the empire.

Under Darius I the empire extended farther, to include the Indus Valley in the east, and Ionia in the west, but it left the Arabs and the Scythians alone. The Oriental empire had finally annexed the entire Levantine zone. Oriental despotism had prevailed over the autonomous city-states and the ethnic polities. In the extreme western periphery, in Greece, a few small city-states were still left, however. The expeditions by Darius (490) and Xerxes (480) tried to eliminate that minor anomaly and to absorb the distant and almost irrelevant appendix of the Near Eastern world. But things went differently from what the Persians planned, and the struggle between the universal empire and the last city-states not only ended in the unpredictable rebuff of the Persians, but also generated in Greek, and later European, minds the opposition between East and West, between despotism and democracy, slavery and freedom, magic and rationality, and redistribution and enterprise, which was to mark world history for many millennia to come.

## FURTHER READING

The standard historical treatment of the Ancient Near East is Edwards, Gadd, and Hammond (1971–92). A recent synthesis of the subject can be found in Kuhrt (1995). On Mesopotamia proper, the best introduction remains Oppenheim (1977). For a thematic introduction, see Sasson (1995). For more technical discussions, see Ebeling et al. (1928–). For historical geography and maps, see Röllig (1977–). More synthetic is Roaf (1990). A good collection of sources is Pritchard (1975).

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## CHAPTER TWO

# From Sedentism to States, 10 000–3000 BCE

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*Augusta McMahon*

The first sedentary communities in the Near East appeared about 10,000 BCE, and by 3000 BCE we find urbanized complex societies. The path between these dates is peppered with major innovations – farming and herding, pottery, irrigation, organized religion, public art, and architecture. It is temptingly easy to view this span of time as exhibiting progression to civilization. But there are unresolved debates and biases in our approach to this crucial era.

### Theory and Bias in Near Eastern Archaeology

The Near East was first explored for its historical archaeology and importance for Biblical and Classical traditions, and there are firmly rooted culture-history and text-based approaches that color the study of its prehistory. But problem-driven archaeological research since the 1960s has had a tremendous impact on work in the region, and scholars working in the Near East have led the way on the key questions of agriculture and state origins (Matthews 2003). However, this “big picture” research has a legacy in the lingering assumption of a unilineal trajectory toward agriculture-based complexity, marginalizing alternative economies and political systems in deserts, marshes, and fringes of agricultural communities. Farming-hunting or herding-gathering blended economies and loose tribal groupings were viable long-term possibilities, rather than temporary stages (Zeder 1994), but these alternatives remain under-researched.

Although many archaeologists continue to ask cultural and historical questions, Watkins (1992) and Cauvin (2000) have explored the symbolic revolution in the Near Eastern Neolithic (12 000–6300 BCE), focusing on psychological changes rather than economic, social, and political ones. Beyond fashions in archaeological theory, one of the most difficult problems in reconstructing Near Eastern prehistory is our vision of the region’s

inhabitants. Are the innovations we see active, brought about by individuals, or reactive, the result of inexorable systemic changes or imbalances? Most importantly, what is the nature of the state when it emerges: benevolent or tyrannical? Are Western scholars who characterize Ancient Near Eastern states as oppressive and exploitative subliminally affected by their opinions of the modern states of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey?

## **Labeling Time and Locating Sites**

Time blocks and cultural labels are basic vocabulary elements in all archaeological discourse, and some generalization is inevitable. But for Near Eastern prehistory, our time units are often over-long; for example, the Ubaid period, 5800–4000 BCE, or the Levantine Pre-Pottery Neolithic period, 8200–5600 BCE, are about 2000 years each. And the material culture used to define these units is often clustered in a few sites or a short time range within longer periods.

Near Eastern prehistory suffers further from the nature of its settlements – small, low sites in a landscape of destruction, which has been exploited for millennia. Identification of sites, even in intensive surveys, favors large multi-period settlements. Low sites are under-recognized in the rolling landscapes of northern Mesopotamia and the Levant, that is, the eastern coast of the Mediterranean, and in southern Mesopotamia sites may be removed by subsequent land use or wind and dune action or covered by river deposits.

## **Sedentism and its Effects**

Sedentism, remaining in one place throughout the year, was first identified as a necessary precursor to agriculture in the 1960s (Binford 1968; Wright 1971; Flannery 1973), and although it is no longer considered a simple equation, the link between sedentism and agriculture in the Near East persists today (Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 1989). Clearly, sedentism can create “positive feedback.” Early semi-sedentary sites already had greater densities of artifacts than did Paleolithic sites (before 18 000 BCE) of mobile peoples, along with more non-portables such as storage facilities, grinding stones, burials, and increasingly substantial architecture (Byrd 1989). Sedentism promoted acquisition, and object ownership meant reluctance to move on and leave things behind. Sedentism had a corollary in increased group size, as female fertility increased and birth spacing and mortality decreased. Larger numbers can also mean disinclination to mobility. Further, increased group size can be linked with more complex social relationships. The mortality rates that were most reduced by sedentism were those of infants and the elderly; not only did group size increase, but the nature of the group changed. The larger group contained more old individuals with memories and acquired status, and more young individuals with hopes for the future. And this social environment preceded and provided fertile ground for agriculture.

Sedentary farmers had less free time than nomadic hunter-gatherers (Bender 1975). The schedules and concepts of work differed. Farming involved spikes of intensive labor and troughs of free time, and the free time was differently arranged across the

year. This new arrangement opened up vistas for non-subsistence activities. But the effects of sedentism and agriculture were not all positive. Reduction of resource diversity could mean greater risk of catastrophe. A restricted-resource agriculture-based diet could mean nutritional deficiencies and dental problems (Smith et al. 1984). The tighter arrangement of sedentary villages and their piles of rubbish (and rats) meant higher rates of infectious disease, and closer contact between humans and animals might favor species-jumping diseases, as organisms associated with animals came into contact with new potential hosts. The repetitive manual labor involved in grain processing could cause skeletal stress (Molleson 2000). Apparently, positives did outweigh negatives, but the persistence of hunting well into the historic periods points out the necessity for keeping alternatives open.

## Foraging, Cultivation, and Domestication

There is an indivisible continuum from mobile to fully sedentary settlements, mirrored by a continuum from foraging to farming. Economic stages can be defined: “foraging” implies opportunistic exploitation of resources; “intensive foraging” indicates strategic decisions to focus on a few species or to exploit a wide range. “Cultivation” means manipulation or taming of individual animals, while “agriculture” involves domestication of species, with dependency of plants and animals on humans for reproduction and protection. But in the Near East these economies were neither mutually exclusive nor necessarily linked. A group might rely on both farmed and hunted species. Species might be cultivated but not subsequently domesticated, like the gazelle in the Levant before the Neolithic. And crucially, domestication of plants and animals also “domesticates” human populations, imposing limits on movement and time.

## Where was the Origin of Agriculture?

Experiments by Hillman and Davies (1990) indicate that domestication of grain and consequent changes in the plants may be achieved within 20 to 30 years by specific harvesting techniques, but can take 200 years or more. In animals, with lengthier generations, morphological changes are even slower to appear. By the time we see the “first” domestic plant or animal, the decision that brought it about was already generations distant. But this has not prevented many scholars from searching for those elusive “firsts.”

Most recent literature reconstructs the center of agriculture in the southern Levant, with subsequent spread to the rest of the Near East and Europe (McCorriston and Hole 1991; Wright 1993; Bar-Yosef and Meadow 1995; Bar-Yosef 2002). But this Levant-centric presentation is clouded by modern political tensions. A smaller amount of archaeological research has been done in the comparable environmental zone of the Zagros foothills along the Iran–Iraq border, and the extant work is mostly pre-1979, creating a knowledge gap there and a bias towards the Levant as the supposed center for agricultural origins. Research in Syria and southeast Turkey has only begun to alter the picture (Willcox 1999).

Many sites have provided archaeological evidence for early “founder crops” with the larger size, restricted dissemination mechanism, and morphological changes that mark them as domesticated. For the Near East the founder crops were emmer and einkorn wheat, barley, lentils, peas, chickpeas, and bitter vetch. Domesticated emmer wheat and barley from southern Levant sites such as Jericho (7500 BCE) and Netiv Hagdud (8260–7800 BCE) were increasingly joined by early domestic grains from sites in other regions (the date of the Jericho grain has been disputed [Nesbitt and Samuel 1998]; the earliest evidence for domesticated grain from this site may date as late as 7200 BCE): Tell Abu Hureyra on the Euphrates in Syria (einkorn, emmer, and barley 7700 BCE, domestic rye possibly as early as 10 000 BCE), Tell Aswad near Damascus (emmer and barley from 7800–7600 BCE), and in southeast Turkey, Cafer Höyük (einkorn, emmer, and barley 7500 BCE), Çayönü (einkorn, emmer, and barley 7300–7200 BCE), and Nevalı Çori (einkorn 7200 BCE).

Archaeologically derived evidence for domestic plants is now supplemented with genetic research. Distribution maps of wild progenitors of domestic species have been updated with this genetic profiling. These studies are complicated by modern agricultural practices and the possibility of relatively recent genetic change within the wild populations (Harlan and Zohary 1966; Heun et al. 1997), but homogeneities found have led to the conclusion that there was a core zone within which grain and legume domestication took place. Accumulation of evidence for einkorn and emmer wheats points toward a southeastern Turkey or northern Syria origin for domestication (Nesbitt and Samuel 1998; Willcox 1999; Lev-Yadun et al. 2000; Özkan et al. 2002).

Domestication of animals has also been studied through the bones themselves and through profiles of age and sex at death. Domestic animals are smaller, lighter, and lose the defensive mechanisms seen in wild forms. But there are problems with size assessments, as these may relate to climatic or topographic variations and are complicated by differences between the sexes. Age and gender profiles are more reliable; managed and domesticated animals usually show selective culling of young males and late killing of adult females.

The dog was certainly the first domesticated animal, in the Epipaleolithic in the Levant, about 14 000 years before the present and perhaps much earlier. The dog was unique in that it was domesticated for protection and hunting, a companion and servant rather than a source of meat, milk, hair, or traction, as were the pig, goat, sheep, and cattle that followed. The Zagros foothills have been posited as the core animal domestication zone (Hole 1984). The earliest known domesticated goat bone has been identified from Ganj Dareh, initially on the basis of small size, reconfirmed by gender and age kill patterns (Zeder and Hesse 2000); this is currently radiocarbon dated to about 7960–7660 BCE. Alternatively, pigs in southeast Turkey may have been the second animal domestication (Rosenberg 1999).

Food is arguably basic to human concepts of the self and is involved in everything from taboos to feasting, so the species shift, as well as the very fact of domestication, means a major change in self-perception and self-expression. Another issue is that complementary farming-herding practices became common over a wide area during a relatively short time span. Why did this happen?

## Agriculture and Herding: Choice or Necessity?

Entwined with arguments over locations are debates over reasons for domestication. Climate change-based hypotheses (Childe 1928) were followed by evolutionary ideas (Braidwood 1960), population pressure theories (Boserup 1965; Binford 1968; Smith and Young 1972; Flannery 1973), systems theory explanations (Redman 1978; Henry 1989), and psychological concepts (Cauvin 2000). Childe named the “Neolithic Revolution,” but his vision, that climate drying forced development of agriculture in “oases,” is no longer accepted. Nevertheless, the Younger Dryas event, a relatively rapid climatic shift to cooler and drier conditions from about 11 000 years before present, is recognized as impacting human economy, especially in the Levant (Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 1989; Bar-Yosef 1996; Hole 1997; Sherratt 1997; Wright 1993). Some would see the cooling and drying climate as having reduced food supplies and encouraged individuals to reconstruct previously available wild stands of grain and herds in now marginal areas (Moore and Hillman 1992). Others would see climate change encouraging stronger seasonality and the migration of plants to new zones and into contact with semi-sedentary humans (McCorriston and Hole 1991). The impact of this event in Anatolia, modern Turkey, and the Zagros has not been sufficiently researched.

Braidwood noticed that humans and potential domesticates lived together on the “hilly flanks” of the Zagros, Taurus, and Lebanon mountains. There, he postulated, simple proximity and humans’ love of experimentation led to cultivation and domestication, although he was later to revise that view (Braidwood et al. 1983). Boserup (1965) argued that technological changes responded to human population growth. Her idea was elaborated by identification of optimal zones (Smith and Young 1972) or marginal zones (Binford 1968; Flannery 1973), within which an increasing population might develop agriculture. Systems theory acknowledges positive and negative feedbacks within the relationships among environment, geography, humans, and domesticates, but this reduction of humans to parts of a system may be too impersonal. More recently, Watkins (1992) and Cauvin (2000) envision agriculture as embedded within a series of wider changes in symbolic and religious behaviors and in recognition of dichotomies between male and female, natural and artificial, human and “super-human.” But there is still no consensus on whether agriculture was chosen or forced.

## Sedentism and Definitions of Space

Domestic structures increased in solidity and size during the Epipaleolithic (18 000–8000 BCE) and early Neolithic (8000–6000 BCE). Further, within the Neolithic there was a shift from round to rectilinear houses. It is easier to add to or divide a rectilinear house than a round one, so the shift may point to increasing household size and complexity. Also, very different mental concepts are involved in circular and rectilinear architecture. A round house has two units, the continuous wall and a roof. A rectilinear house involves a minimum of five units, four discrete walls and a roof. The investment in a rectilinear house, no matter what size, was higher than in a circular one.

A more permanent definition of private space does not mean that the idea was new, but that visible marking of space had become more important. This may have been due to

better definition of edges and internal divisions of communities (Watkins 1992). It might also be linked to notions of land ownership that came with agriculture and household-based production and consumption (Byrd 1994). Or space definition might relate to increases in social distance, as a community increased in size, requiring greater structuring of inhabitants' interactions and communication of taboos and tolerances.

Public buildings, communally constructed if not necessarily community-accessible, also appeared in the early Neolithic and may be seen as indicators of increased attachment to a place. The tower and settlement wall at Neolithic Jericho is an example that has been identified as defensive (Kenyon 1981), or as a means of water management, or a shrine platform (Bar-Yosef 1986). Neolithic Maghzaliyah, in northern Iraq, had a settlement wall, and in southeast Turkey Neolithic sites had special buildings, distinct from houses in plan, construction, and contents (Hauptmann 1993; Özdogan and Basgelen 1999; Schmidt 2000). These buildings may have been exclusive elite advertising, or they may have been communally owned religious structures. But either way, they might have been intended as prominent visual cues of landscape ownership.

## Pottery and Structural Bias

Production of pottery was closely coupled with sedentism and farming. Pottery was heavy, breakable, and difficult to transport, and was almost exclusively found among sedentary peoples. The lulls in agricultural labor were easily filled by pottery production, and straw generated after harvest made ideal pottery temper. Economy and technology dovetailed perfectly.

But what problem did the invention of pottery solve? Morphologically similar containers existed before pottery, in stone, lime-plaster, basketry, and wood. Ceramic containers were more portable than stone but less so than baskets. Pottery vessels were more secure than pits or bins, so the impact on storage was potentially substantial. However, the earliest pottery vessels were not storage jars, but bowls, small jars, and cooking vessels. The main areas in which pottery had a positive impact were cooking, especially boiling grain, and serving and eating.

As soon as the technical aspects of production were established in the late eighth millennium BCE, the surface of pottery vessels became a canvas for artistic expression in the applied clay blobs and paint dribbles of northern Mesopotamian wares, rocker and punched patterns of Amuq A, and early Zagros "tadpole" ware that may imitate the look of tightly woven baskets. Later, Hassuna period cross-hatching and geometric designs enlivened an otherwise drab fabric (6300–5700 BCE). By the time we reach the Samarran ware (6100–5500 BCE) with its dense geometric or elaborate pictorial decoration, the symbolic coding was rich, potentially signaling wealth and social identity, family or ethnic affiliations, or even archetypal myths. Feasting was the most likely outlet for display of this signaling, but it is unclear whether feasting was competitive or collaborative at this early date.

Ultimately, pottery is implicated in a conceptual bias in our reconstruction of the past. Is pottery production so important that its absence should define a time period (the awkward "Pre-Pottery Neolithic," 8000–6500 BCE)? From the earliest humans through the Pre-Pottery Neolithic, preserved material culture was dominated by stone tools. But from the Pottery Neolithic onward (6500 BCE), the most common artifact was pottery, and pottery

becomes our primary instrument for labeling time and society – a shift from tools associated with acquisition to tools associated with consumption. This surely has an effect on our view of society in the later Neolithic and thereafter, consumption seeming to us more civilized and peaceful than the messy and tiring process of acquisition.

## Chiefdoms?

A progression from band to tribe to chiefdom to state was first expounded by Service (1975), to replace the progression from savagery to barbarism to civilization popular in nineteenth-century scholarship. Many scholars think chiefdoms preceded states (Wright 1984; Earle 1987), although the possibility remains that chiefdoms were reactions to states or unrelated organizational forms.

The earliest states in the Near East appeared in the later fourth millennium BCE, the Uruk period, in southern Mesopotamia. The argument might be made that a state existed in northern Mesopotamia or Anatolia contemporary with or even prior to that in southern Mesopotamia, since there are urban sites such as Tell Brak in Syria (about 100 hectares or 247 acres) and impressive buildings at Hacinebi and Arslan Tepe in Turkey. The earlier view of these areas as peripheries to a southern core is currently under revision. But despite evidence of complexity, the north has yet to produce a building to rival Uruk's Eanna IV temple complex or artworks like the Warka vase. Nor did northern Mesopotamian material culture expand into other regions, as did that of the south. The north was complex and vibrant but still owed much to, and followed the lead of, the south.

If the chiefdom preceded the state, we need to look for it in the Ubaid period of the sixth to fifth millennia (5800–4000 BCE). A chiefdom is structurally kinship-based, with a degree of social complexity and inequality and a single leader, in contrast to the corporate entity implied by a state. The Ubaid does offer many identifiers of chiefdoms: two-tier settlement hierarchies, specialist production of pottery, large well-planned structures at Tell ‘Oueili, shrines at Eridu, possible chiefs' houses at Tell Abada, and stamp seals indicating the increased importance of ownership. An unresolved question is whether the power of Ubaid chiefs was based on “wealth finance,” restricted luxuries, as is traditionally assumed for chiefdoms (D'Altroy and Earle 1985; Earle 1991), or on “staple finance,” surplus basic materials such as grain, with control of the land, water, and labor which allowed surpluses (Stein 1994, 1996). Imported luxuries do not appear in quantity in Ubaid sites, while the Tell Abada houses do have space for grain storage and the Tell ‘Oueili structures have been interpreted as granaries (Huot 1996). Nevertheless, it seems that the Ubaid power base rested on a combination of basics and luxuries, a strategy that allowed acquisition and advertisement of power at different levels. And later the Uruk state had the same dual foundation.

## Origins of the Mesopotamian State

Theoretical approaches to state origins match trends in approaches to agriculture origins, and there are comparable arguments over whether the state was a choice or an inevitability. Explanatory theories have replaced evolutionary assumptions (Childe 1928; Service

1975). Classic explanatory theories developed for other regions, for example, the hypothesis that states arose to effect irrigation or to reduce conflict, have proved inadequate for the Mesopotamian situation, but other forces that scholars have suggested include population pressure (Smith and Young 1972), climate change, and river shifts (Hole 1994). Systems theory has also been applied, with its identification of the many factors that contribute to social change (Adams 1966, 1981; Redman 1978). But the most enduringly popular explanations for Mesopotamian state origins involve trade and its management (Wright and Johnson 1975; Oates 1993; Algaze 2001a). Scholars have focused on positive aspects of the Mesopotamian river plains – agricultural surplus potential, predictability of rainfall and floods, efficient water transport – but also point out the necessity for local and long-distance trade to acquire and disperse key items and resources, trade which promoted development of a state structure.

But in southern Mesopotamia we have only scattered excavated material of the Ubaid and early Uruk periods. For the earlier Uruk period in the south, the Eanna Sounding at Uruk supplies a pottery sequence, but not without problems (Sürenhagen 1986, 1987; Nissen 2002); a similar stratigraphic sounding at Nippur was also limited in scale (Porada et al. 1992). The Ubaid levels at Eridu (Safar, Mustafa, and Lloyd 1981) and Tell ‘Oueili (Huot 1996) offer limited hints of pre-Uruk developments. Because of the sparse evidence, we are too willing to place Levantine Neolithic sedentary communities, north Mesopotamian Hassuna farming villages, and Ubaid chiefs’ houses in a trajectory leading to urban sites of south Mesopotamia, while these are mere footnotes to the earliest state complexity. This had strictly southern Mesopotamian predecessors, and until excavation in south Iraq is again possible, we have a flimsy framework derived from neighboring regions and limited local material. It may even be the case that the state was seen first and most dramatically at Uruk because of its proximity to the marshes and head of the Arabian Gulf, which offered a unique environmental setting and range of resources. Even Nippur, Umma, and other southern sites may have learned “stateness” from Uruk.

## Nature of the State

Most visions of the Mesopotamian state involve centralized control and vertical hierarchy (Adams 1966, 1981; Adams and Nissen 1972; Wright and Johnson 1975; Wright 1977; Nissen 1988). Focus is on the material evidence of elites and of state economic administration – public buildings and art, seals, bullae (clay tags), tablets that recorded movement of goods, and mass-produced pottery. There is assumed to have been efficient gathering and redistribution of agricultural products, textiles, and other manufactured items, grounded in an urban core and a rural periphery.

Scholars see the Mesopotamian state as urban, typified by Uruk in the Late Uruk period around 3100 BCE, at about 250 hectares or 620 acres and with population estimates of up to 40,000 inhabitants (Nissen 2002). But what do we know of south Mesopotamia beyond Uruk, and what of Uruk beyond its size and the layout of its religious quarter in the final phase?

Urbanization also “ruralizes.” Pre-urban and post-urban villages may appear similar, but small villages within a larger system have a new counterpoint in urban sites, and the

land between sites takes on a new meaning (Yoffee 1995). The Uruk period with its four-tier hierarchy of site sizes, which is visible in survey around Uruk (Adams and Nissen 1972; Nissen 2002), may not exactly match a power hierarchy but does translate into variability in settlement character. Craft production and centers of religion and secular administration may be displaced to urban centers, creating a system of rural dependency. Pottery and flint tool production remained at the village level of production in the Uruk period at Abu Salabikh (Pollock, Pope, and Coursey 1996). But metallurgy seems to have been restricted to urban sites, while centralization of textile production, often assumed, remains unproven. We know a great deal about the vertical inequalities of the Mesopotamian state, but need more research into rural sites and into household and private economies. The shift in terminology from “state” to “complex society” in archaeological discourse is welcome, with its emphasis on horizontal variation as well as vertical structures. But it must be applied more comprehensively to the Uruk period situation.

And the vertical inequalities may not necessarily mean exploitation and oppression, as is often supposed. It is notable that images of leaders in the Uruk period generally did not dominate, but rulers were depicted as unifying and protecting. There are a few seal impressions representing a ruler with captives, but the majority of artworks showed him in ritual contexts or symbolic scenes with animals or building projects. Texts interpreted as ration lists for enslaved or disenfranchised workers may equally be lists of payment for part-time work, in an economy where staple goods acted as money.

One recent theory avoids definitions and looks to “effects” of states: “identification, legibility, and spatialization” (Trouillot 2001). Legibility is particularly apt for the early Mesopotamian state, with its new visible language, written and iconographic ruler images, cylinder seals and clay tablets, temple complexes, and the urban sites themselves. It is unclear whether Mesopotamian states brought a new spatialization, with borders and enforced population movements, inside to outside, outside to inside, or displacement within. Population movements were certainly a feature of late Mesopotamian states like the Neo-Assyrian empire. And for fourth millennium BCE Uruk, we see a suddenly larger urban center and depopulation of its immediate surroundings (Adams and Nissen 1972). It is unlikely that this was merely the result of a need for protection or the draw of employment opportunities. But Uruk was an anomaly, and the smaller city-states of Nippur and Adab, mostly built through incremental growth, may be more typical. The identification effect – all individuals within a state identifying as members of it – is related to one of Childe’s traits of civilization, which sees membership based on location, rather than kinship. We do not yet have the equipment to assess to what degree early inhabitants of cities and their hinterlands identified themselves as citizens of Uruk or Nippur. But the strength of family relations in Mesopotamia into the first millennium BCE and beyond suggests that identification was negotiated through both physical location and kinship.

## Art and Architecture

Natufian carved bone animals and stone human figures from 10 500 to 8200 BCE are the earliest artworks in the Near East. Although their contexts are often unclear, they are surely possessions and expressions of individuals, not of a kin or residence group. And art

remained primarily in the realm of individuals into the fourth millennium; the portable figurines of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic through Ubaid periods (8000–4000 BCE) were individually rather than corporately owned. But the Anatolian Neolithic sites of Nevalı Çori and Göbekli Tepe present early monumental art: massive stone pillars with relief figures of wild animals or of rough human forms. The effort of transporting and carving the stones was certainly shared across the community, which then owned them corporately. The slightly later wall painting of an onager hunt at Umm Dabaghiyah was also potentially a group effort.

Decoration on pottery was available to all. But art became restricted in access in the Uruk period, even as media and motifs expanded. Figurines representing average humans disappeared and did not reappear in quantity until the later third millennium BCE. Reliefs and statues representing kings, priests, and possibly deities, dominated. Instead of figurines of pregnant women, celebrating fertility, we have cylinder seals showing rows of women at looms, celebrating mass production. Figurines of wild animals were replaced by stylized representations of well-behaved temple flocks. Art was apparently hijacked to the ordered world of the elite as high culture (Baines and Yoffee 1998).

We might view all art produced by an elite as propaganda, to maintain, reinforce, or extend power. But Uruk period art might also have been simply educational. The generic leader figure seen in statues, reliefs, and seals was unlike any prior human representation, just as the leaders themselves were a new category. The rounded hat, schematic beard, and cross-hatched skirt were new ruler identifiers, as was the limited range of contexts in which the ruler was shown: religious, symbolic, and occasionally military. Both the easy legibility of this information and its appropriateness meant that much of the visual vocabulary introduced in the Uruk period, like kings killing lions, was still in use in the Neo-Assyrian and Persian periods, 2700 years later. The division of the world into horizontal registers and conceptual categories, as represented on the Warka vase, similarly presented new concepts and showed comparable persistence.

Monumental architecture can be propaganda; Trigger (1990) pointed out that monumental architecture in early complex societies was often bigger and more elaborate than was required by function. The building of the Late Uruk temple complexes of Uruk Eanna IV and the Anu ziggurat, followed by unnecessary razing and rebuilding, looks very like an attempt to impress the power of an authority on a subject population. But would a small elite have been able to coerce a large labor pool to build monuments that only served to remind of their oppression? The temples celebrated not the ruling class, but nature-based deities who created and protected “civilized” society. The temple complexes were not just buildings commissioned by elites, but vibrant places for ritual and houses for the gods. Now unused and depopulated, the buildings appear to us as evidence of tyranny.

## Writing

“Prehistory” is as biased as “pre-pottery.” Writing’s transformation of human life was not entirely for the better. The earliest texts in the Near East, from the end of the Uruk period, about 3100 BCE, were primarily economic; and it is tempting to believe there could be no

bias in such basic documentation. But the texts belonged to temple-palace institutions and were instrumental in our vision of the Uruk state as economically centralized. The absence of economic texts from villages does not mean an absence of economic behavior there. The Late Uruk “Professions List” presents us with an indigenous vision of society’s vertical and horizontal categories, but this list was written by scribes firmly located near the top (Nissen et al. 1993, pp. 110–115).

Most scholars believe that numeracy and information storage in the Near East had had a long history (Schmandt-Besserat 1992; Nissen et al. 1993; Englund 1991). Accounting was present from the Neolithic, in the form of clay and stone tokens, initially loose, then from the late fourth millennium BCE encased in clay bullae or tags. The idea is that the patterns of the tokens were reduced to impressions and ultimately to incised signs on flat clay tablets, resulting in the earliest writing. This is an elegant theory, linking disparate elements of the archaeological record. Among tokens there were definable size and shape categories, and repetition that implies agreed meanings. But equally there were unique tokens, and we do not know when or how the tokens might have been transferred to two dimensions (Nissen 2002). The archaeological evidence for the relevant period is ambiguous and limited, with tokens in bullae and early numerical and pictographic tablets overlapping in time and a gap in the data existing for the Early Uruk.

And then there is the problem of the transition from numeracy to literacy. Compared with the long life of tokens, writing developed rapidly and surely was a response to the state’s need to deal with complex record-keeping and transactions (Nissen et al. 1993; Michalowski 1993). The complexity of transferal of an aural, oral, and mental code to a visual code does imply that writing was the conscious solution to a problem. And the distance created by such transferal potentially made written communication into something esoteric and restricted. Restricted literacy meant restricted knowledge, and writing itself could be an avenue for bias and deception.

Discussion of the development of writing in Mesopotamia often involves the question of whether writing always signifies or encodes speech. Pictographic writing, such as that of the earliest tablets, can evade connection with speech; a symbol for a ziggurat, for instance, might relate to either a mental image of a temple tower or the spoken word “ziggurat.” Neither system of translation, sound to symbol or mental image to symbol, can be called more logical.

## Production and Consumption

Archaeologists distinguish craft specializations as “independent” or as “attached,” most often with a focus on the New World (Brumfiel and Earle 1987; Costin 1991; Inomata 2001). Independent specialization involves production for an assumed, but amorphous, demand for goods from the general population; attached specialization means production of goods for patrons, with implications of complex society and elite control of media and motifs. Attached specialists generally produce valuable goods, while independent specialists produce utilitarian items (Stein 1996).

For the Ubaid period (about 5800–4000 BCE) and Uruk period (about 4000–3100 BCE) in Mesopotamia we have yet to reconstruct the pattern of craft production. Even for the

historical periods, with detailed information of who was working for whom and producing what, we often cannot be sure that attached specialists recorded in texts were attached full time or even specialists full time. An Ubaid period potter might create common wares and elaborate painted wares for different clientele, but fire them at the same time in one kiln, blurring the specialization boundaries. Similarly, textile production might be household-based, although the final products had many destinations.

In the Uruk period, there were surely attached craft specialists who produced cylinder seals, stone vessels, and statues exclusively for the temple or palace and its elite occupants. The “Professions List” points to the existence of potters, weavers, and carpenters who may have been producing for either elite or common demands, or both (Nissen et al. 1993, pp. 110–115). Were these individuals full-time specialists? And is there any link between value of product and status of producer? Attached specialists may be of low status because of their dependence on patrons. But their esoteric knowledge, artistic skill, and access to restricted media and motifs might be socially valuable. While cylinder seals were clearly valuable because of medium, motifs, artistic skill, and use, what about, for instance, the hundreds of clay cones used for public building decoration? This was clearly an attached specialization, since cones were used exclusively by the temple and palace. But the skill level was low and the medium cheap and ubiquitous. Technically, anyone could have decorated his or her house with cone mosaics. The temple and palace control made clay cones absurdly valuable, but was this status passed on to their producers?

Standardization of pottery was present in shape and style from the Pottery Neolithic (after 6500 BCE). But in the Uruk period, we see probable mass-production. Decoration dropped to a minimum; volumes as well as forms may have been standardized. Many vessels were made on a fast potter’s wheel, and it is possible that some pottery production moved from the hands of women to those of men, while women were more often found at the weaving loom. But questions persist about pottery’s mode of production.

We cannot agree who was responsible for production of the ubiquitous beveled-rim bowl, nor can we agree on its purpose. Was this a ration bowl, produced under elite management, filled under that management, and distributed by it (Nissen 1970, 2002)? Might it have been produced in less regulated circumstances, within the family or village, but brought to the elite for filling? Or neither? Beveled-rim bowls have also been interpreted as salt containers (Buccellati 1990), bread-molds (Millard 1988; Chazan and Lehner 1990), yoghurt containers (Delougaz 1952), temple-offering bowls (Mallowan 1933; Beale 1978), and vessels used at banquets organized by elites (Forest 1987). The reconstruction of the beveled-rim bowl as ration container is problematic. As any refugee knows, the size of container for receiving rations is irrelevant, a plastic bag or empty tin will do; the sole container for which size is important is that held in the hand issuing rations.

## **Trade, Interaction, and the Uruk Expansion**

In concert with development of the state, about 4000 to 3000 BCE, the Near East witnessed an expansion of population and material culture from southern Mesopotamia into northern Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and the Iranian Zagros Mountains. New sites with

purely southern Mesopotamian culture were founded, while at long-occupied sites local traditions were overrun by southern pottery and architecture. These colonies were an essential element of early Mesopotamian complex society, and this phenomenon is one of the most intensively studied aspects of the region. The most popular current model is that these were southern trade colonies, established to ensure continuous and increased access to the resources of the mountainous areas around the lower river plains – timber, stones, and metals. But we are now in the uncomfortable position of knowing far more about the Uruk period at these sites than we do about the contemporary southern Mesopotamian homeland. And the fact that most work on the Mesopotamian state for several decades has necessarily been based in this “Uruk expansion phenomenon” has perhaps meant an overestimation of trade’s importance for that state. It must be emphasized that the Uruk phenomenon was an intensification of an interaction sphere present in the region for millennia.

Initially these sites were viewed as evidence for the south Mesopotamian core exploiting peripheral areas (Algaze 1993). But it is now generally acknowledged that the north exhibited social complexity before the arrival of southern Uruk people and material culture, and the relationship cannot be considered asymmetrical (Algaze 2001b; Stein 2001). The purpose of the southern expansion is still debated between those who see it as motivated by desire to control resources and those who see it as motivated by desire simply to gain access to resources. There was also great variability within the expansion phenomenon, from genuine southern Mesopotamian settlements as at Habuba Kabira in central Syria, through southern outposts embedded within local populations seen at Hacinebi in Turkey, to sites which retained local traditions while borrowing from the south, illustrated at Arslan Tepe, also in Turkey. Was each colony linked to a different city-state in the south, or did southern cities unite to invest in an array of colonies, or were the colonies’ inhabitants economic migrants, no longer associated with the south at all? Questions about the expansion remain, but it is far more important that we return to ask questions in and of south Iraq.

## FURTHER READING

Useful introductions include Algaze (2001a,b) and Stein (1994, 2001). A recent volume is McMahon and Crawford (2015).

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PART II

## THE PHYSICAL WORLD

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## CHAPTER THREE

# Archaeology and the Ancient Near East: Renewing a Culture-Historical Partnership

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*Marie-Henriette Gates*

The two disciplines of archaeology and history both claim authority for their several centuries of interdependent research on the Ancient Near East. Archaeology's contributions to Ancient Near Eastern history include, at a minimum, supplying the raw textual data (archives and monumental inscriptions), identifying ancient sites on the ground, and proving chronological outlines, all first steps leading to the reconstruction of historical narratives. In exchange, written documentation from the Ancient Near East provides an otherwise inaccessible dimension for many issues relating to the archaeological analysis of its societies. The two fields thus complement each other, but by definition examine their subjects with different sources, and from these orient themselves toward different objectives.

This chapter will touch on some aspects of the past, recent and current relationship between archaeology or the archaeological perspective and Ancient Near Eastern history. History is defined here in terms deriving from the *Annales* school of French historians to cover events as well as mentalities, the patterns of social and economic behavior whose roots are cultural, while "historian" refers to the specialist whose primary sources are written (Bloch 1953; Braudel 1972). The archaeologist, in contrast, relies on the material record rather than the written one, and consults artifacts, foodstuffs, building plans, settlement patterns, and other tangible remains of human activity for primary interpretive data. Reconstructing sequences of events and the personalities behind them remains the preserve of the historian, while issues of cultural definition and change, within a specific context and in a broader landscape, concern the archaeologist.

Historian and archaeologist together share the ambition and need to recreate mentalities and social patterns, Braudel's second tier of historical analysis, and in this respect the two fields would appear to be closely linked. The extent to which they have formed alliances in their mutual program of resurrecting the ancient civilizations of the Near East is presented here from the archaeological side of their association. After alternating cycles of

proximity and separation spanning the twentieth century CE, today's generation of researchers is reaffirming the culture-historical partnership by applying innovative approaches jointly to both fields.

## **Archaeology's Service to Ancient Near Eastern History**

All general histories of the Ancient Near East refer to sites and objects in their discussions, and often include illustrations, plans, and reconstructions. These have been almost exclusively provided by excavations carried out in the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries CE, at Mesopotamian urban sites like Warka, Ur, and Babylon, Assur, and the later Assyrian capitals, and in the west, Mari, Ugarit, and the Hittite capital Hattussa. Although many of these projects continued into this century, and recent findings occasionally make their way into new historical accounts, they nonetheless hardly alter, reconfigure, or replace the familiar standards. No excavations begun since the 1950s have enjoyed a similar popularity among historians.

The reasons behind this conservatism are several. The most obvious is that excavations before World War II were carried out on a scale appropriate to recovering historical information. Archaeologists exposed entire cities without being encumbered by sampling techniques, subsistence strategies, micromorphology, post-depositional processes, or the statistical recording of potsherds (for these techniques, see Matthews 2003). Nor did they waste much time on occupational levels later than the period or periods that interested them as historically significant and illustrious, or on subphases of occupation within a building or period. The single-minded pursuit of total site recovery for specific levels aimed at, and succeeded in, producing urban plans, placing monumental buildings within their administrative neighborhoods, and uncovering large structures in their entirety (Parrot 1953, p. 40). We can indeed be grateful for the accomplishments of this stage in the history of archaeological research. It revealed the layouts of cities like Babylon and Assur that are far beyond what the 10 × 10 meter, or 33-foot, trench – the largest module in current use – can ever hope to expose. By providing a preliminary framework and typology for architecture, urbanism, and art in the Ancient Near East, such projects cleared the way for later generations of excavators to concentrate on a finer-grained recovery of comparable or contrasting sites.

Secondly, a major motive behind the choice of which sites to excavate was to find direct evidence for supplementing and reconstructing history. Urban centers therefore took precedence over towns and villages, as did the excavation of their monumental buildings, whose construction could more likely be connected to historical episodes and important figures than private houses. Since the mid-nineteenth century CE, when Botta's and Layard's discoveries at the Assyrian capitals of Khorsabad and Nimrud first showed that palaces could be expected to contain inscriptions on their walls and tablets inside their rooms, and that such contexts might confirm or enrich a historical outline initially drawn from the Old Testament and the Greek historian Herodotus, they became preferred targets because they seemed more informative. Once the deciphered inscriptions and tablets demonstrated the wealth of social and economic detail to be anticipated from such sources, their recovery became a driving force behind archaeological excavation. Excavators were

pressed by the need to find cuneiform tablets, as one can read in the prefaces to their reports. By the third day of the first campaign at Mari in 1933, although a statue of Sumerian type had already been found, “we were not satisfied since Paris was urging us to hurry up and discover ‘a text’” (Parrot 1974, p. 15).

Inscribed finds were also thought to compensate for stratigraphic complexity, recycling, or imperfect excavating, by generating of themselves the required chronological and contextual information (at Byblos: Dunand 1954, pp. 3–7; Dunand 1968, pp. 99–100). That the remarkable series of inscribed statues commissioned by Gudea and his relatives was discovered in a palace built and occupied about 1800 years after their lifetimes did not affect assigning these early governors of Lagash to their correct historical place (Azarpay 1990, p. 97; de Genouillac 1936b, pp. 9–10; Suter 2000, pp. 33–36). It seems incidental that the temple in which the dedications originally stood was not recovered, and indeed most likely destroyed, by its excavator (Lloyd 1980: 159–60). The texts inscribed on the statues related, in satisfactory detail, the circumstances surrounding the temple’s construction and the name of its patron-god; and a model brick on the lap of Statue B (“Gudea the architect,” in his own words) was incised with his divinely inspired temple plan. Sculptures such as these, which prompted museums throughout the world to sponsor projects in the hope of securing display-worthy artwork, also contributed to focusing excavation on royal and urban centers with historic credentials. Thus de Sarzac, the first excavator of Gudea’s temple at Telloh/ancient Girsu, could be congratulated for making the Louvre “the chief European treasure-house of early Babylonian [Sumerian] art and history” (de Genouillac 1936a, p. 1).<sup>1</sup>

Finally, Near Eastern projects carried out before the 1950s were conducted with small teams, large local labor forces, and seasons lasting six months or more, three conditions that favored the emergence of the big picture. The Zimri-Lim palace at Mari, for example, a 2.5 hectare, or 6 acre, complex with over 260 rooms preserved in parts to a height of 5 m, or 16 feet, was dug in only four years (12 months of fieldwork) by a four-person staff and 230 workmen (Parrot 1953, pp. 28–9; Parrot 1974, pp. 19–20). De Morgan, digging at Susa before World War I, considered 1000 to 1500 workers an appropriate labor force, although a few decades later Parrot could criticize this as more suitable for a “civil engineering project,” with any number above 300 posing a “serious threat to scientific work” (1953: 27). At Mari as elsewhere, supervision of the excavation’s progress and the recording of its findings were the responsibility of the single field director and the project head, the two other staff members being assigned to architectural plans and finds illustration, photography, and preliminary conservation.

The results of such broad enterprises suited a narrative publication format whose sweeping conclusions could be readily adapted into historical accounts. Object catalogs and technical discussions for specialists were placed at the end of this narrative, and often set in smaller print. Finds thus illustrated the context, instead of constituting the basis for its interpretation. The recovery of immense quantities of artifacts also favored selecting those few with artistic and historic merit that best served the excavation’s immediate aims. One must recognize in their selection a deliberate sampling strategy, created for a research program that made the archaeologist a full partner of the historian. In the words of Parrot, Mari’s distinguished excavator, historic sites do not lend themselves to “digging with a microscope” (1974, p. 19).

From this heroic era of fieldwork emerged a historical and chronological framework for the Ancient Near East that, until the past decade, survived challenges to its fundamental structure by favoring those methodological advances in fieldwork that relate to historical issues, such as demography. In particular, an interest in the dynamic between urban centers and their countryside led to assimilating information collected by archaeological surveys (Matthews 2003, pp. 182–188); and technical advances in recording, assessing, and reconstructing the archaeological landscape (Wilkinson 1993, 2013; Ur 2013) became integrated into mainstream views of Mesopotamian social history. At another level, efforts to understand archival practices and economic systems likewise encouraged close study of the archaeological contexts where individual archives were found (Zettler 1996; Reichel 2001; Von Dassow 2005). However, the changes that transformed archaeological research after the mid-twentieth century, and shaped its many excavation projects, did not coincide well with a historical agenda. Much post-1950s archaeological research even seemed irrelevant to a historical scheme, given the technical perspective and problem-oriented focus it practices. Consequently, and despite findings of the highest relevance, newer discoveries continued deferring to the repertoire's known standards. Thus for decades the spectacular (non-epigraphic) finds from Tell Mardikh, ancient Ebla, stayed consigned to a few lines only in connection with the conquests of Akkadian kings – hardly more than before the site was excavated, and despite its widely circulated and accessible publications (Matthiae 1977, 1985; Matthiae et al. 1995).

Fortunately, this entrenched tradition is undergoing revision. The integration of recently excavated sites in Syria into a current overview of ancient Sumer (Crawford 2013) announces a welcome shift toward new collaborative attitudes. The region's cultural definition as a northern entity of Mesopotamia has come to the fore through intensive salvage fieldwork since the 1960s, and its archaeological features do offer critical evidence about the historical south. In particular, an increased number of mid-third millennium BCE centers in Syria show their rulers emulating the cities of Sumer for structural and visual models to enhance an unprecedented prosperity, just like their counterparts at Ebla and Mari (McMahon 2013, pp. 462–469; Cooper 2013, pp. 489–490). As a group, they now affirm a cultural radius for Early Dynastic Sumer that extended far outside its traditional base, and whose impact involved more than accounting and commerce. By recognizing the implications of such findings, this publication departs from earlier discussions of this historical phase, and sets a precedent that others can now follow. It also provides this chapter with the first of several examples where archaeologists and historians are today rejoining forces in promising directions. They primarily, but not exclusively, relate to chronology.

## **The Culture-Historical Chronologies of the Ancient Near East**

Archaeology and history rely on a relative chronology of periods arranged in diachronic sequence, and an absolute chronology of calendar dates. Ideally they run in tandem, but archaeology favors relative dating, and history prioritizes absolute dates. After nearly a century of consensus on dating systems, the past two decades have initiated ambitious

revisionary projects that focus on dating the Ancient Near East's historical periods more coherently. The projects' wide-ranging perspectives were conceived to coordinate the two fields of archaeological and historical study, and address questions of considerable significance to both. Three of them, cited here in order of appearance, have made an immediate impact: the SCiem project (*Synchronisation of Civilisations in the Eastern Mediterranean in the Second Millennium*, 1999–); the ARCANe project (*Associated Regional Chronologies for the Ancient Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean*, 2006–) and RAIeLSP (*The Iron Age in Israel – The Exact Life Sciences Perspective*, 2009–). All three were launched by archaeologists with multidisciplinary programs and interests, and funding from European scientific institutions. Their scope includes historical issues, and reasserts the European tradition of archaeology as a subdiscipline of history. Their effect on the chronological framework of the Ancient Near East involves its relative and absolute schemes in equal measure, as reviewed here from their origins to the present.

The relative chronology used by Mesopotamian archaeology reflects the historical research perspective of its early years. It was drawn up at an international conference in 1929 on the basis of two coordinated schemes: one for prehistory, the other for historic phases. Prehistoric periods were named after individual sites thought best to characterize a particular stage of development. These type-sites, standing for distinct cultures, were arranged in a continuous sequence according to the stratigraphic evidence from excavations up to that point. They eventually attributed the earliest Mesopotamian settlement then known to the site of Hassuna, in northern Iraq, and the latest prehistoric ones to Uruk and Jemdet Nasr in the south. The first occurrence of writing in the Uruk IV and Jemdet Nasr phases prompted, in 1931, their formal designation as "Protoliterate Period" to introduce the second chronological scheme (although not without protest: Mallowan 1970, pp. 328–330). The terms Late Uruk-Jemdet Nasr and Protoliterate are still used interchangeably for the centuries on either side of 3000 BCE.

For archaeological phases after the Protoliterate period, a sequence of prominent historical markers was chosen in preference to the type-site system. The third millennium was divided into three major periods – Early Dynastic, Akkadian, and Ur III or Neo-Sumerian – and coordinated with stratigraphic sequences and artifact typologies mainly from the Chicago Oriental Institute's excavations in the Diyala Valley (Lloyd 1984, p. 91). This terminology intended to bind archaeological and historical findings into one harmonious, compatible system. Like the type-site sequence, it assumed that a linear development accurately described ancient Mesopotamian history. It also presumed that historical periods offered a more flexible framework for integrating new archaeological findings than cultural stages could, and that Mesopotamian culture was monolithic, without significant regional variants. It was especially based on the idea that a historical perspective should take precedence over a cultural or archaeological one – a view that was fully endorsed by the excavators themselves (Parrot 1953, pp. 40–41).

This chronological framework proved a poor fit from both perspectives. Historians struggled in vain to stretch the Sumerian King List over the Early Dynastic period's three phases (Hallo and Simpson 1971: 34–9; Lloyd 1984: 90–3, Kuhrt 1995: 29–31). The system was not satisfactory in archaeological terms either, creating from the outset an artificial barrier between Protoliterate and Early Dynastic I which obscured their cultural continuity, and sidelined the upper Tigris. Eventually, summaries of Sumerian archaeology

(Roaf 1990, pp. 79–88; Postgate 1994) avoided attributing specific developments to each of the Diyala's Early Dynastic phases, which are now acknowledged as inapplicable to a general scheme (recently Lecompte and Benati 2017, pp. 6–7). The terms Akkadian and Neo-Sumerian describe the next two (brief) cultural and historical stages more comfortably. But for the second and first millennia BCE, when individual periods last longer and are loosely delineated over broad geographical zones, cultural realities in the archaeological record have been hidden or distorted by nomenclature appropriate only to political territories. Shifting population groups and transitional stages before and after the formation of centralized states disappear within this program.

A further damaging consequence of this relative chronology was to isolate both Mesopotamian history and archaeology from the greater Near East, which uses the Three Age system: Neolithic, Bronze Age, and Iron Age. Perhaps an initial reason behind choosing the historical sequence was that it was thought a simpler expedient into which archaeological levels could be slotted (Parrot 1953, p. 40). Implicit to the original scheme, however, was the concept that Mesopotamia, the core civilization, was central to developments elsewhere, and that the burden of cross-dating rested with the peripheries. These assumptions have at last been overturned by ARCANE's new inter-regional proposal for the third millennium BCE, which coordinates cultural zones and their periodization from Cyprus to Western Iran, and from Anatolia and the Eastern Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. This monumental project breaks with previous systems by dividing its 1000-year period into one-century (three-generation) units, and combining them into multiples of varying lengths according to the individual region's cultural sequence. All 12 cultural zones receive similar weight by assigning them neutral labels and adjustable timeframes: for instance, the EM (Early Mesopotamian) six-part sequence for southern Mesopotamia (EME 1–6) follows the same parameters as the ECY five-part sequence for Cyprus (ECY 1–5). In addition to separate monographs defining the archaeological characteristics for each cultural zone, a second series presents single themes across the entire span of cultures. In the second set, an exhaustive review of the third millennium's philological and historical data applies the same methodology and spirit as the archaeological volumes, so that "this may help to harmonize the archaeological and historical evidence" (Sallaberger and Schrakamp 2015, p. 3). The alliance gives prominence to controlled excavation contexts, and to scientific objectivity in calculating dates. With this aim and for the first time, it introduces a coordinated record of radiometric (radiocarbon) dates as the fundamental basis for absolute dating throughout the Near East, including southern Mesopotamia (Novák and Rutishauser 2013).

For the second millennium BC, revisions to the Near East's comparative chronology have also received significant attention in the past two decades, especially through the concerted efforts of the SCIEM project for the Eastern Mediterranean in the radius of the Nile Delta's Tell el Dab'a excavations (Bietak 2000, 2003; Bietak and Czerny 2007). This project's focus benefits from the precision of Dynastic Egypt's historical framework, and has proceeded from this strength to cross-dating the stratified and seriated material culture of other regions within its wide orbit, from the Levant to the Aegean. It has also tested the accuracy of absolute dates from Egyptian and related records through a vigorous radiometric dating program. SCIEM's balance between chronometric archaeological data and historical sources sets a collaborative model for research into the busy maritime regional

network of the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. The resulting typological studies offer a precise basis to date contemporary civilizations where written documentation is sparse or inadequate for historical purposes, but which have a high visibility in the archaeological record. They include Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece, whose export trade in pottery is a prominent feature of archaeological deposits in the neighboring historically defined regions.

Because the eastern Mediterranean's comparative cultural chronology also intersects with Mesopotamian historical issues, the results of the SCIEM project and its forerunners bear close relevance to key aspects of the Mesopotamian dynastic calendar. Its longest calendrical debate has concerned the regnal years of kings belonging to the First Dynasty of Babylon, the so-called High, Middle, and Low Chronology. It was first formulated in 1928, when assyriologist S. Langdon and astronomer J.K. Fotheringham published a compilation of omens relating observations of the appearance of the planet Venus to specific years for Ammiṣaduqa, the dynasty's penultimate king. Since this chronology provided a convenient handle on which to hang centuries of historical and archaeological data, it gamely survived all efforts to discredit the reliability of its premises (Neugebauer 1929; Reiner and Pingree 1975), despite eventual disclaimers from some early champions (Smith 1951: 67). Resolution in favor of the low chronology seemed at hand in 1998 when, for the first time, ceramic typology, stratigraphic analysis, and settlement distribution patterns for mid-second millennium Babylonia were given equal weight with textual data, and tested against historical and archaeological systems in the rest of the Near East (Gasche et al. 1998; Tanret 2000; Warburton 2011, 2013). The present decade has relaunched discussion, however, and a vocal counter-reformation is gaining momentum for a modified Middle Chronology, supported by revised radiometric analysis (see below) (Roaf 2012; Manning et al. 2017).

The overwhelming interest in what might seem a parochial detail of Mesopotamian dynastic history underscores the tightly knit fabric of most research questions involving the Ancient Near East (Manning 2014 for the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean). The new phase of inquiry introduced by the ARCANE and SCIEM projects manifests a joint need to synchronize the historical and cultural aspects of the field, and a promising route for achieving this goal.

## Archaeometry and Ancient Near Eastern History

Renewed faith in archaeology's contributions to the study of Ancient Near Eastern history also rests on the discipline's technical branches in the natural sciences, collectively referred to as archaeometry. Archaeometrical research has flourished in the multidisciplinary environment of recent years, not least because evolving information technology now brings its specialized equipment directly into the field (Finkelstein et al. 2015, pp. 198–199). These collaborations have similarly encouraged the close integration of archaeometric applications to archaeological and historical problems, and their capacity to answer them. Absolute chronology has especially benefited from advances in radiocarbon analysis, but the value of other approaches such as materials analysis and bioarchaeology is also being recognized.

The most familiar of the scientific applications are radiocarbon dating, calculating the radioactive decay in an organic substance once it dies, and its partner dendrochronology,

which dates wood from the annual growth patterns it acquired as a tree. Both techniques measure the absolute or numerical age of a precise event: the demise of whatever is being sampled. These chronometric methods are therefore especially suited to historical scholarship, with its focus on persons and events. For many years, however, radiocarbon analysis produced margins of error that were too large for historical attributions. The past three decades have seen the margins diminish, first with radiometric cross-checks on dendrochronological samples, and more recently by reconfiguring the numerical counts to represent more exactly the original circumstances and contexts of the samples. Current advances in statistical modelling to determine data probability have thus narrowed radiometric dates to a generation or even a decade, allowing for resolution on the scale of specific events (or at least individual reigns and lifespans) (Bayliss et al. 2007).

The enhanced capabilities of radiocarbon analysis can appeal to specialists in all the Near Eastern disciplines, for research at every level. The new accuracy most visibly lies behind the successful formation of RAIELSP (*The Iron Age in Israel – The Exact Life Sciences Perspective*, 2009–), the third of the (re)visionary projects mentioned here, and like them, close to conclusion. While the multiple interests of this complex project called upon and innovated a wide range of archaeometric methods, its mainstay relies on securing a precise absolute archaeological chronology for the Levantine Iron Age “to obtain reliable snap-shot views of what was transpiring in a region at a specific point in time” (Finkelstein et al. 2015, p. 197). This capacity was likewise exploited by the ARCANE project, both in its regional archaeologies and in a separate work on *History and Philology* (Sallaberger and Schrakamp 2015). Radiometric data are even permeating the heartland of Mesopotamian epigraphy, illustrated here by a new study of Sumerian scribal practice in Early Dynastic Ur (Lecompte and Benati 2017).

Other archaeometric techniques are being attempted to solve long-standing historical controversies from an impartial perspective. Provenience analysis on clay tablets from Amarna and Ugarit claims to have determined conclusively that the Late Bronze kingdom of Alashiya was located on Cyprus (Goren et al. 2003), a method also cited to trace the source of unattributed tablets in museum collections (Westenholz 2017, p. 161). And after a long phase of dormancy, the field of bioarchaeology is returning to themes such as family affiliations, and even ethnicity, for instance to differentiate Akkadians among cemetery populations of late third millennium BC Sumer (Pestle et al. 2014).

The developments summarized here were achieved by a comprehensive intellectual interchange between archaeologists and their collaborators from the natural sciences. Somewhat unexpectedly, they also seem to have played a major role in reconnecting the Ancient Near East’s two disciplines of archaeology and history. Excavated deposits are often less discrete than historians would wish, but archaeometry is reducing chronological uncertainty to a degree that suits the requirements of both disciplines.

## Recent Archaeological Research on the Ancient Near East

Only one aspect of fieldwork remains universal and timeless: financial shortage, a theme common to virtually every excavation report’s preface. In other respects, however, archaeological projects initiated in the Middle East since the mid-twentieth century CE have

followed different agendas from those preceding World War II, and have been carried out under more restrictive conditions. Superficial explanations behind these changes involve practical issues. Field seasons, on average, became shorter once academics on university schedules replaced institute- and museum-sponsored teams as the professional majority engaged in excavations. University-based projects also embraced the mission of training students in fieldwork and field-related research. This aim toward instruction speeded up technical improvements, bringing excavating, sampling, and recording practices to much higher standards. Field teams accordingly expanded to include a battery of specialists and site supervisors several times more numerous than the handful recommended by Parrot, at greater expense to transport, house, and feed. Locally hired labor was reduced as a result of such developments, or replaced by students and volunteers.

These factors shifted the scale of excavation toward smaller trenches and a slower pace. Restrictions of other types also needed to be met. A heightened conscience about preserving sites rather than destroying them led to the argument that soundings and surveys should substitute for excavation,<sup>2</sup> although it is today again recognized that they generate distinct and complementary information (Matthews 2003, pp. 34–35). Industrialization, road works, and hydroelectric dam construction increased the pressure for salvage projects, which diverted efforts from sites chosen for their archaeological potential to short-term and largely random investigations. Much remarkable and unexpected data have emerged from these, but they too overturned research patterns.

Inevitably, these structural changes accompanied theoretical shifts within the discipline itself, as its academic ranks reassessed what archaeology does or does not do, particularly in its aims at explanation (Trigger 2006, pp. 1–4, 26–38). One consequence for Near Eastern archaeology was to favor prehistoric sites answering fundamental issues about the human condition: the invention of farming and animal-breeding, the move from village to urban life, or the development of state systems. For historic periods, a similar turn toward “blue-collar” research led to an interest in private housing rather than monumental buildings, and small sites instead of urban centers. Research programs of these persuasions depend on multi-phase soundings to sample diachronic change and transitions, rather than on large single-period exposures.

The most pervasive influence behind post-World War II fieldwork, however, was a theoretical movement intent on divorcing the archaeological record from historical time. This “processual” approach argued that material culture and texts generate datasets that are separate and incompatible, and investigate questions that are fundamentally different. The debate is an old one, a sign that its seeds rest at the very core of archaeology as a discipline. It lies behind the American “New Archeology” of the 1960s spearheaded by L. Binford, and the European version set forth independently by D. Clarke, in a generational rebellion commemorated by C. Renfrew as “The Great Tradition versus the Great Divide” for his centenary lecture at the Archaeological Institute of America (1980). It resurfaced in the 1990s when the collapse of the Soviet Union prompted even its archaeologists to query the premises behind their research design (Klejn 1993). The force of this ideological rift turned “progressive” archaeologists away from historical issues, not least because its reach extended to the committees allocating excavation funds. In the ensuing years, the theoretical wing’s disputatious tone dissipated somewhat when the field diversified into a variety of schools attempting to coexist. Thus

efforts to recover the individual as active agent, and recapture intangible phenomena such as light, sound and physical sensation in ancient settings, are only some of the interpretive trends in current archaeological practice (Trigger 2006, pp. 579–581). The legacy that especially survives from the processualist phase to all successors is its high procedural standards for archaeological analysis: the cybernetic revolution in fieldwork, record-keeping and material analysis.

Whatever their views on this debate, European and Middle Eastern excavators who were untroubled by the relationship between material culture and history have returned to designing projects that adapt well to historical scholarship. They compensate for limited horizontal exposures by remote-sensing and aerial technology, which can recover entire and extensive site plans when conditions are favorable: outstanding examples spanning three millennia are Titriş Höyük in southeastern Turkey (Matney and Algaze 1995; Algaze et al. 1996), the Old Babylonian city Mashkan-Shapir (Stone and Zimansky 2004), and the Late Iron Age Median site at Kerkenes Dağ, in north central Turkey (Summers and Summers 2013). Judicious selection of which features from the geophysical plan to excavate can also produce results worthy of archaeology's heroic age, but with today's technical standards. Eleven seasons (1992–2003) at Kuşaklı, Hittite Sarissa, exposed monumental temples and administrative buildings, residential quarters, workshops, stables, the fortification wall and its gates, a dam, and an extramural sanctuary – thanks to geoelectrical and geomagnetic surveys that outlined where these features lay underneath the ground surface. The discovery of this planned city on the northeastern frontier of the Hittite state dispelled in one decade the established view that only the Hittite capital Hattusa could pretend to urban status. Kuşaklı's impact on historical issues concerning the Hittites has thus proved to be as significant as its archaeological importance (Müller-Karpe 2002, 2015).

Fieldwork in addition produces rich datasets on environment, subsistence, and technology, the material aspects of ancient economies. Systematic collection and analysis of cereal and faunal remains from well-defined archaeological contexts can provide direct evidence for situations inferred from texts, while relating them to a broader geographical scale. For example, investigations at Early Bronze Tell al-Raq'a'i and Tell 'Atij in north-eastern Syria concluded – by evaluating architectural and botanical findings in tandem – that these small early-to-mid third millennium BCE sites served as regional centers for storing cereals (Schwartz and Klucas 1998; Fortin 1998). The social and political administration behind such centers would thus parallel the structure in contemporary Sumer (as at Ur: Benati 2015, pp. 14–17), although no written sources have (as yet) been found to suggest this. Comparable studies on second millennium sites in the region have provided urban centers like Mari with way-stations for agricultural produce (Del Olmo Lete and Montero Fenollós 1998), and documented the shift from Middle Bronze Mari to Late Bronze Terqa for control of the central Euphrates valley's mixed urban, farming, and nomadic economies (Rouault 1998). Since archives tend to be locality-specific and sporadic, the archaeological record can supply a fuller and more comprehensive picture from which to generalize than does the textual one alone.

Questions involving ancient industries can also profit from the many studies that archaeologists routinely conduct on ceramics, metallurgy, and other materials. Here too, such information fills gaps in the written record, and can redress its biases. At the

simplest level, the contents of ordinary households illustrate facets of economic life that lay outside the spheres of official record-keeping, but were nonetheless fully connected to the existing system. The manufacture of pottery on a wheel, which occurred throughout southern Mesopotamia from the Protoliterate period onward, was a specialized industry in the hands of trained craftsmen. Obvious signs of mass-production are the homogeneity and narrow range of vessel types that characterized Sumerian and Babylonian ceramics over centuries and even millennia (Potts 1997, pp. 150–162). The actual mechanism through which tableware and storage jars were acquired by individuals may be variously imagined, but it certainly involved a supplier – the potter’s workshop – and a purchaser. Thus, for the reconstruction of Mesopotamian economic systems after 3400 BCE, any proposal that assumes ordinary families were self-sufficient, even to making their own pottery (Renger 1984, pp. 88–89), runs contrary to archaeological realities, and is flawed in its basic premise. In historical contexts without written documentation about economic affairs, the archaeological record provides the only evidence. During the Late Bronze Hittite Empire, to cite one such case, ceramics and other products reflect highly standardized industries that exerted a centralizing control to match its administrative system, and similarly ensured economic stability (Ertem et al. 1998; Postgate 2007).

The historian may find the format in which this class of archaeological data is presented more difficult to approach and adapt than excavation summaries. Nonetheless, it remains essential corroborative evidence for any text-based discussion of economic topics, just as the texts themselves supply details for the archaeologist to consult (Potts 1997, p. vii).

## Prehistory and Parahistory

Prehistory, by definition, belongs to the discipline of archaeology, since it reconstructs ancient cultures on the strength of their material remains, without the help of written commentary. But the division between the prehistoric and historic periods in the Near East is – for the archaeologist – a largely artificial boundary. Roots for its early historical developments extend back into prehistoric times. The Late Ubaid phase (fifth millennium BCE) presents many of the characteristics that qualified Protoliterate Sumer for statehood: monumental buildings laid out on a fixed architectural standard, long-distance trade, implantation of South Mesopotamian material culture (and populations?) in foreign lands, specialized industries, broad distribution patterns, and simple record-keeping devices (Matthews 2003, pp. 102–108). Should the two not be linked into a continuum with several stages (as in Kennett and Kennett 2006, pp. 88–90), rather than split into separate entities by archaeologists and historians both?

More to the point is the fact that most archaeological contexts, whatever their period, represent ahistoric or parahistoric (pseudo-historic) entities peripheral to, or entirely dissociated from, any relevant framework of events and persons. Regardless of whether a historic or prehistoric setting is concerned, time in the archaeological sense is calculated in units of multiple generations (such as three generations for the average life-span of a house), or in larger blocks of centuries or millennia for cultural phases (Smith 1992). What emerges from the archaeological past, therefore, is a picture of societies

within their environment – Braudel’s mentalities and patterns – occasionally punctuated by historical detail that gives an additional dimension to the picture.

The analytical techniques used by archaeology are applied in the same way to sites and regions before and after writing appears in the Near East. The only pertinent distinction between the two is whether they speak solely through the words of archaeologists, or whether some members of those ancient societies also manage to express themselves verbally. The example most often cited to illustrate the importance of written testimonials in interpreting an archaeological context is the case of the Assyrian businessmen who resided in central Anatolia from the nineteenth to seventeenth centuries BCE, and wrote their correspondence and contracts on clay tablets (e.g. Matthews 2003, p. 120). Their presence is attested at Kültepe, where excavations have exposed the largest area of a neighborhood in which they lived, and in smaller communities at Boğazköy and Alişar. They assimilated completely into local culture: house architecture, tableware, even many of the deities represented on their seals were Anatolian. The only material clues to their presence at these sites are their tablets, their use of cylinder seals instead of stamp seals, and their burials inside houses (Veenhof and Eidem 2008: 55–61). Contemporary Acemhöyük and Karahöyük-Konya, although in close communication with Kültepe, produced no tablets and thus no trace of whether foreigners were settled there too. The letters of these Assyrian businessmen tell a different (and sadly human) story. Far from acknowledging that they had “gone native” by adopting an Anatolian lifestyle, making a common practice of taking local women as wives, raising their children, and worshiping their gods, they referred to their hosts in pejorative terms and avoided introducing any borrowed words into their written language (Veenhof 1977, pp. 110–112; Veenhof 1982, pp. 151–154).<sup>3</sup> If we had only their archives from Assur (which have in fact not been recovered), and did not know the realities of their entrenchment in Anatolian society, our impressions of their activities and interactions would again be incorrect. A balanced perspective drawn from a social setting revealed through archaeology, and from individual commentaries documented in writing, achieves a closer accuracy.

## A Twenty-First Century Partnership

Like the Ancient Near Eastern civilizations they study, relationships between archaeologists and historians have experienced cyclical phases of convergence, stability, breakdown, and revival. After a century of shared interests, their paths diverged two generations ago over research directives and source materials they declared to be non-communicating entities. Distances between the camps were reinforced by the arduous discourse of theory-laden archaeological prose on the one hand; and by a decline in specialists who were equally conversant in fieldwork and the ancient languages. Some European scholars still published in both areas (Postgate 1994 most brilliantly), but educational trends discouraged this tradition.

Paradoxically, while the divide was gaining force, the two fields were also redefining their parameters toward similar mandates. In North America, text-based scholars began to expand their institutional subjects beyond “Languages and Literatures” by renaming their

departments to highlight “Cultures and Civilizations.” Those terms had already been appropriated in preference to “Art and Archaeology” by Near Eastern archaeologists on both sides of the Atlantic. The new titles announced a decision to restructure the discipline’s academic scope, but required several transitional decades to take full effect. One visible outcome is the modernized culture-historical approach that has been outlined here, reformulated to meet contemporary standards and reconciling the discipline’s two branches to a common purpose.

This supportive alliance comes at a critical time for archaeological practice in the Middle East, today the scene of widespread looting, site destruction, civil unrest, and outright warfare. Among their many consequences, these upheavals have disrupted fieldwork, even if redirecting it in positive cases to long-neglected regions such as northern Iraq. Present circumstances have also reopened ethical tensions concerning the publication of looted antiquities, notably cuneiform tablets. The setbacks these represent are temporary, however. This century’s revitalized partnership between archaeologists and historians has recovered the disciplinary strength to override such challenges, for the mutual advantage of the two fields and to the benefit of Ancient Near Eastern studies.

## NOTES

1. This comment, perhaps made tongue-in-cheek, was written by H.R. Hall, co-author with C.L. Woolley of the excavation report on Tell Al-‘Ubaid (Hall and Woolley 1927, p. 4). De Genouillac misattributes it to Woolley.
2. Replacing excavation with survey and limited soundings was a tenet of the 1992 European Charter for the Protection and Management of the Archaeological Heritage (Articles 4–5), concluding a 20-year crusade. *Antiquity* 67 (1993): 400–445 devoted a special section to this charter, whose ideology has guided and influenced research in the Middle East too. A related move to conduct impact-free survey by recording finds in the field, without collecting them, has lost support.
3. Evidence shows mixed marriages at all social levels, including Assyrian women taking Anatolian husbands, but recorded instances are few (Michel 2008), perhaps because few were formalized. Children raised in these families would surely have been bilingual and bicultural.

## FURTHER READING

The basic introduction in English to the archaeology of the Ancient Near East is (still) Roaf (1990). For the early historical periods, Postgate (1994) provides a lively survey in which archaeology and ancient texts are superbly interwoven. Potts (1997) is recommended for textual and archaeological documentation on practical aspects of Mesopotamian culture, from agricultural products to kinship structure and burial customs, industry, the survival of temple architecture into the Sassanian era, and much else. Lecompte and Benati (2017) set new guidelines in Mesopotamian studies.

Lloyd (1980) remains the standard history for archaeological research in Iraq through the 1960s. Personal accounts by pioneers in the field (E. Porada, S. Lloyd,

T. Jacobsen, and H.G. Gütterbock) can be found in Sasson (1995), and make colorful reading. For more recent developments, and an impassioned demonstration of Mesopotamian archaeology's current techniques and capabilities, see Matthews (2003). The evolution of archaeological methods and theory is best presented by Trigger (2006). For the promising application of the *Annales* approach to archaeology, see Knapp (1992). Neither Trigger nor Knapp engages specifically in historic Mesopotamia and the greater Near East, however.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

# The Degradation of the Ancient Near Eastern Environment

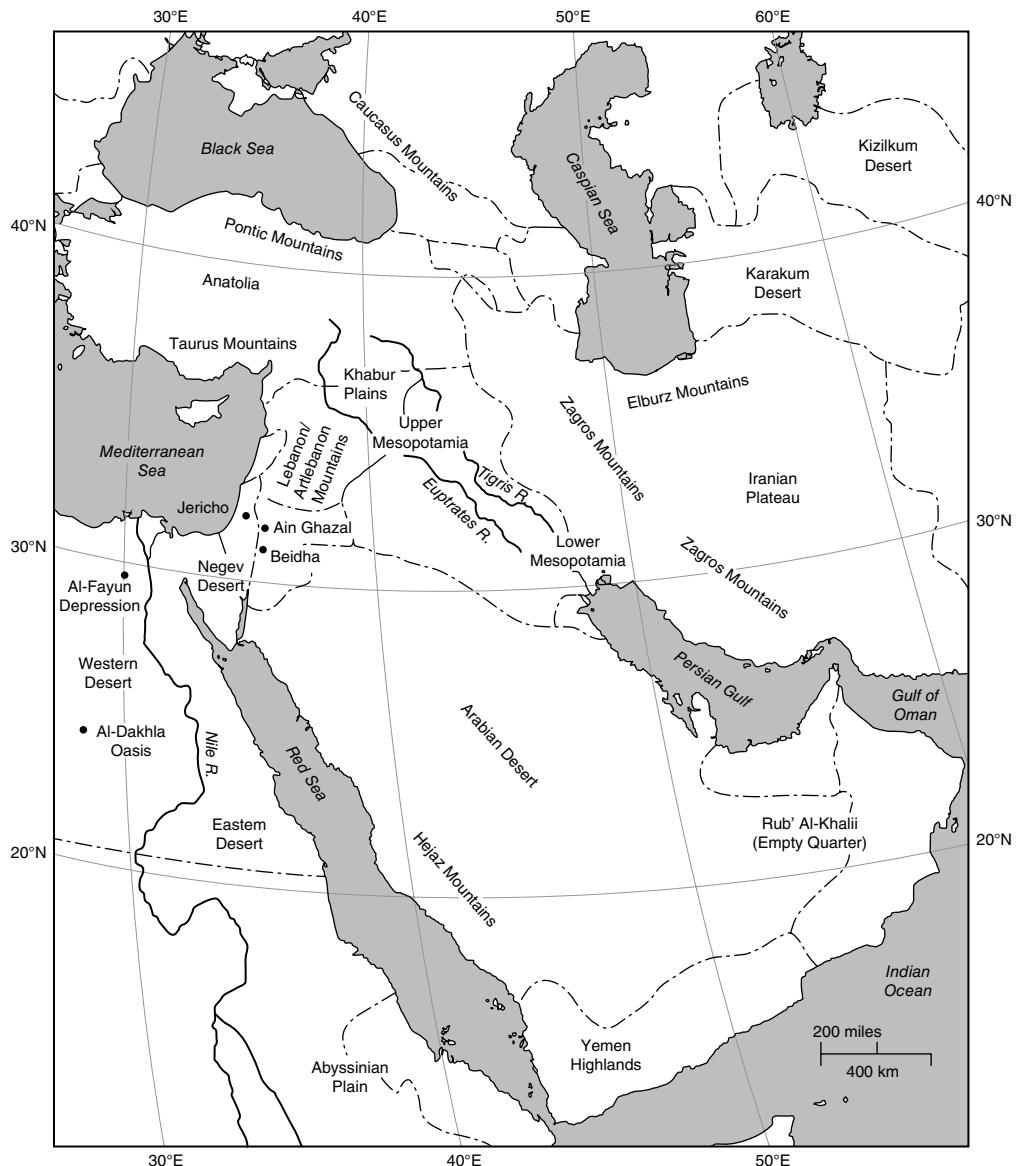
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*Carlos E. Cordova*

It is not surprising that the Near East, the region with the longest record of agricultural development and urbanization, has received considerable attention from scholars interested in ancient land degradation. While some of the Near Eastern landscapes have sustained large concentrations of population, as is the case for the flood plains, others have hardly been settled, such as the hyper-arid region of the Arabian Peninsula known as the Empty Quarter (Map 4.1). Despite these differences, all the landscapes of the Near East have been transformed, making it difficult to determine what pre-agricultural landscapes may have looked like.

The designation “land degradation” has a negative connotation since it implies a diminution in landscape quality. Although such a negative implication is undeniable, natural forces often gear mechanisms of landscape change. But who is ultimately to be blamed for the deterioration of the environment? The answer to this question is frequently stalled by the difficulty in distinguishing natural from human-induced impacts on the landscape. Recent advances in the study of climatic phenomena and improved resolution of climatic records provide better pictures of the natural–human causes of land degradation.

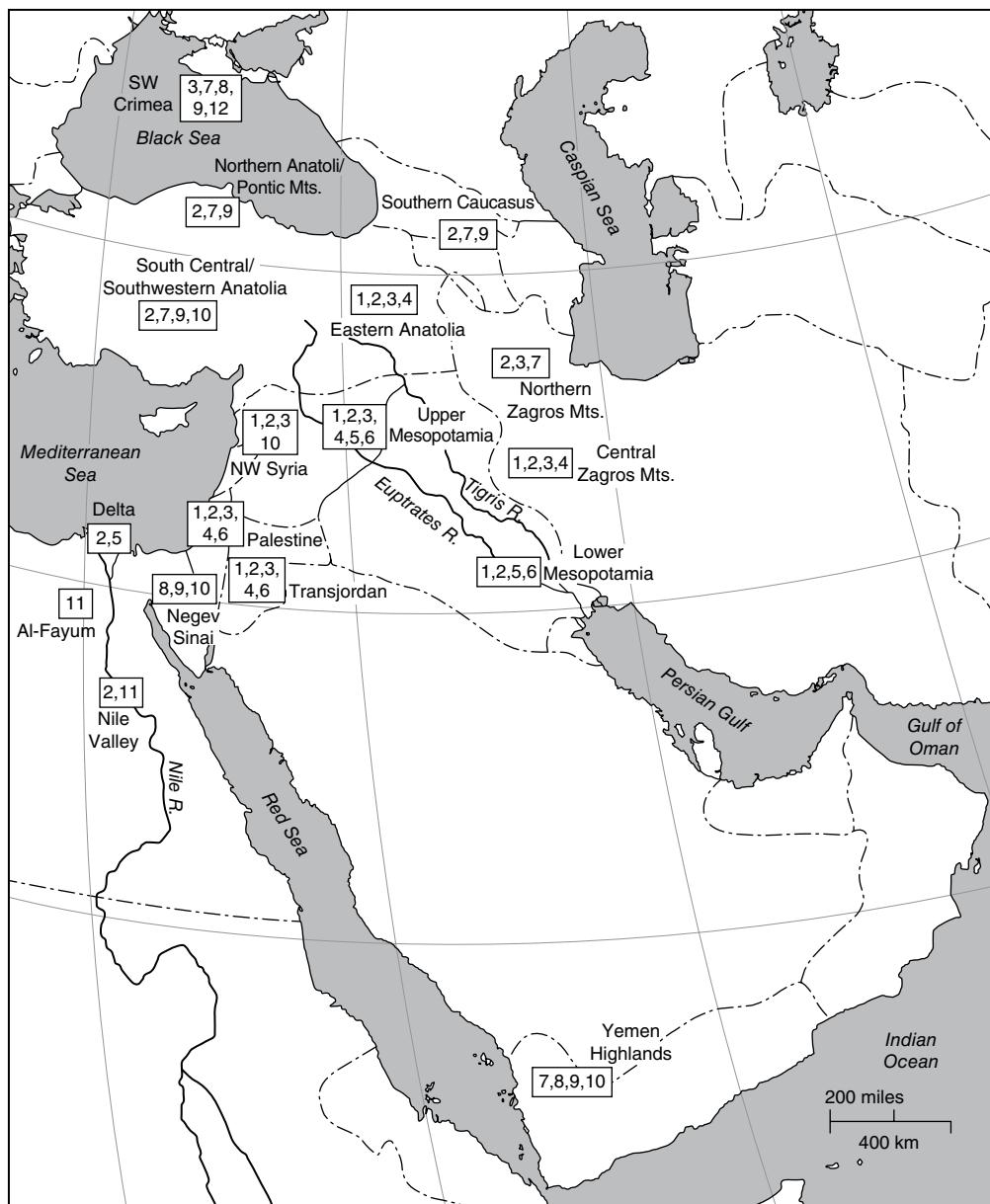
Because the main objective of this chapter is human-induced land degradation, the examples discussed here emphasize human influences on landscape change. However, this is not to downplay the role of climatic change and other natural factors. The different forms of land degradation by region reflect the ecological and cultural differences in space and time (Map 4.2). For this reason, land degradation should be explained as a cultural phenomenon in the context of an ever-changing physical environment.



**Map 4.1** Sites prior to 2500 BCE.

## The Physical Scene

The backbone mountainous systems in the Near East comprise the Taurus Mountains of southwestern Turkey, the Pontic Mountains in northern Turkey, and the Zagros and Elburz Mountains of Iran. Other minor mountain systems are the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon Mountains in the Levant, and the Hejaz Mountains of the western flank of the



#### Prior to 2500 BCE      After 2500 BCE

	Prior to 2500 BCE	After 2500 BCE
Deforestation	1	7
First agricultural disturbance	2	8
Hillslope erosion	3	9
Stream incision	4	10
Soil salinization	5	11
Channel siltation	6	12

Map 4.2 Sites after 2500 BCE.

Arabian Peninsula. Hilly areas and isolated mountains include the mountains of the Sinai Peninsula, the hills of the Western Desert in Egypt, and numerous smaller, isolated hills in the Syrian and Arabian deserts. The major plateaus include the Anatolian Plateau of Turkey and the Iranian Plateau; smaller plateaus exist in the Sinai Peninsula and the region east of the Jordan Rift Valley.

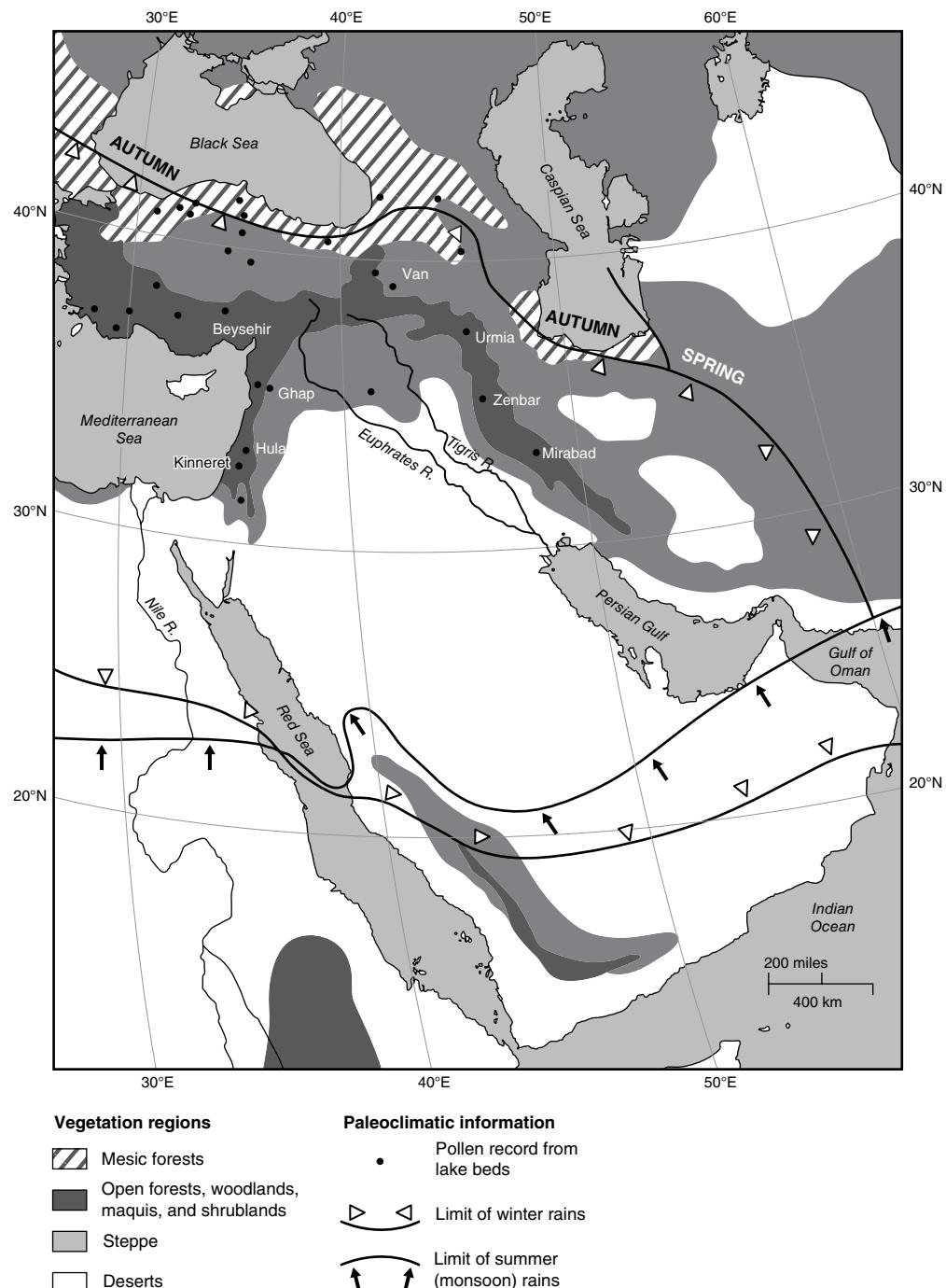
The lowlands include the flood plains of the main rivers in the region: the Tigris, the Euphrates, and the Nile. Other lowland areas are found in some depressions in the Arabian Peninsula, the Eastern Desert of Egypt, and along the coastal plains of Israel/Palestine and the southern shore of the Persian Gulf. Some interior depressions contain salt pans, which are the relicts of extensive Pleistocene lakes, as is the case in the Syrian, Jordanian, and Arabian deserts, and some areas east of the Iranian Plateau.

Vegetation is another aspect often used to describe the landscapes of the Near East. In general terms, it can be classified into forests, woodlands, steppes, and deserts (Map 4.3). The northern slopes of the Pontic and Elburz Mountains have the densest forest cover, dominated by various species of mid-latitude trees, both coniferous and deciduous broadleaf. Open forests and woodlands characterize the Taurus and Zagros Mountains, and the smaller systems of the Lebanon and the highlands of Palestine. These are in most cases characterized by the typical evergreen trees around the Mediterranean and deciduous species arranged in altitudinal levels often generalized into Eu-Mediterranean (the lowest) and Oro-Mediterranean (the highest) region. *Maquis* (evergreen shrubland) and *garrigue* (perennial low scrub) dominate the Eu-Mediterranean region. Pine, Lebanese cedar, and kermes oak dominate the higher elevations, the Oro-Mediterranean region (Zohary 1973).

Steppe landscapes constitute the transition between wooded regions and deserts. The Irano-Turanian Steppe, which consists of a variety of herbs and scrub, extends from the southern foothills of the Zagros and Taurus Mountains to the eastern foothills of the Syrian Anti-Lebanon Mountains (Map 4.3). The thorny shrubs of the Sudanian province dominate in the lowlands of Egypt's Eastern Desert along the Red Sea, the Sinai Peninsula, Nubia, and the Dead Sea-Jordan depression. The rest of the territories belong to the Saharo-Arabian province, which includes mostly herbaceous plants adapted to extreme aridity.

The climates of the Near East are strongly influenced by its latitudinal location, topographic features, and its location inland. The prevailing westerly winds bring rain into most of the region in the form of cyclonic storms originating in the Mediterranean and Black Seas during the winter. Summers are usually dry and hot throughout most of the region. The exceptions are the mountainous areas facing the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, where northerly winds bring rainfall in the spring and summer, and the southern third of the Arabian Peninsula, where rain is driven by the summer monsoons of the Indian Ocean.

Elevation controls the amount of annual precipitation and temperature. Thus, the forested areas of the Pontic and Elburz Mountains receive annual amounts of precipitation of up to 1000 mm, which is enough to maintain a dense forest cover. The lowlands in Iraq, most of Egypt, and the Arabian Peninsula receive amounts less than 50 mm a year. Temperatures drop with elevation at a rate of 1°C per 100 m, although at a certain point they decline to 0.6°C per 100 m. Temperatures below freezing during the winter months are common in the highest parts of the mountains in Turkey and Iran. Snowstorms are frequent in the highest parts of the mountains, where snow cover may remain for two or three months. The plateaus of the southern Levant (Palestine and Transjordan) are commonly



Map 4.3 Paleoclimatic information: vegetation regions.

subject to frosts, although snowfall may be common in some years. Temperatures in the lowlands and depression are generally high. Most areas in the Arabian Peninsula and Egypt may experience summer maximum temperatures above 45°C. However, during the winter months, when northerly winds and scattered rains bring some relief, these areas register pleasant temperatures.

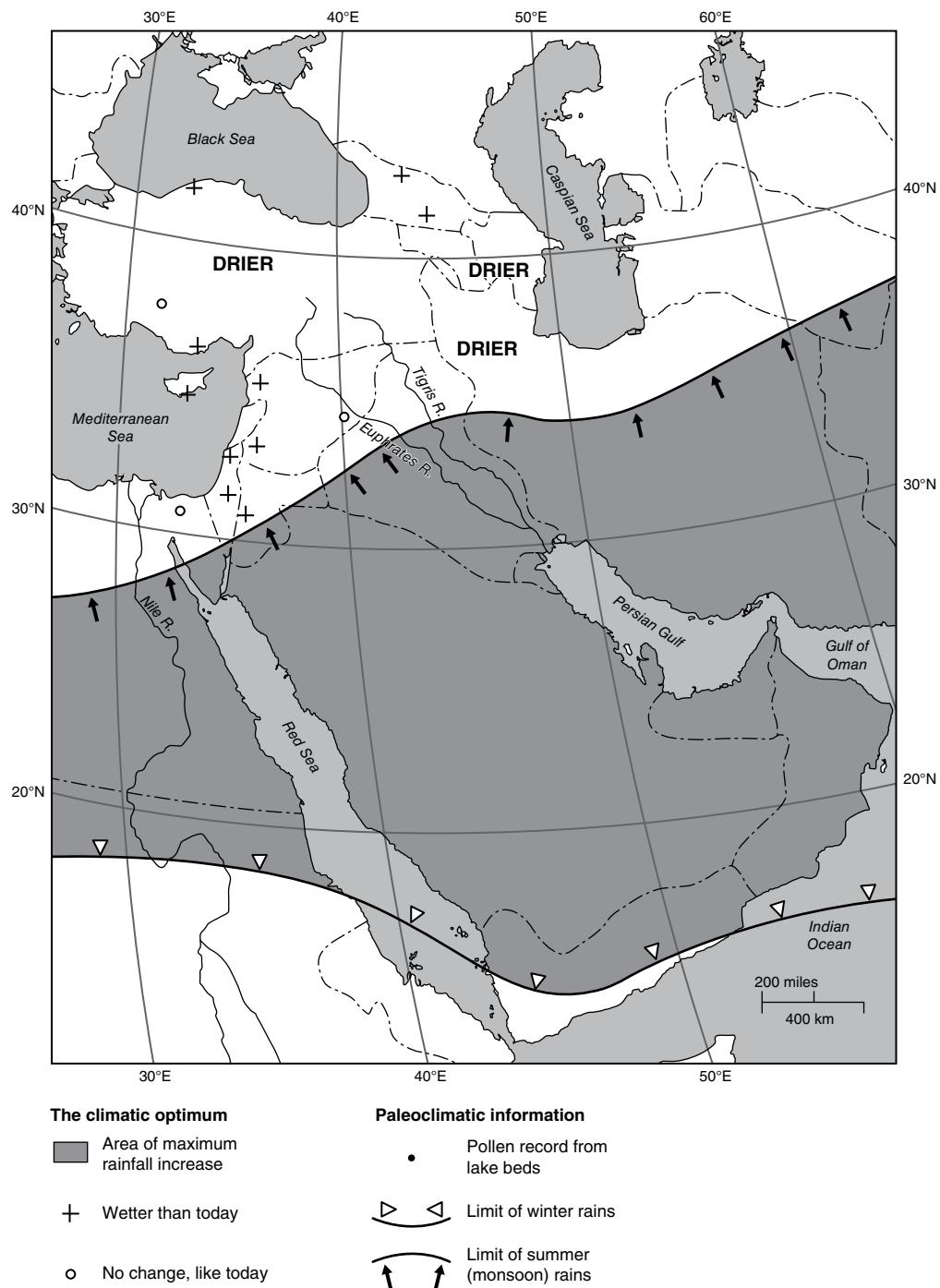
## The Climatic and Paleoclimatic Background

Paleoclimatic data for the past 20 000 years in the Near East come from a variety of sources: lake sediment records, marine records, and a series of terrestrial deposits (cave sediments and alluvial deposits). Pollen records are the proxies for the reconstruction of vegetation, which shows a direct and relatively rapid response to climatic change. Pollen-based reconstructions of vegetation and climate have been carried out at a local scale through the study of cores from lake sediments, and at a regional scale through cores from the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. One problem is that fossil pollen studies are concentrated in areas with lakes, which are mostly the northern part of the region (Map 4.4).

Among other methods, the study of stable isotopes has provided information on past precipitation patterns. They are studied on cave speleothems,<sup>1</sup> microorganisms in lake and sea bottom deposits, land snails, and teeth (Bar-Matthews et al. 1999; Goodfriend 1999). The signatures obtained through isotopes derive directly from the atmosphere, eliminating the noise of human impact, and that is an advantage over studies of pollen analysis.

The broad picture of paleoclimatic change varies from region to region, due to differences in latitude, altitude, proximity to the seas, and weather patterns. During the coldest phases of the Late Glacial Maximum (about 18 000–16 000 years ago), vegetation in the mountainous regions of Turkey and Iran was characterized by *Artemisia* (wormwood) steppe (Van Zeist and Bottema 1991). Although dry conditions were present in the northern part of the Near East, pollen records from the Ghab Valley in Syria and Lake Hula in Israel show an increase in oak forests. Climatic amelioration in most of the regions of the Near East, attested by the expansion of forests, occurred between 15 000 and 11 000 years BP (before present) as warmer conditions induced more rainfall (Blanchet et al. 1998). A relatively short, dry, and cool period is recorded in some areas of the Near East between 11 000 and 10 000 years BP. This event, usually correlated with the Younger Dryas in Europe, was characterized by the cooling of the atmosphere and the partial return to glacial conditions. Pollen records from the northern areas of the Near East show a reduction of forests (Bottema 1995), and lake records of the same region show low levels (Roberts and Wright 1993). Ironically, it is under the adverse climatic conditions of this dry phase that plant and animal domestication began. Some postulate that dry conditions stimulated plant cultivation among human groups that were already in the process of sedentarization (Henry 1989; Bar-Yosef and Belfer-Cohen 1992). Other scholars disagree with this view and propose an alternative scenario in which dry conditions forced “domesticable” wild plants to migrate to areas where human populations were already manipulating wild plants to increase food production (McCorriston and Hole 1991; Wright 1993).

After 10 000 years BP the picture changed as temperatures rose and rains increased. In particular, the period between 9000 and 6000 years BP has been recognized as the



Holocene Climatic Optimum (Map 4.4). During this phase, rains increased considerably in the Eastern Mediterranean region and even in inland areas as far as the Zagros Mountains (Rossignol-Strick 1999; Van Zeist and Bottema 1991). In addition to the increased winter rains, summer rains occurred in some areas, as suggested by stable isotopes, which in turn point to the enhancement of both cyclonic rains from the Mediterranean in winter and the influence of monsoon rains originating in the Indian Ocean in summer (Blanchet et al. 1998; Bar-Matthews et al. 1999). Pollen diagrams from lakes in the mountains of Iran and Turkey show that woodlands and forests advanced over areas formerly occupied by steppes. However, despite woodland recovery, increased human activities slowed down the recovery of woodlands in some regions (Van Zeist and Bottema 1991). A similar scenario occurred in drylands, where increase of grasslands allowed more possibilities for farming and herding, thus adding more pressure onto the environment of the steppes and deserts (Butzer 1995). During this humid stage, lake levels increased, especially the now-dry playas of the deserts in the Sahara and the Arabian Peninsula, and the inland seas, the Aral and the Caspian (Butzer 1995). The overall amelioration of the climate during this phase stimulated the establishment of farming villages, and their subsequent growth into urban centers. Gradual desiccation has been observed after about 3500 BCE, a process that eventually gave shape to the modern dry environments of the region.

## Deforestation and Alteration of the Vegetation Cover

The considerable reduction of the natural vegetation cover of the Near East was due mainly to the increasing need for wood and the expansion of farming and pastoral activities. Although numerous written records exist for the exploitation of wood in the Ancient Near East, evidence has also been recovered from fossil pollen records, archeobotanical remains, and anthracological (charcoal) analyses. Of these, pollen analysis shows the regional picture of the gradual degradation of vegetation. The evidence of deforestation in pollen diagrams is assessed by the fluctuation of tree pollen, referred to as AP (arboreal pollen). The reduction of the AP curve in pollen diagrams indicates reduction of trees due either to climatic deterioration or deforestation. The latter is often coupled with the appearance of pollen of cultivated species, especially cereals, and their associated weeds. Several of the pollen diagrams in the Near East confirm that the AP reduction correlates with the regional increase of farming villages and in general an increase of population levels, which started in the Neolithic and increased during the Bronze Age. Calibrated dates from lake-bed sediments of the Ghab Valley (Map 4.4) showed that the depletion of deciduous oaks started between 12 500 and 9000 years BP due to the beginning of clearing for agricultural activities in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic period (Yasuda et al. 2000).

Intense wood exploitation in areas such as the Lebanese mountains, Mount Hermon, and the Palestinian highlands, led to a reduction in forested areas and tree species. This explains the irony that the Lebanese cedar (*Cedrus libani* L.) is today rare in Lebanon, as compared with the Taurus Mountains and other regions of Turkey (Zohary 1973). Pollen records from the Ghab Valley (Map 4.4) are probably the best testimony of the depletion of cedar forests in Mt. Ansarie, which is the northern end of the Lebanon mountain ranges. Pollen records from the Ghab Valley suggest that due to clearance by Early Bronze

Age people, Lebanese cedar forests had completely disappeared from the eastern slopes of Mt. Ansarie by 4900 years BP, coinciding with the periods of cedar exploitation reported in Mesopotamian sources (Yasuda et al. 2000).

Oak experienced a trend of depletion similar to cedar. The pollen diagrams of the Ghab Valley show that as oak and cedar decreased, olive (*Olea europaea*) increased. This is explained by the rapid expansion of olive cultivation at the expense of native forests. Pollen records from Lake Hula and Lake Kinneret/Galilee show a similar trend. In particular, the Lake Kinneret pollen record shows that the Early Bronze Age and Roman–Byzantine periods present the most prominent peaks of olive tree cultivation (Baruch 1990).

The timing of the destruction of the forests seems to be different for each region of the Near East. In Anatolia, modern Turkey, the profound changes in the natural vegetation are not evident until after 4000 years BP. Such changes were recurrent in almost all the pollen records of lake sediments in Turkey and Greece, and to some degree in Western Iran. Although with regional differences, this phase began about 1500 BCE and ended about 400 CE. Because the best example comes from the deposits of Lake Beyşehir in Turkey, this phase has been named the Beyşehir Occupation Phase (Bottema and Woldring 1990). The high levels of atmospheric moisture during this phase may have encouraged expansion of agricultural activities (Bottema and Woldring 1990). The reasons for the end of this phase are unknown, although possibly they have to do with changes in the agrarian systems toward methods that had different effects on vegetation (Bottema et al. 1993).

Accessibility and proximity to the main urban centers were important factors in the destruction of forests in antiquity. The Taurus Mountains, the Zagros Mountains, and the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon Mountains have been dramatically deforested for timber since the Bronze Age, as opposed to less accessible areas such as the Pontic Mountains and the Euxinian forests of northern Iran, where deforestation did not take place until the Hellenistic and Roman periods (Rowton 1967).

## The Impact of Grazing

Overgrazing became one of the most destructive forms of land degradation as nomadic pastoralism appeared on the scene about 9000 years ago. For millennia, nomadic pastoralism has been a strategy of subsistence in areas with low carrying capacity, requiring seasonal movements of flocks to a variety of ecological zones. For this reason, there is basically no natural region spared from the devastation caused by livestock grazing. The wild ancestors of grazing animals had a minimal impact on vegetation because they occupied specific habitats, and predators controlled their population numbers.

In particular, sheep and goats are the most common and destructive grazing livestock in the Near East. These two closely related species developed different ways of grazing. Sheep graze to root level, destroying the herbaceous mat to the ground, while goats graze indiscriminately on trees, shrubs, and herbs. In the end, goats are more destructive, since their devastating effects cover larger areas.

Although pastoralism has a direct impact on the composition of herbaceous vegetation, it also has effects on the arboreal vegetation. Young plants are usually within the reach of livestock, while acorns and seeds are rapidly eaten before they can even germinate. From

the ecological point of view, grazing implies the selection of certain species of plants that are preferred by livestock. This means that before the establishment of grazing, the composition of the vegetation in most regions was certainly different from today.

The numerous pollen diagrams in the region show the effects of pastoralism on the natural vegetation in the form of a rapid increase in herbs and scrub associated with grazing. These plants include *Plantago lanceolata*, *Rumex acetosella*, and *Urtica*, which are benefited by nitrates from livestock dung. Livestock also avoids aromatic plants such as those of the mint family (*Labiatae*) and the spiny ones often referred to as *Poterium/Sanguisorba* type in pollen diagrams. In steppe and desert areas, members of the Chenopodiaceae (for example *Anabasis syriaca* and *Noaea mucronata*) and Asteraceae family (for example *Artemisia*) are among the main plants avoided by livestock.

## The Human Impact on Fauna

The impact of humans on wildlife can be assessed through the record of extinctions and the reduction of species, for which testimonies exist in the numerous faunal remains in the archaeological record and in representations of animals in rock art. In most cases hunting was the main cause of the reduction of fauna. In other cases the destruction of vegetation, which acts as habitat for fauna, contributed to the elimination of animals.

Despite the amount of data produced by numerous studies of faunal remains, problems exist for the study of some groups of animals. For example, the reconstruction of bird exploitation is limited due to the lack of bone preservation in the harsh environment of the Near East (Gilbert 1995). In addition, most bird species are migratory, making determinations of geographical extent more difficult.

The list of species that went extinct in pre-agricultural times includes the so-called Pleistocene megafauna such as the Asiatic Elephant (*Elephas maximus*), which lived in several regions, and hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*), which inhabited the Nile River Valley and the coastal region of the Levant (Gilbert 1995). Among the ungulates commonly exploited by hunters of the Pleistocene–Holocene transition were wild horses (*Equus africanus* and *Equus hemionus*), wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), red deer (*Dama mesopotamica*), ibex (*Capra nubiana*), wild goat (*Capra aegragus*), and wild sheep (*Ovis orientalis*), among others (Uerpman 1987).

Those species that survived extinction have been reduced in both numbers and geographical extent. One example is the reduction of the geographical extent of the genus *Gazella* (gazelle) in most regions of the Middle East. Some species, such as the goitered gazelle (*Gazella subgutturosa*), have become extinct (Uerpman 1987). In addition to hunting, modification of wildlife occurred through domestication, although some domesticated species still have relatives in the wild.

## Soil Erosion and Slope Management

Soil erosion and deforestation are perhaps the two most evident forms of land degradation in the Near East. Soil erosion is a natural process that implies the removal of mineral and organic particles from the ground surface by water and wind.

The triggering of soil erosion is linked to the reduction of vegetation, which can occur as a result of both climatic change and human disturbances. The removal of soil particles by soil erosion in upland locations results in rapid accumulation of sediments in valleys and lowlands. Thus, investigating past soil erosion histories starts with the study of sequences of sediments in valleys. This approach allows the reconstruction of events of intense soil erosion in Greece (Van Andel et al. 1990), northwestern Syria (Wilkinson 1999), southwestern Turkey (Wilkinson 1999; Rosen 1997b), the Shephelah region of Israel (Rosen 1997a), the Transjordanian Plateau (Cordova 1999, 2000), and Western Iran (Brookes et al. 1982), among other examples. In addition to evaluating rapid sediment deposition in valleys, geomorphologists often study soils in the uplands, where the thinning of some horizons and an internal structure testify to intense degradation (Van Andel et al. 1990; Cordova 2000).

One of the measures taken by ancient and modern farmers to control soil erosion in the mountainous regions of the Near East has been the construction of hillside terraces, which is still widespread in the mountainous regions around the Mediterranean and the southwestern part of the Arabian Peninsula. But how old is slope terracing in the Near East?

If we consider that olive cultivation has often been associated with terraces, it can be assumed that agricultural terracing was implemented in the Neolithic as olive cultivation increased. However, no clear archaeological evidence exists to support such an assumption. The reuse and rebuilding of terraces, the mixing of datable materials of various ages, and the destruction of diagnostic pottery through continuous plowing make the accurate dating of terraces difficult (Wagstaff 1992). On the slopes of the Judean Hills, around Jerusalem, terraces seem to be associated with Early Bronze Age occupations, but they were continuously repaired in subsequent periods, especially during the Iron Age and the Roman and Byzantine periods (Gibson and Edelstein 1985).

The abandonment of agricultural terraces has proved detrimental to the environment, since the lack of maintenance leads to the breaking of walls and the subsequent removal of soil particles from inside the terraces by torrential overflow. In some cases, depending on conservation practices, terracing itself can have adverse effects. For example, in the mountains of Yemen, Wilkinson (1997b) showed that the initial phase of terrace construction implied an increase in erosion, as vegetation was removed and slopes were reshaped. It seems, however, that slope terracing was only a partial solution to the problem of soil erosion.

## Irrigation and Soil Salinization

Soil salinization involves the accumulation of salts in the soil, which impedes the development of crops and most plants. Soil salinization is a problem particular, but not exclusive, to arid and semi-arid lands. Although a natural process, soil salinization occurs through human intervention as a result of poor planning in the management of irrigated lands. The problem starts when excess irrigation water produces waterlogging, which under conditions of high evaporation rates results in precipitation of salts near the surface of the soil (Artzy and Hillel 1988). For these reasons, the problem of salinization is viewed here in the context of the main irrigation systems in the Near East.

The worst cases of soil salinization in the Ancient Near East occurred in large-scale irrigation systems, especially in the Mesopotamian lowlands, where irrigation was difficult and challenging. One of the major problems was the late spring and early summer floods produced by melting snow and rain in the mountains. Besides causing destruction of fields, these floods brought excess water at a time when it was not needed. On the other hand, the flow of water was relatively low in the late fall and early winter when water was desperately needed. Another problem was that fields lay lower in relation to the main river channels. This situation produced overflowing of water into the fields and made draining the excess water difficult. Consequently, evaporation of the stagnated waters prompted the accumulation of salts in the upper soil horizons. Today, modern technology partially solves the problem through a system of deep drainage to lower and hold down the water table, and with the use of chemical amendments to restore soil texture (Artzy and Hillel 1988). However, this technology did not exist in ancient times.

The major breakthrough in partially solving the problem of salinization in Mesopotamia occurred during the Sassanian Period (226–637 CE) when irrigation along the flood plains of the Diyala River, a tributary of the Tigris, was devised (Adams 1981). This system included the Naharawan canal, which was 3000 km or 1860 miles long and 50 m or 54 yards wide, and designed to drain the excess water into the Tigris.

In the Nile Basin the situation was very different, for the timing of the floods coincided with the growing of crops. In addition, the fields lay far above the main channel. The adaptation of agriculture to this scheme was much simpler. Floods occurred yearly before the planting season. The flood plain was divided into different basins, which were filled with flood waters, bringing to the fields the nutrients necessary for each agricultural cycle. Once the waters receded to the main channel, the excess water in the fields was drained and the water table lowered. The main problem in the ancient Nile Valley was when floods failed or when they occurred offseason (Butzer 1976). The only areas of Egypt with major salinization problems were the Fayum Depression and the Delta. In the former, the problem lay in the fact that the flow of water diverted from the Nile through the Fayum Canal ended in a closed basin, where excess water had no way to escape (Hamdan 1961). In the lower part of the Delta the water table was often high, especially in areas where it was contaminated with salty water from the sea (Hamdan 1961; Stanley and Warne 1993).

Several strategies to cope with the problem of soil salinization were implemented by farmers on a local scale. One of the common practices in Mesopotamia was to plant the deep-rooted *shoq* (*Prosperina stephanis*) and *agul* (*Alhagi maurorum*), which absorbed capillary water, thus creating deep-lying dry zones that hampered the rise of salinity (Jacobsen and Adams 1958). Among other strategies, selection of well-drained soils for irrigation proved to be useful, but only worked in small-scale irrigation systems. One of these cases was the irrigation around the Dakhla Oasis in the Western Desert of Egypt, where water was lifted using the *saqiya* (animal-powered water wheels) into canals and then into raised plots built on sandy deposits (Brookes 1990). The high porosity of these sandy deposits inhibited salinization by letting the excess water drain freely and minimizing waterlogging, the main factor leading to salinization. This strategy could not have been applied to the Mesopotamian lands, where silts and clays in the soils would impede drainage of excess water.

The degradation of soils by salinization means that fertile lands turn into a salty desert, forcing farmers to abandon their fields. Under such circumstances, farmers abandoned

their lands to become pastoral nomads; this move meant a more secure procurement of living and probably more flexibility in terms of taxation (Butzer 1995). Under this scenario the supply of food to the city, especially grain, failed, thus having an impact on the entire structure of the state. Salinization has been linked to the decline of Mesopotamian civilization (Adams and Nissen 1972), although scholars argue about this issue, especially when dealing with the participation of the state in controlling irrigation systems (Wagstaff 1985).

Soil salinization was not a major problem in the small-scale irrigation systems of the Near East, because it was easier to control and in general was implemented in areas with better drainage. Overall, small-scale irrigation systems were more sustainable and ecologically better suited than the large-scale systems. There are several types of small-scale irrigation systems, of which flood irrigation is the simplest and presumably the earliest (Sherratt 1980). Operation is simple, since the main objective is to build cross-channel dams intended to redirect floodwaters produced by sporadic rains and to maintain moisture in the soil. In antiquity, these systems were extensively practiced in the driest parts of the Near East, such as the Negev (Evenari et al. 1982) and the Libyan Valleys (Gilbertson et al. 1994).

There were other small-scale systems that were technologically more complex. They included canal irrigation tapping the waters of smaller permanent streams, usually draining from the mountains into the drier lowlands, as was the case for the Al-Ghuta system at Damascus, which to this day taps waters from the Barada River.

Some of the small-scale irrigation systems were known for their technological sophistication, such as the *qanat* system, which consisted of gently sloping tunnels cut through river-laid material and bedrock (usually limestone) to transmit water from beneath the water table to the ground surface. Once on the surface, the water was distributed by canals. The *qanat* system was highly efficient since it reduced loss of water by evaporation and consequently avoided salinization (Beaumont 1971).

## **Direct and Indirect Alteration of the Fluvial Systems**

Through an extensive study of river deposits in streams near archaeological sites, geoarchaeologists have linked radical changes in sedimentation and erosion with the appearance and intensification of farming. Mabry (1992) was able to link changes in sedimentation and channel erosion with the growth of early agricultural villages in the Jordan Valley.

The process known to geomorphologists as “channel entrenchment” or “stream down-cutting” lies in the destruction of stream beds and fertile flood plains. Rosen (1997a) linked the abandonment of Early Bronze Age sites in the Shephelah region of Israel with the degradation of streams. A similar scenario has been postulated for the abandonment of the Early Bronze Age site of Khirbet Iskander in Jordan (Long and Cordova 2003).

Silts originating from soil erosion in the upper reaches of the valleys caused numerous problems in the lowland streams of Mesopotamia. Large amounts of silt carried by streams ended up clogging river channels, forcing them to change course, consequently causing destruction of fields. Irrigation canals collected large amounts of silt, creating the need for enormous cleaning operations every year (Adams 1981). Over the millennia the increase in silt transported by the rivers led to the advance of the Mesopotamian delta into the Persian Gulf and the formation of the marshes in southern Iraq (Sanlaville 1989).

Channel straightening and dike construction along the banks were common practices to maximize irrigation in Mesopotamia. However, in the long run such practices had adverse effects, producing unrelenting flooding and salinization (Adams 1981). A straight channel increases water flow velocity, augmenting the risk of overflow and catastrophic flooding.

## Pollution of Air, Water, and Soil

The level of pollution in waters, air, and soil was certainly much lower than today, but little is known about pollution in the ancient environments of the Near East. The burning of wood must have caused contamination of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, but no figures exist on the extent of such pollution. On the other hand, sedentarization and the expansion of villages are known to have increased pollution in surrounding water bodies (Brothwell 1972), but there are no studies that address the issue directly. Assumptions can be made on indirect data recovered through paleoenvironmental studies of lakes. Increases in nutrients in sediments of Anatolian lakes (Behcet 1994; Eastwood et al. 1999) seem to suggest that lakes were undergoing eutrophication.<sup>2</sup> Large amounts of *Pediastrum* spores in the Neolithic levels of the lake deposits of the Ghab Valley, Syria, are interpreted as a lowering in lake water quality due to accelerated soil erosion and nutrient supply (Yasuda et al. 2000).

Dramatic cases of air pollution similar to those of the industrial era have been documented in the copper mine region in the Araba Valley in southern Israel and Jordan. Paleoenvironmental data from settlements in the Wadi Faynan region in Jordan showed that their populations were exposed to extremely high levels of contamination produced by copper mining and smelting (Barker 2000). Although initiated in the Chalcolithic period, it was not until the Early Bronze Age that this activity grew to larger proportions (Levy et al. 1999). This growth of the smelting industry was the result of the immense social change of this period, and the high demand for copper in the Near Eastern markets (Hauptmann 1992). However, it was not until the Roman and Byzantine periods that heavy metal pollution reached a peak (Barker 2000). Recent geochemical studies have shown that the effects of Roman and Byzantine mining and smelting are still present in the region. The milk, urine, and feces of goats raised by Bedouins in the region have significant levels of heavy metals from grazing on polluted grounds (Barker 2000).

## Environmental Crisis at the End of the Third Millennium BCE

A period of apparent environmental and social troubles in the Near East took place towards the end of the third millennium BCE. The Old Kingdom civilization of Egypt, the Akkadian Empire of Mesopotamia, and the Bronze Age civilizations of Syria, Palestine, Greece, and Crete, all of which had achieved their economic peak by 2300 BCE, collapsed by the end of the third millennium. The high complexity of this widespread phenomenon leads to several possible causes of societal collapse. Opinions of scholars working on the subject

range from views of worldwide climatic change to ideas about socio-economic crises. Whatever the causes were, this phenomenon is discussed here because land degradation most certainly played a significant role in the collapse.

Weiss (2000) and Weiss and Bradley (2001) support the idea of climatic deterioration, based on examination of paleoclimatic records at local, regional, and global scales. Such records show that a 300–400 year period of low precipitation took place in several regions of the world (Weiss 2000). Evidence exists, for example, of dust deposition at the bottom of the Gulf of Oman, suggesting frequent dust storms (Weiss and Bradley 2001). Those in favor of non-climatic causes provide examples of socio-economic crises that may have occurred regardless of climatic deterioration (Butzer 1997).

This environmental change occurred in a relatively short period so that it was not clearly registered in marine and lake records. Pollen records from lake sediments show evidence of environmental deterioration, but not necessarily due to aridization (Butzer 1997). Deposits by rivers show rapid sediment accumulation followed by channel entrenchment in various streams, especially those areas heavily populated during the Early Bronze Age. It is possible that intense land degradation (forest clearance, grazing, and plowing) crucially impacted the stream courses, which in addition to climatic deterioration prompted the collapse of the socio-economic systems around them.

Wilkinson (1997a) presented a comprehensive model based on the development and collapse of Early Bronze sites in Upper Mesopotamia. He based his argument on the capacity of these settlements to use the natural resources around them while implementing strategies to procure food and other necessities in a highly variable environment. Thus, as population increased, the vulnerability of resource procurement systems became more stressed, pushing the environmental and social systems to the brink of collapse. Wilkinson's model implies that societies contain their growth in order not to cross the threshold of their carrying capacity. However, this threshold dropped as climate deteriorated, thus increasing the probability of economic collapse. It is in this part of the argument that land degradation plays an important role. The profound transformation of the Near Eastern environments, initiated with the emergence of agriculture several millennia earlier, reached the highest point in the third millennium BCE, when urbanization reached a peak. Thus, the environmental systems were pushed against their limits, becoming vulnerable to adverse climatic changes and to social and economic crises.

Although Wilkinson's model explains local and regional collapse in the semi-arid region of Upper Mesopotamia, it does not clarify widespread collapse in the Near East. A wide regional generalization of this model is difficult given the variety of landscapes and economies. Based on historical and paleoenvironmental data from various regions of the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean, Butzer (1997) discussed a possible scenario in which economic crisis in one region was transmitted to neighboring regions in a domino-like fashion. He explained his argument using the collapse of the Old Kingdom in Egypt and its consequences on those polities linked to Egyptian trade. Accordingly, the collapse of the Egyptian state affected the network of Egyptian trade in the Levant and other regions. The crisis was transmitted to neighboring areas dependent on resources and trade with the collapsed regions.

With a lack of substantial, well-dated evidence, it is probably advisable to analyze the role of climatic deterioration and progressive land degradation in the environmental and societal crises of more recent times. The environmental crisis in the 1930s in North

America is a modern analog showing a combination of environmental and economic factors in the collapse of agriculture on the Great Plains. The Dust Bowl occurred when drought affected an area experiencing socio-economic collapse in the Great Depression; these two independent factors, when occurring together, led to detrimental consequences in the socio-economic system of a nation. This alludes to Wilkinson's model, suggesting that the effects of increased land degradation have to be taken into consideration to explain the environmental crisis at the end of the third millennium BCE.

## **Land Degradation in the Near East: Myths and Realities**

The theories of environmental determinism plaguing geographical literature in the early twentieth century impacted the understanding of land degradation in the Near East. These deterministic ideas gave way to the so-called "desert and the sown" dichotomy, an approach that partitioned the population of the Near East into nomads, as destroyers of the land, versus sedentary peoples, as keepers of the land. Such views were portrayed in the works of Lowdermilk (1944), Tchalenko (1953), and Reifenberg (1955), among others. These authors maintained that the collapse of agriculture during the first centuries of Islamic rule in the Near East could be blamed on a widespread shift to a pastoral economy. Recent works on the problem have shown that such a thing never occurred, and that agriculture actually flourished in some areas, while others went into decline (Kedar 1985). Despite the rejection of its radical views, the "desert and the sown" rationale downplays the role of natural factors in the development of the deteriorated landscapes that we see today in the Near East. The trend followed by scholars in recent years is to look at as many factors as possible, as has been shown in the case of the environmental crisis at the end of the third millennium BCE.

### **NOTES**

1. Cave features formed by slow-moving water containing calcium carbonate. Chemical changes cause calcium carbonate to precipitate, creating various features inside the cave.
2. Depletion of water oxygen supply caused by organic contaminants produced by agricultural activities.

### **FURTHER READING**

For a variety of sources on paleoclimatic reconstruction, see the compilation by Bar-Yosef and Kra (1994). For an integrative study of pollen from lake sediments, see Van Zeist and Bottema (1991); for pollen from sea bottom sediments, see Rossignal-Strick (1999). The best guide to the vegetation of the Near East is Zohary (1973). An overview of fauna can be found in Gilbert (1995). For ungulates (hoofed animals) in the Near East, see Uerpman (1987).

Specialized discussions of the deterioration of flora, fauna, soils, and streams in the Eastern Mediterranean region can be found in the compilation by Bottema et al. (1990). A comprehensive description of the irrigation systems and their problems with salinization in ancient and modern Mesopotamia can be found in Jacobsen and Adams (1958), Adams (1981), and Artzy and Hillel (1988). For salinization in Egypt, see Hamdan (1961), Butzer (1976), and Stanley and Warne (1993).

Multidisciplinary views on the environmental crises at the end of the third millennium BCE can be found in the compilation by Dalfes et al. (1997). Numerous references to the climatic factors involved in this crisis are summarized in Weiss (2000) and Weiss and Bradley (2001).

The works of George P. Marsh (in Lowenthal 2000) are a good example of early deterministic ideas that affected the interpretation of the Near Eastern landscape at the end of the nineteenth century. An alternative view, still with deterministic ideas, was presented by Huntington 1911.

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## PART III

# THE SOCIAL WORLD

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## CHAPTER FIVE

# Gender Roles in Ancient Egypt

*Ann Macy Roth*

The roles played by men and women in ancient Egypt were clearly differentiated. As in most agricultural societies, men were responsible for food production, crafts, administration of the institutions of state and temple, defense of the population from outside threats, and most other duties outside the domestic sphere. Women's activities, by contrast, were largely restricted to the home: bearing and rearing children, producing clothing, cooking food, and caring for the sick. Even when women did work outside of the domestic sphere, they tended to take on tasks mimicking their household roles: weaving, serving as wet-nurses, preparing and serving food and drink, and, probably, prostitution.

## Gender and Cosmology

In Egyptian culture, however, this separation of gender roles was not merely a social custom, but had a theological and cosmological basis. As Erik Hornung has pointed out (1982, pp. 172–185), the Egyptians believed that before the creation of their world, non-existence was a single uniform substance that filled all space, containing all potential life and matter, but undifferentiated, with no internal distinctions or separate parts. Each of four basic characteristics of nonexistence – the lack of motion, limits, light, and form – was personified by a male–female pair of divinities. Clearly nonexistence also lacked gender distinctions, since each characteristic was both male and female. Moreover, religious statements about the nature of things before creation included the explicit statement that the creator god had no mother and no father.

At the moment of creation, the creator god, who was an indistinguishable part of this undifferentiated substance, brought into existence two gods, one male and one female. Sometimes this was said to have been done asexually, through spitting or sneezing, but

perhaps most often it is described as having been done through masturbation. Since the creator god himself was part of the undifferentiated nonexistence, he was sexually androgynous. He recounted that he “acted as husband with my fist, I copulated with my hand” (Allen 1988, p. 28). Since the word “hand” is feminine in Egyptian, this was essentially a sexual union with himself, emphasizing the androgynous character of the nonexistence of which he was an indistinguishable part. Because nonexistence was androgynous, gender distinctions were an indispensable feature of existence.

The gods created by this act were distinguished from each other in other ways (as dry air and moisture, for example) in different versions of the story, just as the creator god who was credited with their creation varied, but the separation of two sexes was essential to the definition of existence itself. Existence was defined by such contrasts rather than by mere physical presence; nothing could exist unless it could be contrasted with something else. For men to have existed, women must have been in existence from the very same moment; the two sexes were therefore regarded as of equal antiquity and equally essential to the existence and functioning of the created universe. The maintenance of the boundaries between the sexes and their contrasting expression in gender roles were thus essential to the existence of any people at all. It is significant that the Egyptian word for people, sometimes mistranslated as “men,” has both male and female determinatives (Fischer 2000, p. 46).

For this reason, any blurring of the boundaries between the gender roles that represented this sexual differentiation was seen as endangering existence. Maintaining the opposition of gender roles prevented the world from reverting to the uniform substance of pre-creation nonexistence. This maintenance of opposing dualities was expressed in many aspects of ancient Egyptian life: the divisions between east and west, the Nile valley and the desert, active historical kingship and ancestral kingship, or cyclical and linear time. But the division of the male from the female was a fundamental contrast.

In art, this contrast was expressed by contrasting skin colors. Women were conventionally represented with yellow or gold skin, while men were represented with skin of dark red or red brown. This coloration may originally have been an exaggeration of the skin color difference created by men’s outdoor work and women’s work inside the house; in some cases peasant women could be represented with darker skin, while sedentary older men were shown in yellow. But as a general rule, the difference denoted a difference in gender. Interestingly, in women’s mortuary monuments, they were sometimes depicted with pinkish skin, suggesting that in death, they returned to the state of androgyny that preceded their birth and also their rebirth into the afterlife (McCarthy 2002).

In addition to their skin color, women, particularly elite women, were often shown in a passive pose, standing with their feet close together and their arms embracing their husbands, or at their sides, or folded to grasp the opposite shoulder, or holding lotuses to their noses. Men’s poses were more active and took up more space. One foot was conventionally shown striding forward, and one hand reached out to hold a staff or an offering, while the other held an emblem of official power. Men’s gestures reached out to the world, while women’s turned inward.

In the representations of couples, a wife was often depicted as smaller than her husband. This could show a natural height difference, but in some cases the difference is so extreme as to imply an artificial hierarchical scale. Since this hierarchy was also used to differentiate

between kings and officials, parents and children, and landlords and peasants, it is clear that women, despite their equal status in the religious tradition, were viewed as inferior to men in status. It should be noted, however, that the same woman could be represented both as equal to *and* significantly smaller than her husband, depending on the context (Roth 2006).

## Ancient Egyptian Sexuality and Fertility

This distinction between male and female was, of course, sexual as well as social. The male role in sexual reproduction was seen as the actual creation of new life, which was then implanted in the female. Fundamentally, children were viewed as extensions of their father's life force or *ka*; the mother's role in determining their nature was decidedly secondary. Instead, women seem to have had dual roles, preceding and following the creative act: they aroused the man with their beauty and sexual attractiveness to stimulate the creation of a child, and then they nourished the life that his creative power had produced before and after birth. The fact that women were not credited with the creative side of fertility, which is attributed to women in most other ancient cultures, is perhaps due to the unusual geography of Egypt. Often, the earth is thought to be female, fertilized by rain from a male sky; however, Egypt's agricultural fertility came from the annual flooding of the Nile River. The earth, therefore, was seen as masculine, its fertility stimulated by the nude, star-spangled figure of the sky goddess above it. This reversal of the more common view of the agricultural world may have had profound effects on the ancient Egyptians' views about gender (Roth 2000).

Sexual acts were not often represented in formal Egyptian art, although embraces were quite frequently shown. In some cases these embraces were mutual, but more often it was the woman who was shown embracing, supporting, or affectionately touching the man. Simpson (1977) has demonstrated, however, that this is a general pattern, which seems to reflect power relations more than gender: kings were shown embracing gods and children their parents. In this, as in other ways, the man was seen to be superior in status to the woman, despite the equal importance and complementarity of their roles.

Subtle depictions of sexual congress occurred in the "divine conception" scenes in temples and later in birth houses attached to Graeco-Roman temples. There the couple was depicted seated on a bed, while the male extended the life hieroglyph to the nose of the female, and she often supported his elbow. Over time, these figures tended to be separated by increasing amounts of space, and in later birth houses, the life sign could become extremely long.

One hieroglyphic sign depicting the sexual act is preserved in the tomb of Khety at Beni Hassan, which shows a man lying atop a woman, who faces him, on an ebony bed. This sign is quite clear on the wall, although it was depicted as broken in the late nineteenth-century publication of the tomb (Newberry 1893, plate 14). Since this sign appears to be a generic hieroglyphic ideogram, the "missionary" position taken in the intercourse shown here was presumably the norm. Other depictions of sexual intercourse, in much less conventional positions, occur on the Turin Erotic Papyrus and in graffiti and ostraca from the New Kingdom. In these, men with sexual organs as long as their arms approached or penetrated scantily clad women in a variety of positions. Even more generously endowed men

were represented in sculptures of the late period, some of which were possibly of religious significance or to be used as amulets (Myślewiec 2004, pp. 54, 120–127).

It has been suggested that the Turin papyrus served as a bill of fare at a house of prostitution (Manniche 1987, p. 107), but in fact the social institution of female prostitution was not well attested until the later periods of Egyptian history, when it occurred in the Greek-influenced story of Setne-Khaemwas and possibly other texts. During the pharaonic period, the two characters in literary works who offered to pay for sex were in both cases women. In the story of the unfaithful wife in papyrus Westcar, the wife of the high priest sent a box of clothing to a man of the town to engage his attention (Simpson 2003, p. 14), while in the Tale of Two Brothers, the wife of Anubis offered to make her brother-in-law fine clothes if he would sleep with her (Simpson 2003, p. 82). Interestingly, when she repeated the rejected proposition to her husband, as coming from his brother, no remuneration was mentioned. Given that cloth may have served as a kind of informal currency and that it was produced by women, mention of it in these contexts suggests a stereotype.

## Departures from Heteronormativity

Although a binary view of gender seems to have been not only a social but a cosmological norm, there are rare references in textual evidence for homosexual interest and sexual relations. These sources show a more ambivalent attitude than might be expected.

Male homosexual interest and sexual relations were mentioned in several literary works. In the myth recounting the contest between the gods Horus and Seth for the throne of Egypt, Seth claimed to have taken the active role in homosexual intercourse with Horus, and this was apparently felt to disqualify Horus for the kingship; he was spat upon by the other gods (Parkinson 1991, pp. 120–121; Simpson 2003, pp. 99–100). No disgrace seems to have attached to Seth for his part in this activity, however, presumably because he claimed to have taken the male role, and therefore did not violate societal expectations. Horus's (alleged) transgression was in taking the female role, not merely in participating in homosexual intercourse. In a difficult passage from the Instructions of Ptahhotep, intercourse with a “woman-boy” is called opposed (to the general order), but the advice takes a practical rather than a moral view in warning against it, arguing essentially that it is a futile business, because the boy will be insatiable (Simpson 2003, p. 143; oddly the simple word “opposed” in this passage is here translated as “debasement” and “lewdness”). Ptahhotep assumes, however, that the audience for his instruction would take the active, male role, and not the woman's. In at least some contexts, homosexual activity was seen more as a subject for humor than as a shocking violation of societal norms. A Middle Kingdom story about a king Pepi II, a long-reigning king of the Old Kingdom, recounted his scandalous behavior with a general “in whose entire house was no woman.” The story seems to represent the attempts of outraged citizens to discover and discourage such activities as laughable, and in one case, thwarted by court musicians drowning out the complainer's voice (Parkinson 1991, pp. 54–56).

There were no textual allusions in the ancient Egyptian corpus to female homosexuality outside of dream books and protestations of innocence put in the mouths of the dead

(Manniche 1987, p. 22). This may be due to the fact that most literature was produced by men. Nor is transvestitism attested, perhaps because the clothing and hairstyles of men and women were in many periods too similar to serve as a marker of gender. In one interesting statue, however, Sobeknofru (1760–1755 BCE), a reigning queen at the end of the Twelfth Dynasty, was shown wearing a man's kilt over the traditional close-fitting woman's dress (Callender 2000, pp. 170–171).

## Law and Social Custom

Despite the sharp distinction between the sexes, ancient Egyptian society seems to have been somewhat less patriarchal than most of its neighbors. Women had, in theory, the same legal status and rights as men, although social custom and community pressure seem to have prevented them from exercising them very often (McDowell 1999, pp. 40–41). Women could own property, including agricultural land, and could sell or bequeath it as they desired. They inherited shares that were equal to the shares of their brothers from their parents' property. In a preindustrial society, this control over land, the most productive type of capital investment, presumably implied considerable economic power. In the Graeco-Roman and Coptic periods (332 BCE – 641 CE), women flourished as money-lenders, a similar type of capital investment (Pomeroy 1990; Wilfong 2002). And throughout the pharaonic period (3100–332 BCE), women produced cloth in their homes, a durable commodity which served as a unit of economic exchange, particularly in the early periods. In the Old Kingdom tomb of Akhethetep, men were shown examining strips of cloth and putting them in boxes, while other men distributed jewelry to women, who departed wearing it, suggesting that women were selling their excess cloth production and that the profits were their own (Ziegler 1993, pp. 116–118; Fischer 2000, p. 65 n. 104).

In addition to holding economic power, some women were also politically important. Kings' mothers seem to have been highly respected, and in the case of minor kings, usually served as regent for their sons until they came of age. Several other queens, notably Sobeknofru (1760–1755 BCE) in the Twelfth Dynasty, Hatshepsut (1473–1458 BCE) in the Eighteenth Dynasty, and Tawosret (1198–1190 BCE) in the Nineteenth Dynasty, became pharaohs and ruled in their own right. The monuments of both Hatshepsut and Tawosret were intentionally defaced and usurped after their deaths, but it is unclear what this persecution truly represented. Some have argued that it reflected a general resentment of female rule (Wente 1984). However, the persecution of reigning queens may also be attributed to the fact that such queens tended to rule as the last members of a dynastic line, and subsequent rulers may have attacked their legitimacy as a means of emphasizing their own. Kings' mothers who reigned during the minority of their sons were honored by them, in at least one case for their political effectiveness. Queen Ahhotep (1590–1530 BCE) of the early Eighteenth Dynasty was praised by her son for having cared for the army and recovered fugitives and deserters from it, and for having expelled rebels (Vandersleyen 1971, pp. 129–196).

In twentieth-century histories of Egypt, the role of male advisors who were prominent during these reigns was heavily emphasized: "It is not to be imagined, however, that even

a woman of the most virile character could have attained such a pinnacle of power without masculine support" (Gardiner 1961, p. 184). It is often implied that these men behind the throne had sexual relationships with the queens they served, although there is no evidence for such assertions. To judge from the example of a later female pharaoh, Cleopatra VII (51–30 BCE), however, it is at least possible that these earlier women in fact ruled Egypt during their reigns.

Another office held by women was that of "God's Wife of Amun." This position was held in the early Eighteenth Dynasty by royal wives and other women of the royal family and was presumably largely ceremonial in its duties, though perhaps quite generous in its remuneration. In the Third Intermediate Period (1075–715 BCE), it was revived in a different form as a kind of high priesthood of Amun and king's deputy in southern Egypt. These later God's Wives were depicted on the walls of their monuments performing the king's role in traditional rituals before the gods, and they seem to have held political as well as religious power in the southern part of Egypt. Again the question has arisen of the extent to which they were simply figureheads, with their male stewards holding the true power. It has been remarked that the tombs of the stewards and other officials serving the God's Wives were extremely large and elaborate, many times the size of the small tombs of the women themselves. Nonetheless, the location of these smaller tombs in a temple complex may have signified their greater importance, despite their smaller size. The women who held this office in its later form were royal daughters who did not pass the office on to their own daughters, but to daughters of the next king, whom they adopted. Because their successors were adopted and because no husbands of these women were attested, they are usually presumed to have been celibate, although this was clearly not true of earlier holders of the office. They were sometimes also called "Divine Votaress," "Divine Adoratrice," or "God's Hand," the last title being a reference to the role of the hand of the creator god in the story of creation.

Non-royal women could also serve in temples. In the Old Kingdom and Middle Kingdom periods, elite women could serve as prophets (the principal religious functionaries) in the cults of goddesses, most commonly Hathor and Neith; kings' daughters of the early Old Kingdom period sometimes served in the mortuary cults of their fathers. Later, women's roles in temples seem to have been more limited and specialized; they served as "chantresses," providing music at rituals of both male and female divinities, a role also attested in earlier periods.

The most common career for women, however, seems to have been marriage and family. Marriage was a strictly social institution. It apparently had no religious implications, and it was not marked by any religious ceremony. Nor was it normally seen as a concern of the Egyptian state. It was sometimes constrained by a contract between the parties, usually when property or children from previous unions were involved. The constraints imposed by social customs and expectations were presumably considerably more restrictive. While both parties seem to have had equal rights within the marriage legally, literary sources suggested a double standard: adultery in women was often punished by death in stories, while adultery in men was not seen as meriting punishment, though the adulterous man was sometimes made to look ridiculous. Wisdom texts advised men against seducing women, but essentially because of the danger of alienating their male relatives for so trivial a reason.

## Changes in Gender Roles over Time

Galvin (1984) pointed out a marked decrease in the importance of women's roles in the Hathor priesthood between the Old Kingdom and the Middle Kingdom, and Fischer (2000, p. 45) has shown that this change was a more general phenomenon. One Old Kingdom woman was accorded the title of "overseer of (female) doctors," implying that other female doctors existed to be overseen. In the tomb of Princess Watetkhethor of the early Sixth Dynasty, women were depicted who held the titles "steward" (literally "overseer of the house"), "overseer of equipment," "overseer of cloth," and "overseer of ornaments." Elsewhere, women had the titles "overseer of singers," "overseer of a dance troupe," and "overseer of the house of weavers" (Fischer 2000, pp. 18–20). Interestingly, the feminine form of the title "overseer" itself is only attested for the Old Kingdom and the early Middle Kingdom (Ward 1986, pp. 3–4). These positions indicate supervision only of other women, and are usually attested in the households of other women. Similarly, female doctors probably also served only women. These titles may thus be the result of a degree of segregation of upper class women rather than evidence for a high degree of professional specializations among women. Nonetheless, the fact that these women were depicted with their professional titles showed that public decorum allowed such women a greater degree of visibility than was possible in later periods.

Religious institutions also showed a decrease in professional female staff over time. The title "prophet" was attested for women primarily in the cults of goddesses in the Old and early Middle Kingdom; women could hold a lower title, "*wab*-priest," in the cults of male gods in the Middle Kingdom. Later, women serving in the cults of both gods and goddesses were limited to the musical roles that had always been the principal type of temple service for women.

The literacy of women has long been a question. There is no explicit evidence for female literacy in the Old Kingdom, although one would think it was probably necessary to perform such offices as steward. A female form of the title "scribe" is attested in the Middle Kingdom, though some have argued that it should be translated as "cosmetician." Women in the New Kingdom period were sometimes shown with scribal equipment, and a scribal palette bearing the name of a king's daughter was found in the tomb of Tutankhamun. A clear example of a female scribe existed in the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty (664–525 BCE); she served in the household of the God's Wife of Amun (Piacentini 2001). Given the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty enthusiasm for reviving older forms, her role may have been inspired by the women who served as administrators in the households of Old Kingdom royal women.

## Summary

The ancient Egyptian view of the world stressed the creation of women and men at the same time and their essential equality, as well as their contrasting and complementary roles. Their equality was reflected in Egyptian laws, but was limited and modified by social pressures and traditions. It is clear that men were viewed as having higher status socially than women. This was shown when a married couple was represented and the woman was

depicted at a markedly smaller scale and by the fact that affectionate gestures so often were depicted as directed by women towards men.

One of the main controversies in Egyptological scholarship about gender relations has been between those who would emphasize the independence and autonomy of Egyptian women as an (admirable) anomaly in the ancient world, and those who prefer to stress the evidence that, despite the fact that a few women seem to have held economic and political power, most of the female population were occupied with domestic duties and were economically dependent upon their male relatives. Much of the evidence on this question is a matter of interpretation. Were female rulers and God's Wives truly exercising authority by themselves, or were they merely figureheads? Are letters that seem to have been written by women truly evidence that at least some women were literate, or were they dictated to scribes? Despite such questions, it is clear that Egyptian women, particularly those of the upper class, had considerably greater legal rights and social autonomy than was found in many ancient civilizations and could sometimes exercise real political and economic power.

## FURTHER READING

There is an extensive recent literature about women in ancient Egypt, although less has been written on gender and sexuality. For a very full bibliography, occasionally updated online, see Wilfong (1992). Among the general semi-popular books in English, Robins (1993) and Graves-Brown (2010) offer clear and comprehensive presentations of most of the evidence. Other useful general works on the topic are those of Tyldesley (1994), Nur el-Din (1995), Hawass (2000), and the more popular Watterson (1992). Two exhibitions dealing with women have catalogs focusing on expressions of gender in material culture and containing useful essays, Capel and Markoe (1996) and Wilfong (1997). Graves-Brown (2008) is a volume of articles on gender issues, some dealing with homosexuality and masculinity.

More specific studies have dealt with particular communities, where the roles of women were especially well attested, for example the community of Deir el-Medina (Pinch 1983; Sweeney 1992; McDowell 1999) and the much later Coptic town of Djeme (Wilfong 2002). Troy (1986) deals with the royal women of Egypt and their particular sexual and symbolic roles.

Shorter periods of Egyptian history have also been subjected to more detailed studies of gender. For the comparatively greater autonomy of women in the Old Kingdom, see Galvin (1984) and Fischer (2000). For the often-neglected Middle Kingdom period, see Ward (1986, 1989) and Lustig (1997). The New Kingdom period tends to be the main focus of the more general works, but is specifically addressed in Robins (1993). Considerable work has been done specifically on the roles of women in the Graeco-Roman period: see Pomeroy (1990). For gender questions more generally in the same period, see Montserrat (1996).

For sexuality in the pharaonic period, Manniche (1987) offers a useful collection of the sources. One area of sexuality where much has been written is its role in mortuary beliefs. The necessity for sexual union to re-conceive the dead in the afterlife was first suggested by Desroches-Noblecourt (1953) and Westendorf (1967); no synthetic study of this phenomenon has yet appeared in English, although several aspects of it are discussed in Roth (2000).

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## CHAPTER SIX

# Royal Women and the Exercise of Power in the Ancient Near East

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*Sarah C. Melville*

The diverse societies that made up the long continuum of Mesopotamian history were ruled by kings, and those kings were men. The only woman reckoned among kings was, according to the Sumerian King List, Ku-Baba, a tavern woman who ruled Kish as king (not queen) for a hundred years during the third millennium. Ku-Baba, about whom we know little else, remains an anomaly, however. Although women could not be rulers and were, like everyone else, subordinate to them, the king's wife, mother, sisters and daughters held prestigious positions and participated in key political, administrative and religious activities. By contrast to men, royal women did not lead soldiers into battle, appoint high officials or governors, establish treaties with foreign states, found cities, or deliver capital punishments. Ideally, members of the royal family, including the king, acted to further the interests of what was essentially a corporate body, that is, the family, tribe, or dynasty. Women did not exist in marginalized isolation, but played vital roles that fulfilled both political needs and social requirements.

Non-royal women also participated actively in business ventures, religious observances, and to benefit their families and communities. In all periods of Near Eastern history, women had legal rights (Justel 2016). Although they did not enjoy "equal opportunity" in the modern sense, neither were they helpless victims of oppression and exploitation. As Andrew McCarthy notes: "There were strict cultural norms that defined the role of every person in society, from slave to king and everything in between. A person's place was determined through a complex interplay between a number of factors, including kinship, gender, age, physical qualities and intangible personal qualities" (McCarthy 2016, p. 104). Women and men worked together to solve problems and improve their lot in life. Practically speaking, that meant that women and men fulfilled different roles and wielded different types of power, although their spheres of operation often overlapped.

Not all women in the ancient Near East shared similar experiences. The evidence concerning women is incomplete, scattered across time and geographical space, and difficult

to interpret: sometimes it is plentiful and varied, sometimes scarce or overly specific. Sources range from economic documents, letters, and monumental inscriptions to artistic representations, jewelry, and other personal items, but we do not have complete information for any individual woman let alone a single time or place. In spite of the frustrating lack of data, there is still too much to consider thoroughly here. Using examples from different periods and areas of Mesopotamia, I concentrate on royal women, who are better represented than lower status women.

## Royal Women and the Royal Household

Architectural remains do not support the notion that women lived strictly cloistered lives, cut off from public interaction, though texts such as the Middle Assyrian harem edicts perpetuate the notion (Parpola 2012). Palaces were crowded and busy, with women, children, servants, and officials coming and going throughout the day (Solvang 2006; Barjamovic 2011, pp. 48–57). Women wore veils in marriage ceremonies and covered their heads in public to show their married status, but that does not mean they lacked agency or felt oppressed (Stol 2016, pp. 22–28). Numerous women of varying rank lived and worked in the palace, the mother of the king and the queen holding the highest positions.

Texts such as ration lists indicate that the female population could be substantial. For instance, at Ebla toward the end of the third millennium, distribution records show that the number of royal wives living in the palace increased from 20 or 30 to 50 over a short period (Archi 2002, p. 3). A thousand years later in ancient Assyria, wine lists, letters, and administrative documents demonstrate that large numbers of women of different ranks lived and worked at the palace (Svärd 2015, pp. 87–143). Of these, only the most elite – the queen mother, queen, king’s daughters and occasionally sisters – have left much evidence of their active involvement in affairs of state.

There is almost no information concerning the education that royal women received, although some found a means of creative self-expression. Enheduanna, the daughter of Sargon, founder of the Empire of Akkad around 2334 BCE, is the world’s earliest identified author. Later tradition credited her with composing a cycle of hymns dedicated to the goddess Inanna, although the attribution remains controversial (Lion 2011, pp. 96–97; Foster 2016, pp. 206–208; Gadotti 2016, pp. 67–69). Poems, such as a lament for the death of the king Ur-Nammu, a lullaby for a crown prince, and a love lyric for the king Shu-Sin, have been ascribed to female authors (for the texts, see Black et al. 2006). Similarly, an Assyrian woman may have composed a poem mourning death in childbirth (Livingstone 1989: 15).

Whether and to what extent royal women could read and write remains a matter of some controversy, although scattered evidence suggests that some achieved basic literacy. A seventh century BCE letter from the daughter of the king to her sister-in-law, the wife of the crown prince Ashurbanipal, indicates that high-ranking women were expected to be literate. The princess reminds her sister-in-law of what is expected of someone in her position, admonishing: “why do you not write your tablet and do your schoolwork? If you do not, they will say, ‘Is this the sister of Šerua-eṭirat, the eldest daughter of the Succession Palace of Aššur-etel-ilani-mukinni (Estarhaddon), great king, mighty king, king of the

world, king of Assyria?" (Melville 2014a, pp. 214–215). Though literacy rates among elite women remain uncertain, surviving evidence shows that female authors produced works similar to their male counterparts (Svärd 2013, p. 278). Female scribes are attested in nearly every period and culture of the ancient Near East (Lion 2011, pp. 98–101; Crawford 2014, pp. 16–17).

Royal women are rarely depicted on public monuments or mentioned in inscriptions, but when occasionally they do appear, they are subordinate only to the king or divinities (Suter 2016a,b). Thus, a sculptured disc worshipping Inanna portrays Enheduanna (Winter 1987; Bahrani 2002), and on a bronze relief, Naqia, the mother of Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE), stands in a ritual pose behind her son (Ornan 2002; Macgregor 2012, pp. 114–116, 118; Svärd 2015, pp. 77–80). Occasionally, a woman may appear alone: a standing stone at Assur depicts the Assyrian queen, Liballi-Sharrat (Gansell 2013), and a letter refers to a statue of the queen mother, Naqi'a (Cole and Machinist 1998, p. 61). High-ranking women regularly appear on cylinder seals and smaller objects in all periods (Suter 2016a,b).

Grave goods also attest to the fact that the king's primary wife and mother were particularly revered. The Early Dynastic III graves at Ur contained a seal bearing the inscription of Puabi, the queen. The rich finds associated with the grave and the practice of retainer burial – killing and burying subjects with the ruler and his wife – reveal that Puabi's status was comparable to that of the king (Gansell 2007). The high regard accorded to royal burials is evident throughout Mesopotamian history. Recent excavation of the tombs of Neo-Assyrian queens (plus associated later burials) at Nimrud produced extraordinary examples of gold jewelry, crowns, and personal objects (Hussein 2016; Spurrier 2016).

Men could gain status through their relationships with certain elite women, but at the same time, a man's honor was intimately tied to his female relatives. At Ebla the brothers of the queen mother received goods and rank as a direct result of their relationship to her (Archi 2002, p. 6; Biga 2016). Sometimes men became legitimate rulers only through marriage into the royal family, and certainly a king's virile image was enhanced by the presence of more women, and therefore more children in his household. At Arrapha in the fourteenth century BCE, "a ruler of very average importance, subject to the Mitanni," nevertheless maintained multiple palaces, numerous wives and concubines throughout his kingdom. Thus, the number of women in the king's household demonstrated his financial power and masculinity (Lion 2012).

If, on the other hand, a man lost control of these women, he lost status. The capture of royal families became a *topos* in Assyrian royal inscriptions, symbolizing the utter defeat and humiliation of the enemy. For instance, when Tiglath-pileser I (1114–1076 BCE) defeated Kili-Teshub, the king of Kutmuhi, and "carried off his wives, his natural sons, (and) his clan," he not only dealt a terrible blow to the enemy tribe, he cuckolded its leader (Grayson 1976). By taking over the enemy's family, a king assumed all the power and authority that had belonged to his adversary. This gesture was widely recognized throughout the Ancient Near East. It appears in the Bible and accounts of Alexander the Great (Briant 2015, pp. 262–266).

Royal women fulfilled important cultural roles, but their official duties are much more difficult to determine, since they varied according to whether the context was administrative, political or religious.

## *Royal Women and State Administration*

Where there is evidence of royal administration of land, trade, and the economy, there is evidence that women were active as well, often holding positions of responsibility on behalf of the king or taking part in private transactions of their own. For example, excavations of the Early Dynastic levels at Lagash uncovered the archive of an agricultural institution called the “household of the wife” administered by a succession of ruler’s wives. These women managed the cultivation of over 10 000 acres, or 4048 hectares, of land and were responsible for a huge and complex administration that employed a large number of men, women, and children to labor in the fields, tend livestock, and produce textiles in return for food rations (Karahashi 2016; Sharlach 2017, pp. 292–295). Similar institutions existed in several other cities and functioned throughout the early periods of Mesopotamian history. The royal women of the Sargonic period also administered large estates and traveled freely between them (Foster 2016, pp. 36–37). Royal wives of the Ur III dynasty (2112–2004 BCE) contributed to the administration of the state economy in several cities of the empire (Weiershäuser 2008; Lafont 2016).

Royal women often held positions of great responsibility second only to the king. At Ebla the king’s mother and the queen were among the most dominant people at court (Biga 2016, pp. 71–77). At Mari, a city now near the Iraqi–Syrian border, in around 1800 BCE, a large archive of letters to and from Shibtu, the wife of the ruler Zimri-Lim, demonstrates that when the king was away on campaign, she acted as his representative. He sent her directions and information, and she in turn carried out his orders and reported back to him. From her letters it is apparent that the king delegated authority and tasks to Shibtu; yet there appears not to have been any one specific area or institution over which she exercised sole control. Although Shibtu was subordinate to the king, her administrative role mirrored his; she participated in virtually all areas of administration and her sphere of influence extended beyond the bounds of Mari itself (Ziegler 2009–2011; Ziegler 2016, pp. 297–304). Since she usually carried out her husband’s instructions, it is difficult to assess how much individual political agency she enjoyed. Shibtu’s power seems to have derived from her personal talents, the king’s trust, and the privileges of her office.

Not all rulers’ wives were as autonomous or active as Shibtu. A few years earlier, a letter from Shamshi-Adad warned his son, Iasma-Addu, against housing his wife outside the citadel, since “Upon hearing this, her father will be very irritated. This is simply not done” (Sasson 2015, p. 105). Under normal circumstances, a high-ranking wife could expect to be actively involved in domestic affairs. Not only would Iasma-Addu’s poor treatment have had adverse political consequences, but it would have prevented his wife from contributing to the palace administration or controlling her own fate. The extent to which royal wives involved themselves at court depended on their own abilities and above all on their relationship with their husbands.

During the Neo-Assyrian period (934–610 BCE) elite women took part in economic affairs, owned and administered estates, and fulfilled tax obligations. The king’s primary wife was wealthy in her own right; she received a share of tribute and audience gifts which other women did not, and she could even run her own palace. The consort and the queen mother employed a large number of men and women and administered households that were in many respects mirror images of the king’s or the crown prince’s (Kertai 2013;

Svärd 2015, pp. 61–74). Women who came to court through diplomatic marriage brought with them suitable attendants and personal assets, over which they maintained some control. Evidence for the economic activity of foreign women and concubines is scanty, but it is likely that they were free to carry out business transactions using their personal wealth. Royal women could act individually, dispose of their own property as they wished, or administer large domains, but it is likely that when they died most of their wealth reverted to the crown, and therefore their independence was something of a fiction.

Privileged women of all periods, especially the ruler's wife or his mother, played important administrative roles. However, it is not always possible to determine when they were acting in an official capacity and when they were dealing as private persons. Nor is it clear whether and in what way gender constraints curtailed their activities. Nonetheless, the highest-ranking women enjoyed economic freedoms and administrative responsibilities which were on a par with, or exceeded, those of many men.

### ***Women and Politics***

Although women could be important in civil administration, in the political arena their roles were more restricted. A strong royal wife could be her spouse's true partner; the king's mother could help him gain the throne; and his daughters could, when married to vassals or other kings, represent their father's interests. The role of the king's wife in diplomacy tended to be gender-specific. She dealt primarily with other women, as in the case of the Early Dynastic consort, Baranamtara of Lagash, who exchanged gifts with Ninizkimti, the wife of the ruler of Adab before 2400 BCE (Prentice 2010). Such exchanges demonstrated to both sides that the rulers were the heads of proper families of equal status, who knew and followed the rules of diplomacy.

Towards the end of the second millennium, the Hittite queen Pudu-hepa corresponded with both the Egyptian Pharaoh Ramses II, and his wife Nefertari, but this correspondence was restricted to perfunctory formal greetings and some negotiation about the marriage of a Hittite princess to the Egyptian king (Bryce 2016, pp. 307–308; Vigo 2016, pp. 335–338). Pudu-hepa's letters were meant to show that the Hittite royal couple were equal to the Egyptian ruler and his wife, but they also reflect a practice peculiar to the Hittites, that the queen, rather than the king, chose which royal daughter would marry. The mothers of kings could sometimes enter the political fray on behalf of their sons. Some of the most powerful women in Mesopotamian history acquired their authority, not by aiding their husbands, but by helping their sons gain or keep the throne (Ben-Barak 1987; Melville 2004). The Neo-Babylonian king, Nabonidus (555–539 BCE), who was not of royal birth, claimed that his mother, Adad-guppi, introduced him at court. According to her pseudo-autobiographical stele, she was instrumental in her son's rise to power and later provided him with a convenient rationale for claiming legitimacy. Her pious deeds brought him to the attention of the gods, who then put him on the throne (Beaulieu 1989, pp. 78–79; Melville 2006; Yun 2017). Adad-guppi lived to the ripe old age of 104 and proved to be a great public relations asset to her son.

The Neo-Assyrian queen mothers, Shammu-ramat (Semiramis of legend) and Naqia, both played important roles during their sons' reigns. Naqia corresponded with officials in cities throughout the empire, made donations to temples, built a palace, and administered

her estates. Naqia was a prominent and respected figure at court. However, she was directly involved in matters of state on only one occasion, when, after her son's sudden death, she fulfilled his wishes and imposed a loyalty oath on the Assyrian populace on behalf of her grandson, the new king, Ashurbanipal (668–627 BCE) (Melville 1999, pp. 79–90; Melville 2014b, pp. 231–232). The power these women wielded differed significantly from that of the king, who, as head of state, made life or death decisions and controlled policy. Such distinctions notwithstanding, men and women alike acted for the benefit of their families and dynasties, and marriage provided a means to that end.

There were three basic types of political marriage in the ancient Near East: dynastic marriage, diplomatic marriage between equal states, and marriage to tie a vassal to the lord. At around 2150 BCE, it was the custom at Lagash for the ruler to gain the throne by marrying a daughter of the previous ruler or, if there was none, a daughter of the ruling family. In this way Gudea became ENSI of Lagash by marrying Ninalla, the daughter of Urbaba (Diakonoff 1991, p. 91). Marriage continued to function as one of the chief ways for a man to legitimize his claim to the throne. By marrying Shibtu, the daughter of the ruler of the powerful state of Yamhad, Zimri-lim acquired sufficient military backing to reclaim the throne of Mari and implement his lifelong but ultimately unsuccessful effort to extend his territories. The complex political marriages of the Neo-Babylonian period offer another example of this type of union: Neriglissar, the son of an official, married into the royal family and then murdered his brother-in-law, the king Amel-Marduk. Neriglissar then claimed the throne on the strength of his link to the dynasty through Amel-Marduk's sister (da Riva 2014, p. 14).

During the Sargonic period (2334–2913 BCE), one of the daughters of the king of Marhashi joined the royal family of Agade by marrying either the king or his son. Less than a century later, Ur-Nammu, the first king of the Ur III dynasty (2112–2004 BCE), arranged a marriage between his son and the daughter of the king of Mari, thus establishing a friendly relationship between the two city-states. Sometimes marriage alliances failed to achieve the desired political objective, however. In his thirty-first year, Shulgi, the third king of the Ur III dynasty, married his daughter to the king of Anshan on the Iranian plateau. The marriage was a diplomatic failure, for Shulgi destroyed Anshan shortly afterwards. The daughter of Shu-Sin was married to the king of Shimanum, but the couple was subsequently deposed, and Shu-Sin had to go to war to restore them to power (Sharlach 2017).

Not only did the king of Mari, Zimri-Lim, use his daughters to set up alliances and secure vassals, but once they were installed in their new homes, these women gathered intelligence for their father, and many of their letters contained reports on the political maneuvers of their husbands (Sasson 2015, pp. 110–118). When the marriage and the alliance were successful, the daughters led rewarding lives, but if the political circumstances deteriorated or the marriage itself failed, then the situation of the daughter could become intolerable, prompting her to write to her father begging for him to call her home. Zimri-lim was not insensitive to the plight of his daughters. Once Zimri-lim responded to an urgent request to return to Mari by telling his daughter to "Go then, solve your problem; if it is not feasible, cover your head and make your way here" (Sasson 2015, p. 116). However uncertain their situations sometimes were, the daughters of Zimri-lim actively and even enthusiastically corresponded with their father, who they

expected would consider their reports and counsel. In one case, the princess Kirum even went so far as to remind her father of the negative consequences of not heeding her advice (Sasson 2015, pp. 116–117). Because Zimri-lim and his daughters operated in a fairly limited geographical area among a homogeneous ethnic group, the royal women of Mari were able to take part in political exchanges to an unprecedented degree. When the political stage grew to include a wide area and many different cultures, however, the significance of diplomatic marriage changed, and with it the role of the women involved.

During the Late Bronze Age (1500–1100 BCE), diplomatic marriage occurred not only between kings and their vassals, but on a grand scale at an international level as the Great Kings of the Hittites, Mitanni, Assyrians, Kassites, and Egyptians schemed to make alliances and outwit their enemies. The diplomatic correspondence recovered from Amarna in Egypt contains a number of revealing letters about arranged royal marriages, which were the primary means to validate alliances. But the diverse cultures involved had different concepts of the political relationships created by marriage ties. Although the Pharaoh did not permit Egyptian royal women to marry foreign kings, he did allow foreign women to join his household. Thus, the Egyptians tended to see marriage alliances as acknowledging their own superiority, while the Near Eastern kings considered that they gained the upper hand by becoming the fathers-in-law of the Pharaoh (Meier 2002, pp. 167–168; Podany 2012, pp. 217–242; Tyldesley 2016). No matter how the different kings presented such marriages to their own subjects, the fact is that they helped secure parity between the great powers rather than create vassal relationships.

Marriage agreements between equal powers were accomplished only after lengthy negotiations. To prove her worth and thus the worth of her father, a royal bride-to-be was sent to her new home accompanied by a large retinue of attendants and a huge dowry, and the groom paid a sizeable bride price for his new wife. Anything less would have been demeaning. The Kassite king Burnaburiash wrote indignantly to the Pharaoh asking, “Who is going to take her to you? With Haya (the Egyptian messenger) there are five chariots. Are they going to take her to you in five chariots? Should I in these circumstances allow her to be brought to you from my house, my neighboring kings would say, ‘They have transported the daughter of the Great King to Egypt in five chariots’” (Moran 1992, p. 11). In this case, the inadequate Egyptian entourage not only insulted the Kassite king, but cost him, for he would have to pay for a suitable retinue from his own treasury.

Kings were always anxious to safeguard a daughter’s status because it reflected their own. For example, when the Hittite king Suppiluliuma negotiated a marriage contract between the king of Mitanni and his own daughter, he insisted, “You shall not bring my daughter into the position of second wife. In Mitanni she shall rule as queen” (Schulman 1979, p. 178). Even though the kings maintained lively communication via messengers and embassies, once a woman married a foreign ruler, she seldom maintained contact with her original family. The Kassite king Kadashman-Enlil felt compelled to complain to the Pharaoh, “Here you are asking for my daughter in marriage, but my sister whom my father gave you was (already) there with you, and no one has seen her (so as to know) if now she is alive or if she is dead” (Moran 1992, p. 1).

Since so many diplomatic marriages took place during this period, kinship ties between the different royal houses became complicated, sometimes with serious political consequences. For example, Mubalitat-Sherua, the daughter of the Assyrian king Ashur-uballit

I, married the Babylonian ruler Burnaburiash II and bore a son. When that son was subsequently murdered in a rebellion in 1333 BCE, Assur-uballit, as the murdered king's grandfather, retaliated by invading Babylonia, putting down the revolt, and choosing the next Babylonian king (Collins 2008, pp. 65–66).

The treatment of foreign-born royal wives fluctuated with changing political situations. After the Hittite king Suppiluliuma died in 1322 BCE, his Babylonian-born wife was accused of using witchcraft to kill the wife of the new king, Murshili II. Although Murshili got permission from the gods to execute his stepmother (Suppiluliuma's widow), he decided instead to remove her from priestly office, thus substantially reducing her power (Murphy 2002, p. 441; Beckman 2013, pp. 208–209). The accusation was undoubtedly politically motivated, probably in part by the desire to oust a foreigner from an influential position. Under the successive large empires of the first millennium – the Assyrian, Babylonian, and finally Persian – diplomatic marriages usually took place between the prevailing king and his vassals, rather than between kings of equal status as it had in the Late Bronze Age (Dalley 1998).

In all periods, ultimate authority resided with the king and every king struggled to gain, maintain, and expand his authority. He mustered the help of everyone he could, particularly family members. Thus, kings called upon the women most closely associated with them – their wives, mothers, and daughters – to carry out any number of civic, political or religious duties. Royal women came to represent the ideals associated with their offices and thus “became responsible for the functions of [those] positions within the work and symbols of the royal house” (Solvang 2003, p. 2).

### ***Women and Religion***

There is no word for religion in Akkadian or Sumerian, but organized worship of the gods was vital to the cultures of the Near East. The king was the link between the mundane world and the divine one, and as such usually took a leading role in the worship of the most important deities. Custom also required that the king's close relatives (both male and female) participate in various cults, but there was a political element to their involvement as well. States such as third millennium Lagash and seventh century Assyria deliberately promoted the idea that the royal couple paralleled a divine one (Sharlach 2017, p. 292; Parpola 2012, pp. 619–620).

Particularly important temples could be rich and influential, and the king always had to check their acquisition of power and look after his own interests. He did so by performing religious duties, by appointing those closest to him to key priestly positions, or by encouraging family members to patronize certain temples which he himself supported. Although not all cultic activity was politically inspired, and certainly not all priests or priestesses belonged to the royal family, royal participation in cult practice, especially when visible to the public, had a political payoff. Females performed religious activity as private individuals, as occasional celebrants, or as official priestesses whose lives were dedicated to the service of the gods.

Royal women made offerings to deities on behalf of themselves, the king, or their sons. Dedications took various forms including small statues, plaques, jewelry, or temple accoutrements. Thus Watartum, the wife of the Ur III king Ur-Nammu, dedicated an agate

plaque to the goddess Inanna for the life of their son, Shulgi (2094–2047 BCE) (Sharlach 2017, pp. 14–15). Over 1500 years later, Naqia, the mother of Esarhaddon (680–669 BCE), made a similar dedication on an inscribed pectoral, or breast ornament, petitioning “the Lady” of a temple at Nineveh for “the life of Esarhaddon and for herself, her own life, the length of her days, the stability of her reign and her well-being” (Leichty 2011, pp. 318–320; Melville 2014b, pp. 234–235).

If the king’s wife or mother was particularly concerned about something, such as the welfare of the king while on campaign, she might consult oracles or diviners. Aside from making personal contributions or seeking reassurance, royal women often provided animals and fresh produce for temple daily offerings, and could also contribute gold or other material toward temple construction, the fashioning of a divine statue or temple furniture (Melville 1999, p. 112). Women’s contributions to temples are comparable to those made high officials or male members of the royal family other than the king.

Some religious ceremonies required the involvement of the king and his wife. The worship of certain deities, not just female ones, called for female supplicants, and the celebration of specific festivals needed both high-ranking women and men. In addition, a great deal of ritual promoted the welfare of the king and his family, who were the main performers in such ceremonies. During the Early Dynastic period, royal women carried out cultic duties at different temples and towns throughout the state of Lagash (Sharlach 2017, pp. 296–297). The royal princesses of Ebla, who were married to foreign kings, returned to their home city to perform rites on special occasions such as royal births or marriages (Archi 2002, p. 4). Likewise, the royal daughters of Mari had cultic duties which they continued to perform even after they were married and had moved to another city (Sasson 1973, p. 77). In Assyria, royal women participated in both occasional rites and ones that were a regular part of the cultic calendar. When Esarhaddon’s wife died, for example, her daughter, daughter-in-law, the king’s secondary wives and perhaps concubines all took part in the funeral (Melville 2004). The king’s closest family members, both male and female, took part in the annual celebration of the marriage of the gods, Nabu and Tashmetum (Cole and Machinist 1998, p. 56).

When a king named a sister or daughter to a priestly position, there were sometimes far-reaching political implications. In about 2300 BCE, Sargon appointed his daughter Enheduanna to be high priestess of the moon god Nanna at Ur, and perhaps high priestess of An at Uruk. The move was apparently calculated to help consolidate Sargon’s rule of the city-states. By giving his daughter a Sumerian name and appointing her to a prestigious Sumerian post, Sargon aimed to unify the Sumerian south and tie it to the Akkadian north. Sargon must have successfully achieved his political objectives through the appointment, because for the next 500 years kings continued to assign their daughters to the post of high priestess at Ur. Through much of the second millennium, this office was one of the major symbols of legitimate rule in Babylonia, and only the ruling dynasty could place a member of its household in the position. The high priestess held her post for life, and she could remain in it even after political power changed hands (Hallo 1978, pp. 29–30; Stol 2016, p. 563).

Much later the Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus revived the tradition by making his daughter High Priestess of the moon god. By promoting the moon god, he probably hoped to counteract the political machinations of the powerful priesthood of the god Marduk in Babylon (Beaulieu 1989, p. 71). Further, by restoring an ancient tradition,

he could claim to ally himself with the ancient kings who began it, and, in effect, to borrow legitimacy and status from them.

## Concluding Remarks

The roles of elite women were complex, varied, and subject to a high degree of fluctuation due to changing political circumstances. In the administrative and religious spheres, royal women acted both officially as administrators or priestesses, and privately, by carrying out economic transactions of their own or making personal dedications to temples. In politics, however, women's official roles were symbolic. Although we may imagine that powerful women took part in personal politics at least on the level of court intrigue, there is little direct evidence of that.

Women did wield power right alongside men, but they had different roles, different means of exercising influence, and different avenues of authority from men. According to deeply ingrained cultural principles, the head of a dynasty, tribe or state had to be male; therefore even the most exalted woman was always second to at least one man. For the same reasons, when royal women took part in administration or politics, they did so not simply to further their own interests, but to promote those of the royal family as a whole. Women were critically important to the highest-ranking men; a woman's beauty, brains and ability to bear children were not only practical assets, but augmented her husband's reputation. The royal women of ancient Mesopotamia fulfilled their societal roles with competence, verve and occasional panache.

## FURTHER READING

For surveys on women in Mesopotamia, see Gansell (2012) and Stol (2016). For primary sources involving women, see Chavalas (2014). Collections of studies on women, gender, and sexuality across the Ancient Near East include Parpola and Whiting (2002); Masterson et al. (2015); Budin and Turfa (2016); and Lion and Michel (2016). Excellent discussions of theoretical approaches to the study of women in Ancient Near Eastern history and art appear in Bahrani (2001) and Svärd (2015, 2016). For a current bibliography of women and gender in the Ancient Near East, see Garcia-Ventura and Zisa (2017).

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# The Family in the Ancient Near East

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*John P. Nielsen*

In her introduction to *After Kinship*, Janet Carsten (2004) provides a discussion of kinship studies at the turn of the twenty-first century. The previous decades had been defined by a shift away from a functional appreciation of kinship rooted in the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss to one that emphasized kinship as a created meaning as epitomized in the works of Clifford Geertz and David Schneider.

The post-structural turn brought new insights to the study of kinship, but it also elevated the field into a realm of abstraction that divorced kinship from the categorical study of family organization and relationships on a human level that characterized anthropology's structuralist past. Carsten laments this loss of emphasis on the personal experience of relatedness, and writes, "I take it as axiomatic that the creative energy that ordinary people apply to their lived relationships makes [kinship] a topic that is anything but boring, abstract, or technical" (Carsten 2004, p. 17).

Kinship may be a created artifice, but the lived experience of family and all the meanings that come with it have a concrete reality for people in any society. The rituals and symbols that were performed within the family life of the Mesopotamian – some of which would have been so mundane and informal that they would not have required explanation in texts if they were mentioned at all – would have expressed the fundamental values of the family so that the family appeared as natural fact to those who were members (van der Toorn 1996b, p. 42).

Assyriology has always been rooted in philology. Consequently there has always been a tendency to amass bits of textual references with the belief that they can be used to assemble a mosaic that reasonably approximates the Mesopotamian past. Such an approach may seem naïve to scholars from other fields, but the limitations of the evidence often makes this a necessary first step, especially with a concept as complex as family. Family and kinship may be rooted in the biology of procreation, but out of that reality emerged a range of cultural constructs expressed in Mesopotamian society, religion, politics, and institutions. The Sumerian and Akkadian vocabulary that pertained to familial relationships crossed a threshold

into contexts that had nothing to do with family in order to express a whole host of other relationships of power and obligation.

The fluidity of family as a construct meant that the concept could be applied beyond human families, but it also meant that the lived realities that did not satisfy the desired familial order could be altered so that they conformed. Legal fictions such as adoptions were created that appropriated familial structures and the cultural practices associated with family in order to replicate them for diverse purposes that went far beyond the needs of those who were unable to create families naturally. Often these legal fictions reflected a concern with property, the ownership of which had ramifications for familial associations in situations that involved inheritance or dowry.

For the literate and propertied segment of Mesopotamian society that is well represented in the documentary evidence, the familial concerns with maintaining wealth are occasionally recorded in remarkable detail in family archives and can be traced over multiple generations. The interest in property was not restricted to economic concerns; attachment to physical property such as the house or the estate could also be shaped by both its material and symbolic value to the family. As a result, it is possible to consider the social values that motivated the desires that reinforced the constructed reality of family in Mesopotamian society. This reality may not have been uniform across all segments of Mesopotamian society, but the sentiments that drove the wealthier and therefore better-documented families can reasonably be believed to have been present across the societal spectrum, even if it expressed itself differently.

The way in which the family was constructed and conceptualized must have undergone change between the late third millennium BCE, when evidence from cuneiform documents pertaining to families first becomes available, and the late first millennium BCE when cuneiform literacy was in decline. Consequently, the presentation here will lack a fully diachronic perspective, but rather will focus on general characteristics of propertied families in ancient Mesopotamia over time, while pointing out historical differences and the context of the evidence.

The discussion of the family will be organized around a few central themes:

- the house, both the physical space which the family inhabited and the cultural symbol of the *bit abi*, “the house of the father” or estate around which familial identity was formed;
- the paternal line as a means through which the property and the identity of the family was transmitted over generations;
- marriage and dowry as an instrument through which family ties were created and a lens through which to view the experience of women within the family;
- children, the means by which the family perpetuated itself; and the extended family, the concept of which expanded the family as it was experienced within the nuclear family to a larger network of familial ties beyond the residential confines of the house.

## The House

The space that families occupied did not simply provide shelter from the elements. The layout of the home and the materials excavated within it reflect both the needs and the activities of the family that resided therein, and therefore can be used as an explanatory

tool to understand the domestic organization of the family (Stone 1981, p. 19; Pfälzner 2015). Houses from the first half of the second millennium – the Old Babylonian period – and mid-first millennium – the Neo-Babylonian period – are best represented in the archaeological record, and the excavated remains can be paired with written evidence found in house-sale tablets and other legal documents to create an even better picture of how families functioned within the home.

Unfortunately, there is less archaeological and textual evidence from the intervening centuries between these two periods (Baker 2015, p. 374). This makes it difficult to account for changes in terminology, residential practices, and family organization that occurred in the interval. Nevertheless, there are enough commonalities to allow us to examine the domestic life of the family in a synchronic fashion by focusing on the typical or shared features of houses in both periods, while noting any distinctions (Adelheid 2015, p. 61).

Babylonian houses tended to be organized around an unroofed central courtyard. Smaller houses without a courtyard that would have accommodated a single, nuclear family are also well attested for the Old Babylonian period and present in the Neo-Babylonian period, and larger houses with multiple courtyards existed as well. Though unroofed, the courtyard was a place for work and recreation, affording residents a ventilated space in the summer and the warmth of the sun in the winter (Adelheid 2015, p. 75). It was also the space through which the different wings of the house communicated. Not all of the rooms were connected internally, and rooms for storage, meal preparation, and household production were frequently separated from suites of rooms that served as living and sleeping quarters. Excavated houses from both the second and first millennium reveal that meal preparation took place in an oven room adjoining the courtyard and separate from the living quarters (Brusasco 2004, p. 143; Baker 2004, pp. 189–191).

The courtyard was also the first communal space through which visitors to the house had to pass. The path visitors took to enter that space highlighted the private nature of the house. Typically, access from the street required a guest to pass through the front door and into a reception room or possibly a suite of rooms that served this purpose. Movement through this reception space required visitors to make at least one turn and often two turns before they entered the courtyard. The effect of this layout was that an outsider on the street could not look through the front door and see through the reception room or rooms to the courtyard beyond, let alone to the more private parts of the house. In some cases, the placement of the entrance meant that it communicated externally with an alley. The alley had only one outlet onto a more trafficked thoroughfare, meaning that the house did not open directly onto the street. Such an orientation further reduced the likelihood that a stranger would even be passing by the door to see into the house.

The emphasis placed on domestic privacy meant that there was a series of gradations from public to private. The reception room or suite was a place where formal interactions could take place, whereas the courtyard was a transitional space where a visitor was closer to the private quarters. Because the oven room was only accessible through the courtyard, a visitor could conceivably encounter any member of the family within the courtyard, including female members. However, only more intimate friends and family would be entertained in the living rooms beyond (Brusasco 1999–2000, p. 94 and Baker 2015, pp. 381–382). Bedrooms would have been smaller rooms located off of the living room or suite (Baker 2015, p. 378). This concern for family privacy typified

homes in both the Old Babylonian and Neo-Babylonian periods (Baker 2015, p. 400), and this concern probably extended to all periods.

The nuclear family headed by a father with his wife and unmarried offspring would have been the basic family unit to inhabit the home and comprise a household. Nevertheless, we may imagine that there were as many variants on this form as the vicissitudes of life could bring. There is ample evidence of households headed by widows (Roth 1991/93), and the household may have extended to include other family members such as an elderly parent, a spinster aunt, unmarried sibling, or the wife of a son. Multi-family homes are also well attested (Diakanoff 1996). The division of a house into inheritance shares after the death of a father could result in two or more brothers or even cousins occupying and modifying a house to accommodate multiple families (Stone 1981; Brusasco 1999–2000; Feuerherm 2007; Baker 2015). When the possible presence of domestic slaves or other dependents within the household is also considered, we see that the makeup of families and households could be highly varied.

Because household makeup could be so complex, it is also possible to comprehend the house not only as a physical structure that distinguished public space from private space, but also as a structure that reinforced internal divisions by communicating power and access within the family. These divisions are best illustrated in Paolo Brusasco's analysis of the Old Babylonian houses at Ur, where access to the family chapel and private archives could be controlled by the suite of rooms inhabited by the head of the household in a multi-family house (Brusasco 1999–2000, p. 98). No such divisions appear to have existed between men and women within the house, even in multi-family houses (Brusasco 1999–2000, p. 106). Within the private space of the family, the distinction that mattered was between the senior male, the "father," and the junior male members.

## The Paternal Line

The importance of the senior male to the house led to the frequent reference to the *bit abi*, "the house of the father," in cuneiform texts. The term referred to the entirety of the patrimonial estate including immovable property, both agricultural and residential, but it took on ideological importance related to the family. Expressions communicating a desire to maintain the house of the father in its original form or retain or regain ownership of the property appear in legal documents from the first millennium. Its importance elevated the *bit abi* as a metaphor for an entity deserving of veneration and respect (Nielsen 2011, pp. 244–253). The house as a structure therefore became the physical locus of all the values and desires that defined the family: the continuation and replication of the paternal line from father to son over successive generations.

The significance accorded to "the house of the father" is representative of the patrimonial nature of Mesopotamian society and expressed in the vertical inheritance practices that favored sons in all periods (Stone 1987, pp. 17–18; van der Toorn 1996b, p. 21; Brusasco 1999–2000, p. 134; Baker 2015, pp. 375–376). Wealth passed down through the male line was retained in the family, while wealth inherited by a daughter as a dowry, though a smaller share than what a son received, was regarded as passing out of the family.

Because primogeniture (meaning all the inheritance went to the oldest son) was not

generally practiced, there was always the risk that an estate would be divided to the point of it being no longer viable. It is possible that such an eventuality was forestalled through patrilateral endogamy, consanguineous marriages in which a son would marry the daughter of his paternal uncle (Greengus 1966, 1969). The practice of allotting to the eldest son a preferential share of the inheritance is attested in most periods, though the allotted portion varied by city and over time. The eldest son in the Old Babylonian period received an extra tenth of the estate according to evidence from Nippur (Stone 1987, pp. 23–24) and Ur (Brusasco 2015, pp. 135–137). Neo-Babylonian sources from the mid-first millennium indicate that the son received a half share of the estate, while the younger brothers divided the other half (Baker 2015, pp. 375–376).

This practice had changed by the last centuries of the millennium; texts from Hellenistic Uruk indicate that no preferential share was reserved for the eldest son, though he did have first choice of the share that he would inherit (McEwan 1984, p. 227). Sons may have preferred to avoid the actual division of the patrimonial estate, opting instead to administer it jointly. However, one outcome of the practice of giving the eldest son a preferential share of the estate may have been that he had the financial wherewithal to purchase property from the younger brothers. Doing so would have allowed the eldest son to retain greater control of real estate and agricultural land, thereby keeping the paternal estate intact with minimal alteration while providing younger brothers with the financial liquidity to assemble new estates.

Texts and archaeology attest to the divisions and reconsolidations of houses over successive generations. It was always the sons who divided this property. If there was sufficient wealth within the estate for the sons to set up independent households, they would have done so. However, there are instances from both the Old Babylonian and Neo-Babylonian periods where the archaeological and textual record make it apparent that a house could be subdivided to accommodate multiple families. The fact that the house was built with mud brick made it easy to open up new entrances and wall-up doors (Feuerherm 2007). In some instances rooms within the house were shared, such as the courtyard and the oven room (Baker 2015, pp. 397–399), but in other cases the previous house was transformed into smaller, single-family homes (Stone 1981).

## Marriage and Dowry

With the exception of kings, monogamy was predominant in Mesopotamian marriage customs, though it was possible for polygamy to be practiced by commoners, and marriage was at the heart of the family (Stol 1995a, pp. 488–490). Even though the Code of Hammurabi stipulated that a marriage had to be contracted to be valid (Roth 1995, pp. 105–128), very few documents recording a marriage agreement survive. Most that do reflect the wealthy status of the families involved in the marriage or the presence of extenuating circumstances that necessitated documentation. These should be seen as formal testaments to practices that were observed broadly throughout the society.

What little documentation survives indicates that marriage was a transaction between families, and not just an event that involved two people. The fathers of both the bride and groom were important figures in the negotiation of the marriage agreement, though we can speculate that mothers may also have played a role in identifying potential spouses for

their offspring (Nielsen 2011, pp. 236–237). The age at which men and women typically married has been disputed. Roth (1987) has argued that women married at a significantly younger age than males, likely in their early to mid-teens, while males were in their late 20s at the time of marriage. Gehlken (2005), using data primarily from the personnel of the Neo-Babylonian temples of the Ebabbar at Sippar and the Eanna at Uruk, concludes that men were around the age of 20 when they married, closer in age to their brides who would have been in their early teens. This matter is unresolved, but it stands to reason, given the presumed rate of mortality for women in their childbearing years, that older widowers would continue to try to secure new brides by remarrying, creating circumstances in which it was not uncommon for older men to predecease their wives and leave them widowed.

As a rite of passage, the marriage of a woman, or really a girl, represented one of the more dramatic shifts in social status that any individual could undergo. A woman was transferred from one family into another, and the rites of passage that marked this transition emphasized both the transformation in identity as well as the transfer of property that accompanied it. Both the groom and bride spoke words that recognized the new status of their spouse, “you are my wife” and “you are my husband” (Yoffee 2014, p. 62), and the joining of the two families was marked with a feast. The bride, who came to the marriage veiled, was then covered with a new veil by her husband, clothing her in her new status as his wife (van der Toorn 1996a).

The clothing worn by the bride also served as a symbol of the transfer of wealth that accompanied the marriage. There are indications that a portion of the bride-wealth paid by the father of the groom to the bride’s family could be sewn in to the hem of the bride’s clothing, the symbolic importance of which was enhanced by the cutting or tearing of the hem to indicate divorce (Yoffee 2014, p. 66).

The dowry that the bride brought to the marriage probably constituted her share of the inheritance from her father’s estate (Stol 2016, p. 137), given to her by either her father or her brothers if the father was dead, and as such was viewed as an alienation of property from the paternal line (Brusasco 1999–2000, pp. 134–137). A portion of the dowry could include objects and utensils for domestic use by the bride. The dowry in its entirety, however, was intended ultimately to be part of the inheritance for any offspring the union might produce (Barberon 2003, p. 10).

There are examples of all or a portion of the dowry being withheld until the marriage proved fruitful. Even when the dowry was paid, it is clear that in the Old Babylonian period it remained a discrete part of the husband’s estate distinguished as the wife’s property so that it could be reclaimed in the future by the wife (Stol 2016, p. 137). These aspects of the dowry may be present in one case from the early first millennium in which a dowry served as a medium through which land was transferred by an extended family out of the paternal line and the family of the groom took steps to retain that land (Paulus 2014). Because a wife maintained a claim to her dowry, the dowry could represent a crucial form of financial support for a divorced or widowed woman, particularly if her children were still in their minority. It could even serve as a source of wealth to fund the dowry of her own daughter (Roth 1994, pp. 19–23).

The obligation to transfer wealth out of the paternal line in dowries led families to pursue strategies that either kept that wealth within the family and under the control of the male members, or used that wealth to further the social and financial interests of the family. The consecration of a woman as a *nadītum*, a kind of priestess, attested in the

Old Babylonian period was one method by which high-status families retained wealth that otherwise would have been lost to them as a dowry. Rather than marrying a daughter off, a wealthy family could elect to dedicate a young woman as a *nadītum* to a temple (Harris 1963; van der Toorn 1996b, p. 54), where she was cloistered in a complex known as the *gagūm* (Harris 1963; Stol 2016, p. 587). The woman functionally became a concubine of the god (Stol 2016, p. 586), and her consecration as a *nadītum* therefore emulated a marriage, with the family of the *nadītum* providing a feast for those involved as well as a dowry, consisting of an equal share of the inheritance, which was given to the temple (Harris 1976, p. 133; Stol 2016, pp. 590–593).

Because a *nadītum* was cloistered, she was expected to remain celibate, though it was possible for her to marry and even provide her husband with an heir by means of a slave-girl designated as a surrogate (Stol 2016, pp. 584–586). Nevertheless, a *nadītum*'s circumstances made it less likely that she would have offspring of her own, and even though the primary motive for dedicating a daughter as a *nadītum* was religious, there would have been in some cases an intentional expectation that her dowry would eventually revert to her family after her death (Stol 2016, pp. 589–590, 597–600). As a result, a *nadītum*'s male relatives were obligated to support her (van Wyck 2014). However, freed from the dangers of childbirth, some women who had become a *nadītum* lived to an advanced age (Stol 2016, pp. 600–601), and some possessed considerable wealth (Stol 1995b, p. 139).

There are instances in which impatient brothers or nephews brought lawsuits against a *nadītum* from their own family in order to reclaim the dowry. But in general the designation of a daughter as a *nadītum* did prove to be an effective strategy for families that sought to maintain the integrity of their patrimony.

Marriage and the payment of dowries provided families with an avenue for pursuing their economic interests. Evidence from the neo-Babylonian period suggests that familial status played a significant role in determining patterns of marriage; families of lower social status actively sought to marry their daughters in to more prominent families, and men were probably more reluctant to marry women from families that outranked their own in terms of wealth and influence (Still 2012).

These tendencies are exemplified in the family archive of Itti-Marduk-balāṭu from the Egibi kin group. Within this archive are records that provide information about the dowries of nine women over three generations, all of whom either married into or out of the family. Women who married into the family generally brought more wealth in their dowries than those women who married out of the family. Those husbands who married women from the family probably were willing to accept smaller dowries because they benefitted from their association with the rich and powerful family, whereas families were motivated to provide their daughters marrying into the family with richer dowries in order to gain comparable associations (Roth 1991, pp. 35–37).

## Children

The attitude toward children combined a desire for heirs with a love of offspring. The sole purpose of marriage was to provide the paternal line with legitimate heirs. This aim did not preclude the possibility that the home knew romantic love between man and wife and

parental affection for their children, but these were secondary concerns to the practicalities of perpetuating the lineage for a propertied family. This was not easy given the real likelihood that children would not survive to adulthood.

Analysis of fourth-century ration lists indicates that both birth rates and infant mortality were high. Families had on average 3.4 adolescent children, which required that women gave birth on average to 7.73 children during their lifetimes (Gehlken 2005, pp. 104–105; Jursa 2010, p. 38). This is consistent with Nemet-Nejat's (1998, p. 227) estimate that two to four children within a family survived early childhood.

Mesopotamian onomastics in all periods reveal the concern that families had about the fate of their children (Stamm 1939); names were given that expressed a desire for male heirs (*Enlil-nādin-apli*, “Enlil is the provider of an heir”), hopes for their continued health (*Bulluṭu*, “to keep in good health”), and the relief when another male heir was born to replace a deceased older brother (*Erība-Marduk*, “Marduk has replaced [the heir] for me”). These concerns for the wellbeing of children are also apparent in diagnostic and medical texts that pertained to the treatment of sick children (Cadelli 1997; Volk 1999), and the existence of charms and incantations that were used to ward off the attentions of malevolent demons (Wiggerman 2000).

The fear that children could die before reaching adulthood was only one way in which a couple could face childlessness. Because it was expected that a marriage would produce offspring, the possibility it might not was also cause for great concern. Medical and magical cures existed for infertility and impotency (Stol 2000, pp. 33–37; Stol 2016, pp. 148–151; Volk 2004, pp. 77–78), but if these solutions failed, both surrogacy and adoption were viable options for producing a legal heir. Surrogacy typically involved the provision of the husband with a slave girl, whom he married as a second wife, or a concubine (Stol 2016, pp. 165–199).

In some instances, legal steps were taken to ensure that the senior wife's status was maintained and that any offspring produced by the surrogacy were recognized as the children of the senior wife (Stol 2016, p. 168). Adoption, as it was practiced in both the second and first millennia (Stone and Owen 1991; Wunsch 2003), also required legal recognition. The primary mode of adoption involved the unilateral adoption of an orphaned child, who, due to the absence of living parents, could not be claimed as a child by another person. The secondary mode of adoption was more complex, given that the legal status of the former parents had to be annulled before the new status of the adoptee could be legally confirmed (Westbrook 1993, p. 195).

Both of these modes of adoption could be utilized to create fictive ties between two adults that provided a legal framework for transactions that suited both parties (van der Toorn 1996b: 26). The most famous examples come from Late Bronze Age Nuzi, where it had been thought that stipulations preventing the alienation of land and the tax obligations that accompanied that land outside the family led to the practice of sellers “adopting” buyers as their children (Maidmen 2010, pp. 10–11).

It has also been argued that this practice of adopting the purchaser was a holdover from earlier periods at Nuzi when legal formulations for land sales were still being developed (Maidmen 2010, pp. 166–167). Adoption of adults by the elderly could also be a strategy by which elderly individuals, lacking children to support them, could adopt an adult who would provide them with care and who in turn inherited the estate. Such an arrangement

is described around 527 BCE in an adoption in which Gimillu of the Nappahu kin group adopted a man named Iddin-Nabû, who belonged the same kin group, and gave Iddin-Nabû all his assets in return for regular rations for him and his wife (Roth 1991/93, pp. 11–13; Baker 2004, pp. 30–33).

These arrangements employed law to impose the social expectations of familial obligations without creating a family, and so it is not surprising that they were documented. There are, however, other examples of adoptions of infants or children that did seem to be intended to provide childless couples with children (Stone and Owen 1991, p. 5). These children had value as heirs, but such adoptions doubtless also created emotional familial connections important to everyone involved.

Children were brought up to inherit the property of their family, but also to assume the social roles of their parents. This is more evident with sons, given their greater participation in public life as males compared with the opportunities afforded to daughters. For families that made up the urban elite class, considerable effort was made to ensure that their sons rose to the social positions of their fathers. Even though it can be shown that families exerted strong influence over various administrative offices within the city and temple, such positions were not hereditary. Retaining control over these positions required families to work to ensure that their sons were qualified to fill those roles. Scribal education was essential to this process, as was training in any esoteric skills possessed by the family.

Sons also worked alongside their fathers in junior roles, affording sons an apprenticeship before rising to more senior positions (Nielsen 2011). A similar pattern can be observed among laborers. Work crews that harvested wood in the vicinity of Umma in the Ur III period were organized by family seniority, with sons taking their fathers' positions upon the senior member's death or retirement (Steinkeller 1987, pp. 78–83).

In the absence of a senior male, women could step in to advance their son's interests if he was still in his minority. A legal tablet dated in 640 shows both a mother and her son's paternal grandmother providing testimony about outstanding debts that had been owed to the boy's grandfather (Nielsen 2011, pp. 117, 237–238). Even though it occurred infrequently, women could act publicly on their own account or on behalf of men, and possessed sufficient knowledge of the financial affairs of the family to pursue their children's interests. This degree of legal competence enjoyed by women in judicial matters only seems to have been diminished late in the first millennium during the Hellenistic period, possibly due to reforms instituted by Antiochus I (McEwan 1995, pp. 21–25).

## The Extended Family

The practice of house division and the tendency for houses to be entered through alleys that had more restricted access rather than via public thoroughfares meant that even when family members left the confines of their own home, they may have entered into a neighborhood centered around an alley that was occupied at least in part by members of the extended family (Stone 1987, pp. 6–7, 126; Brusasco 1999–2000, p. 59). Such neighborhoods would have contributed to the maintenance of family ties beyond the nuclear family.

The importance of the resulting familial networks would have extended to matters of property and explains the inclusion of a clause preventing the brothers, sons, and extended family of a seller from contesting the sale of real estate in documents from the third millennium to the late first millennium BCE (Diakanoff 1996). In Akkadian, these extended family members were distinguished as *kimtu*, *nisūtu*, and *salātu*. From the perspective of an individual, the *kimtu* may have been composed of immediate family, including brothers and sons and any other intimate kin within the same lineage. The *nisūtu* may have been understood as consanguine kin, individuals who were distant relatives from a different lineage with a shared ancestor. Finally, the *salātu* may have distinguished kin by marriage (Nielsen 2011, pp. 240–244).

The importance of the extended family may not have only been due to the nearby dwellings of relatives in the neighborhood; it may also have been expressed in other cultural practices. In all periods, families tended to adhere to certain gods, veneration of which was passed down from father to son. Furthermore, within the house in the Old Babylonian period, the spirits of the deceased ancestors (Akkadian *etemmu*) received food offerings known as *kispum*.

The most important ancestors were those who made up the paternal line, and knowledge of these specific ancestors could extend back over several generations (van der Toorn 1996b, pp. 54–55). It was crucial that the spirits of the ancestors be satisfied in order to gain their blessings, and observances of the rituals that honored the deceased had the added benefit of affirming familial identity for all participants.

Extended familial ties would have been most apparent during the family holidays that focused on the ancestors in late summer at the end of the month of *abu*, July–August. Larger family gatherings would have taken place within the homes of senior males, strengthening kin ties for all involved and perpetuating familial identity over multiple generations (van der Toorn 1996b, pp. 50–51).

There is less evidence for the veneration of ancestors within private homes, including the offering of *kispum*, in the first millennium. However, the concern shown by the Assyrian kings for their ancestors, and echoed in other Assyrian royal inscriptions and ritual texts from the court that reference *kispum* offerings (CAD K *kispum*), indicates that rites venerating the ancestors, particularly those in the paternal line, continued to be part of Mesopotamian culture over the intervening centuries. The family chapels excavated at Old Babylonian Ur may have fallen out of use in later centuries, but the use of ancestral family names observable at many Babylonian cities in the first millennium may reflect a continued impulse to maintain familial identity based on descent (Nielsen 2011).

The use of family names that claimed descent from an ancestor or an association with a temple office had its antecedents in the late second millennium. The practice may have gained in popularity in the first centuries of the first millennium among the leading urban families. This was a period marked by either weak Babylonian monarchs or kings of either Assyrian or Chaldean extraction. Under these political circumstances, the practice of family name usage may have reinforced social cohesion among the leading urban families in Babylonia. Certainly there is evidence of rulers attempting to cultivate these families by granting them land (Nielsen and Waerzeggers 2016). These landholdings became incorporated into paternal estates, and the evidence from the archive of a branch the Ea-ilūta-bani kin group indicates that families placed enough value on *hansū*-land that was historically

associated with their kin group that they actively pursued strategies to reacquire and reconsolidate such landholdings (Joannès 1989).

## Conclusions

It is this conservative desire to maintain the *bīt abi*, the patrimonial estate, or even remake it to match what it was believed to have been, that is at the heart of the Mesopotamian family in antiquity. Certainly there were cold, hard economic practicalities that motivated the strategies that wealthy families pursued, and these concerns find ample expression in the surviving legal documents that are our most important window into the life of the family.

The precarious nature of the Mesopotamian environment, the political vicissitudes that characterized much of the region's history, and the vulnerability to disease and infection that could cut a life short in the long era before the advent of modern medicine meant that even the most successful families were not far removed from experiencing a turn in their fortunes that could lead to their falling on hard times, or even being wiped out. In the face of these threats, families wanted to preserve for the next generation the life that they had known by providing them with the same resources and giving them access to the same social circles that had benefitted them.

Such efforts both maintained the paternal line and made it an object of filial veneration. Offerings made within the home to deceased ancestors or claims of personal identification with a lineage through the use of a family name expressed this veneration. These practices, passed down over generations, made the individuals part of something much larger than themselves.

The tangible evidence of this was the immediate experience of family – comprising parents, siblings, spouse, and offspring – of which they were a part and with whom they shared or had shared a home. The *bīt abi* was both a physical space and a constructed concept that protected and sustained the individual. Not all were equal within this space – women were certainly of lesser status – but all could hope to experience life trajectories that they saw repeated in the world around them within the confines of the family: birth, childhood, marriage, parenthood, and death.

It was the pursuit of this personal trajectory that maintained the paternal line over generations. A girl may have passed out of one paternal line to join another when she married, but once she had children of her own, it is evident that she became as invested in the interests of her new paternal line as her husband.

The next rite of passage was death, and this brought with it a reconfiguration of the *bīt abi* as the inheritance was divided among the sons. It also meant that the name of the father was remembered among the dead ancestors – in family rites and in genealogies – by his offspring until, with the passage of time and generations, his name was forgotten.

The trajectory of the family was one in which members sought continuity, and in spite of that desire for permanence, change would have been slow but inevitable. Just as Gilgamesh pointed out the edifice that was Uruk as a permanent achievement that would outlive him at the end of the epic, so too members of a family must have looked upon their paternal lineage as something that they contributed to with the hope that it would endure past their lives and preserve something of themselves in a world they would not live to see.

## FURTHER READING

Basic introductions to the problems of family include Brusasco (1999–2000), Neilsen 2011, and the studies by Roth and Stol. Carsten (2004) describes the problems and possibility of family studies.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Pastoralism in the Ancient Near East

*Anne Porter*

Several issues can become conflated in discussions of pastoralism: systems of animal husbandry, types of movement, ways of life, and kinds of social and political organization and practice. There is increasing awareness among specialists that animal husbandry and mobility are two separate issues, even if they frequently coincide. The term “pastoralism” refers to the management of various animals in different kinds of subsistence practices. It does not denote the way those animals were managed, nor where. “Pastoralist” does not indicate the socio-political organization of those who manage animals in a variety of subsistence practices.

Traditional approaches to the topic in the ancient Near East, however, focus on mobile pastoralism, generally understanding it as something separate from, and secondary to, the agricultural practices of the sedentary world. Economic interaction between the two is seen as a necessary, but fraught, affair. Rather than an adequate representation of the social, political, and economic place of animal husbandry in the ancient world, such approaches reflect mobile pastoralism in the world of the modern state, where control of sovereign territories and defined boundaries have constrained economic opportunities and contributed to identities for those who base their livelihood on grazing animals over long distances.

Yet “the state” has also been the prime source of what evidence we have for pastoralism in the ancient world because of the importance of wool in urban economies. Although the textual data may make little sense in terms of modern economics, the evidence is unequivocal that sheep, wool, and textiles were circulated in complex patterns between polities (Wilkinson et al. 2014). Not only was textile production a prime economic activity, with textiles given as payments to institutional personnel and various individuals as well as given as gifts to the gods and to the dead, raw wool was itself a key trading commodity (Sallaberger 2014). Since most of our records come from the temple and palatial administrations reliant on wool, and not those who cared for the flocks that provided it, the data

is limited because institutional record keepers cared little for the details of herd management. Nevertheless, the numbers of animals derived from these texts – some millions in total – show a staggering scale of state investment in animal husbandry.

But in fact it is not the data contained in administrative texts that has colored Western scholarship's understanding of pastoralists and just where they fit into the ancient Near East; it is the literary material. Stories about a variety of topics include apparently pejorative references to pastoralists that have little to do with the narrative at hand. But the chronological and political contexts of these stories render them unusable sources for any considered study of the topic. In addition, both textual and archaeological data have been interpreted through the lens of modern ethnographies of Middle Eastern pastoralists, especially since the pioneering approach of Michael Rowton in the 1960s and 70s (Rowton 1974). This work has given rise to a deep-seated, but contradictory, conviction that pastoralists are hostile to the sedentary world, and at the same time desperate to join it. Even the translation of thousands of tablets from the second millennium BCE levels at Tell Hariri, ancient Mari, tablets that reveal the complexity of pastoralist organization and interactions with the sedentary world, has failed to broaden perspectives on the topic in the English language literature.

Pastoralists grazing flocks through localized and more broadly ranging movements were not of course the only mobile groups in the ancient world. Traders, voluntary and involuntary migrants (captives, deportees, refugees), armies and empire builders, were also part of the movement of people that spread ideas, attributes of material culture, and even DNA across the Near East and beyond (Highcock 2017). And while scholars have focused on a few key periods, or rather, populations, such as the Amorrites and Arameans, in reality, mobile groups and individuals have had a transformative role to play throughout the entirety of Ancient Near Eastern history. Mobility is itself a dynamic in the way people organized their communities and interacted with each other. Much of this movement, however, should not be understood as one-way migrations of people, but as a series of multidirectional passages, often configured through interconnecting regional networks across which people moved with varying intensity.

## The Nature of Pastoralism

Both archaeological and textual sources attest to the dominance of sheep and goat as the staple subsistence animal in most Ancient Near Eastern settlements. Sheep, and especially goat, are best suited to exploit the marginal environments outside riverine settlements, because they are comparatively mobile, tolerate woody vegetation and salt, and can survive without water for several days (although that is not desirable). Whatever the final determination as to date of domestication (see Heide 2010 for a summary of the data), there is no evidence that camels, the most mobile animal in the Near East, were in wide use until the first millennium, an occurrence that changed the nature of pastoralism considerably. Pig dominates some faunal assemblages in the Ancient Near East, especially in the north, but pigs are not well-adapted to the steppe, limiting the amount of land that can be exploited for their upkeep. In addition, their husbandry requires higher rainfall than that of other animals. While cattle most certainly are mobile

in various regions, they are generally (although probably erroneously) assumed to be limited to sedentary farming in the Near East.

There are many ways to manage holdings of sheep and goat, ranging from small-scale, sedentary, household-based herds numbering in the tens of animals, to the many thousands grazed by large-scale mobile pastoralists. While there may be a correlation between size of herds and degree of mobility, the multiple ways any one group can choose to pasture animals means this is not determinative. Moreover, herd size does not dictate who moves where. In some instances, the entire population of a herding community moves *en masse* (to comprehend the full effect of this, see the 1925 silent documentary film *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life*). In others, the group fragments into small units and disperses in different directions.

In general, however, the herds that are few enough to be penned in the courtyards of houses at night are grazed close by the settlement during the day, depending on availability of vegetation (itself a product of climatic conditions among other factors), overall numbers of animals, and local density of settlements and fields. Possibilities in this regard are more limited in southern Mesopotamia, for example, where settlements are surrounded by irrigated farmlands, than in the north, where settlements are fewer and farther between.

When herd size owned by inhabitants of settlements exceeds the possibility of localized grazing, a number of strategies may be employed. Mesopotamian texts tell us that temples contracted out herds to named individuals, commonly interpreted as professional shepherds. We do not know, however, whether those individuals were mobile pastoralists with their own herds to which temple animals were added, or whether they were responsible only for the temple's holdings. Nor do we know where temple herds were pastured in relation to the city. It has been assumed that it must be nearby, to allow for temple oversight. However, this is not necessary, since all that was required was the reporting of additions and losses to the herd, with the latter attested to by presentation of the fleece of the dead animal (Liverani and Heimpel 1995). Other approaches to pasturage may have been devised for the holdings of private households, although these are not clearly attested. Marriage alliances with groups exploiting steppe lands is one possibility, as is multi-resource exploitation. In one form of the latter, part of the household moves with the flocks, while part tends to sedentary pursuits such as cereal farming or horticulture. In another, pastoralists may supplement animal husbandry with *ad hoc* sowing of barley or vegetables.

The evidence in the Near East for large-scale pastoral groups independent of polities centered in urban settlements, commonly referred to as tribes, is opaque, but the existence of tribes is assumed in both archaeological and Assyriological literature. Much of the analysis of this material depends on how scholars view pastoralism in the first place, rather than on any clear evidence (for reviews of the history of this issue, see Porter 2012; Makarewicz 2013a). Many have assumed that there was movement over grazing lands far away from settled areas.

The difficulties of understanding pastoralism in the ancient world are compounded by loose modern terminology. Pastoralism is not the same as nomadism, although pastoralism is often (but by no means always) facilitated by some form of movement. Pastoralism refers to means of subsistence based on grazing animals, but nomadism to a lifestyle based

on movement. Most scholars concur that nomadism denotes full-time movement, but few groups practice pure nomadism, and indeed few groups practice pure pastoralism. Designations describing pastoralism with nomadism are therefore to be avoided. Semi-nomadism in particular is an empty label, variously used to denote people who move part of the time rather than all the time, or groups who are divided over sedentary and mobile pursuits. Transhumance has a specific technical meaning, referring to upland and lowland seasonal movements, but is frequently used as synonymous with semi-nomadism. For a detailed study of kinds of husbandry and kinds of movement, see Khazanov's (1984) masterful work on the topic. However, the degree to which Khazanov's determinations are applicable to the ancient world has to be established. He himself (2009) has rejected the idea that pastoralism in the ancient world can be understood through modern examples. More recently, the term "agro-pastoralism" has become common. It is intended to acknowledge the mutual, if not interdependent, role of both cereal cropping and animal husbandry. However, since this label incorporates a wide range of strategies in both cropping and husbandry, it is ultimately of limited utility.

In recognition of the inadequacy of traditional terminology and approaches, specialists increasingly employ new language and techniques. A major move forward is accomplished simply by careful separation of what component of pastoralist communities is under discussion – polity or society, subsistence strategies or grazing strategies. In order to describe the kind of pastoralism in which movement is involved, but with no implications as to what that movement might consist of, the general term "mobile pastoralism" is to be preferred when discussing the Ancient Near East, with further precision established by terms such as "limited-resource," "multi-resource subsistence," "localized-," "short-range-," and "broad-range grazing". Although labels such as "mixed short-range pastoralism" may be cumbersome, specification avoids conflation of different aspects of existence as well as the confusion engendered by terms carrying multiple meanings.

In addition, it is now well recognized that understandings of ancient pastoralism and mobility based on observations of modern mobile pastoralists applies an inappropriate universalism to such groups. The increasing use of bio-archaeological techniques such as measurements of muscle mass and bone strength, geometric morphometric analyses, stable isotope analyses, and kill patterns, offer a more reliable basis for reconstructing the organization and practices of pastoralism.

## **The History of Mobile Pastoralism in the Ancient Near East**

Research in the southern Levant (Fujii 2009) and Anatolia (Pearson et al. 2007; Hammer and Arbuckle 2017) indicates that sheep and goat, domesticated around 10 000 years ago (Zeder and Hesse 2000), were managed in a range of ways since the Late Neolithic period, including grazing in marginal areas (Makarewicz 2013a). The exploitation of animals for secondary products such as milk is also understood to have begun at this time (Makarewicz 2013b; Becker et al. 2016), well before the fourth millennium date originally posited by Sherratt (1981). Although Iran might seem like the paradigmatic location for the

emergence of prehistoric long-range pastoralism, it has been argued that nomadism in this region was a very late phenomenon (Potts 2014), but note the distinction in terms specified above.

It is not until the fifth millennium BCE that widespread evidence for wool production is found in the form of spindle whorls and loom weights, especially in northern Mesopotamia (Sudo 2010; Stein et al. 1997). In the fourth millennium, images on cylinder seals in southern Mesopotamian contexts show weavers sitting with ground-based horizontal looms, and the expansion of wool production at this time (McCorriston 1997) might well have played a part in the widespread distribution of material cultural attributes characterized as the “Uruk Expansion” (Porter 2012).

In the third millennium, pastoralism became much more prominent, both as a component of ancient life and as a subject for academic consideration. For example, the establishment of new settlements marking the beginning of urbanism in northern Mesopotamia, in areas recognized today as environmentally marginal, have prompted explanations based on pastoralism in the absence of evidence of a better climate at the time. These settlements, previously called Kranzhügeln, literally “wreath hills”, but now known as “circular cities,” are characterized by outer walled rings that have been interpreted as animal pens (Lyonnet 1998), although there is little evidence to sustain this. With or without animal pens, it may also be that these settlements were sites of attraction for pastoralists exploiting the grazing potential of the area between the Euphrates and the Habur rivers. The circular cities housed practices of social integration such as ancestor rituals, and offered goods and services for a mobile constituency (Porter in press). Tablets from Tell Beydar, ancient Nabada, that date to the mid-third millennium BCE attest to a settlement-based system of comparatively small-scale herds that was part of a devolved system of control stemming from Tell Brak, ancient Nagar (Sallaberger 2004). The total numbers of animals calculable from these texts raises questions about the spatial requirements for grazing that would suggest the interstices of settlements in this area would be insufficient. Exploitation of adjacent steppe environments (Ur and Wilkinson 2008) and beyond was necessary.

In this same period, the kingdom of Ebla in western Syria maintained massive herds of sheep and goat, with estimates of holdings ranging from more than 650,000 to two million (Wilkinson et al. 2014, p. 58). Here too, interpretation of the data is controversial, as an emphasis on pastoralism seems to some scholars to be incompatible with the levels of “civilization” attested at Ebla in its Royal Palace G and associated accoutrements. However, the problematic issues that underpin this perspective are numerous, and include assumptions about the nature of animal husbandry, and forms of socio-political organization associated with pastoralist and urban communities.

Large areas of grazing would be required to sustain even the minimum number of animals calculated for Ebla, and this may be related to the territorial extent of the kingdom as seen from its archives. Although calculations differ, Ebla at the very least maintained a sphere of influence extending as far as the Euphrates. Within that territory were villages belonging to members of the royal family that doubtless included grazing lands. It has also been proposed that the establishment in the late third millennium of a line of circular cities along the western edge of the steppe, roughly paralleling the Orontes River, was related to the management of Ebla’s wool production (Castel and Peltenburg 2007; Schwartz 2017). Others have argued that these settlements provided a line of defense

against dangerous nomads, or were somehow related to pastoralists themselves (see the collected papers in Castel et al. 2020). At the same time, intensive surveys of the Homs Basalt (Philip and Bradbury 2010) and the region around Palmyra (Schou 2015) show an extraordinary density of archaeological remains in what has been termed “sub-optimal” environments. The remains consist of cairns, stone circles and enclosures, and towers that attest to usage of these regions by herders on the scale of individual families in some instances, and much larger communities in others. These surveys also show the fluctuating nature of land use and pastoralist movements over time. The Homs Basalt attests to small-scale agro-pastoralist activity in the first half of the third millennium, until the line of western circular cities develops, while the Palmyra area bears witness to intense activity in the late third to early second millennium. This data might seem to contradict other evidence for climatic deterioration at this time, since sub-optimal areas are also negatively impacted by such conditions. As noted above, among many possible strategies pastoralists might employ in response to drought, one is for larger groups to fragment and disperse over the landscape.

In southern Mesopotamia, royal inscriptions from the Akkadian kings mention a region that many scholars believe to be the original homeland for Amorrite pastoralists: Jebel Bishri. Jebel Bishri, a small mountain emerging from the heartland of the steppe just west of the Euphrates River, is noted as the refuge of the coalition of southern kings who rebelled against the Akkadian ruler Naram-Sin. Among those claimed by Naram-Sin as his captives are two lowly captains given the label “MARDU”. An inscription of Gudea towards the end of the third millennium mentions the MARDU mountain.

Now a history of pastoralism in the Ancient Near East becomes very complicated. MARDU/MARTU is the Sumerian term for the Akkadian word *amurru*. The spelling here of “Amorrite” both reflects the original Akkadian and distinguishes those so named in the early second millennium from later Biblical Amorites. Amurru means “west”. It is also the label given to people in a wide range of contexts, some of whom go on to rule southern Mesopotamian city-states in the second millennium. According to the Assyrian King List, those kings are descendants of people who lived in tents. The most famous of these kings is Hammurabi, who rose to power in Babylon and incorporated into his kingdom an extensive territory including that of fellow Amorrites Zimri-Lim and Samsi-Addu.

These Amorrite kings claimed a mobile heritage, and they were in some way distinguished from the local Mesopotamian urban population through this label; this is the basis for the long-held, but increasingly challenged, understanding that the Amorrites were intrusive to the region. That their names are different to those of the same local urban population also contributes to this situation. The notion that Amorrites invaded from the desert, achieving their position through violent conquest, is largely dismissed now. Nevertheless, the conjunction of what appears to be an ethnicon, “Amorrite”, with a cardinal direction “west”, with kings of Mesopotamia who acknowledge a mobile origin, has led to a search for a homeland for a mobile pastoralist group to the west of Mesopotamia. The discovery of archaeological remains at Bishri and environs that date to the early second millennium is seen by some as proof that Jebel Bishri fits the bill. Others have accepted the proposal by Harvey Weiss (Weiss and Courty 1993, Weiss 2014) that the Amorrites were northern Syrians fleeing the devastation of prolonged drought there. Despite

increased interest in the role of climate change in the ancient world, there is considerable debate, still, about the existence, extent, and effects of such a drought (Marro and Kuzucuoglu 2007; Höflmayer 2017).

The movement of populations in some way associated with the term Amorrite has also long been seen as responsible for changes in the southern Levant occurring during the period from the mid-third millennium to the early second (Kenyon 1966; Burke 2017). This is a complex problem of intersecting regional chronologies that are currently under revision (Schwartz 2017), since the delineation of fluctuating settlement patterns is dependent on precise dating of sites. Just as importantly, arguments that changes in settlement patterns can be explained by cyclical shifts between nomadism and sedentarization or that in times of instability people escape by becoming nomads must confront two issues. Such ideas underpin explanations of declining urbanism in the southern Levant at this time. One issue is the complexity of knowledge and the social networks required to be successful as a mobile pastoralist. The other issue is the preoccupation of the anthropology of pastoralism with the topic of sedentarization during the 1970s and 1980s. This work described economic and cultural forces that led pastoralists at varying socio-economic levels to abandon a mobile way of life in favor of residence in cities and towns. It was widely taken as universally applicable to all pastoralists, thus contributing to the sense among Near Eastern scholars, already biased towards sedentary agriculture as a superior way of life, that pastoralists hungered for the attributes of the settled world.

There are many anomalies and contradictions in reconstructions of the history of the Amorrites that are product of, on the one hand, the nature of the sources, and on the other, the nature of scholarship. Given that our only sources for the identification of Amorrites are texts from southern Mesopotamia, it is there we must start. It is unlikely that Sumerians themselves had a clearly defined frame of reference as to whom the term incorporated. The earliest undoubted use of the label MARDU comes from the city of Shurrupak in the mid-third millennium, where people so designated received disbursements from the administrative system. This has seemed to many scholars simply incompatible with later sources on the MARDU, the Sumerian literary texts, which provide a very specific perspective: the Amorrites are outsiders, they are barbarians, and they are trouble. How can they then be part of the system?

In addition, the Assyrian King List makes a specific link between two groups who are associated with “kings who live in tents”: the Didanu and Hana (Gelb 1954). The Didanu are mentioned in the Ebla texts from Western Syria, yet if Didanu = Tidnu in the inscriptions of Shulgi and Shu-Sin of the Third Dynasty of Ur, this would seem to put them in the east, in the foothills of Iran. The Hana are well known indeed in the archives from Tell Hariri, ancient Mari, where they form the basis of Zimri-Lim’s pastoralist allies. While the Hana fit in with reconstructions that place the Amorrites to the west, the identification of the Didanu with Tidnu confounds attempts to set a single established geography for the Amorrites.

But there is another way of looking at it. Given that the foundation of mobile pastoralism is indeed mobility, then we have potential evidence here of the movements undertaken by peoples who are thought to be of the same socio-political group. That the Didanu/Tidnu are known from Ebla to Elam would indicate that this group, or parts of this group, incorporated broad range movements as part of their grazing strategies, or,

more likely, that their home grazing lands shifted over time. At the same time, it is clear that all those who share the same subsistence practices and ways of life are not the same monolithic socio-political group.

The earliest attested insult directed against the Amorrites comes from Shu-Sin's inscription, where they are described as "destructive people of dog-like mind, like wolves..." (Frayne 1997), although this inscription is known to us only through a later Old Babylonian copy. Indeed, the other descriptions of the Amorrites are also known to us only through Old Babylonian tablets (that is, early second millennium, the period of Amorrite hegemony), and while it is assumed that these are copies of earlier materials, this is as yet unproven. These are the texts written in Sumerian that tell tales of Lugalbanda, the father of Gilgamesh; Gilgamesh himself; Enmerkar; the fictive correspondence between Shulgi and various officials; and, especially, the Marriage of Mardu. For most of the twentieth century these aspersions were cited, with no contextualization of the statements within the text, as historical evidence of: the Sumerian enmity to the Amorrites, the generally uncivilized nature of the Amorrites, the outsider status of the Amorrites, and Sumerians' general hatred of anything outside the urbanized world.

But as archaeologists know, context is everything. Statements such as the Mardu know no barley, towns, or houses are neutral descriptors. They have been interpreted as aspersions largely because of the Marriage of Mardu (Black et al. 2004). Although the whole story is about Mardu, only one paragraph in this story uses words such as "destructive," "abomination," and "confused." This passage is pejorative indeed, but within the context of the entire story it becomes not a general descriptor of the Amorrites, but the attempts of a father to dissuade his daughter from marrying out of her community. The Old Babylonian tablets of Sumerian literary materials are deeply imbued with political propaganda specifically extolling the connections of the first king of the Third Dynasty of Ur, Ur-Nammu. Ur-Nammu is portrayed as Gilgamesh's brother and Lugalbanda's son in these texts. It is therefore reasonable to assume they were first disseminated some time during the Third Dynasty of Ur (2100–2000 BCE).

So it is that the Mari letters provide the first *substantive* textual data on pastoralism. Primarily dating to the time of the last ruler of Mari, Zimri-Lim, the 20 000 tablets and fragments retrieved are those apparently collected for removal to Babylon by Hammurabi after he sacked the city in 1761 BCE. For some reason, they were never actually sent on (van Koppen 2006). Among these tablets are some 3000 letters between Zimri-Lim and members of his administration, including those in charge of both mobile and sedentary populations. These texts provide precise details of political territories, grazing lands, seasonal movements of various pastoralist groups and their relationships with sedentary farmers and city-dwellers, as well as their socio-political structures.

Unfortunately, mid-twentieth century CE English-language treatments of the Mari texts (Luke 1965; Matthews 1978; and especially Rowton 1974) are still frequently cited. The outdated anthropological underpinnings of these works, in conjunction with the Sumerian literary references to MARDU, leads to the assumption of a fundamental alienation between tribe and state, even as their mutual dependence in economic terms was highlighted by scholars such as Rowton. This picture is certainly challenged by the extensive publication of the tablets by the French team under the direction of J.-M. Durand and D. Charpin, and in more recent scholarship in English, such as the several works of Georgio Buccellati,

Daniel Fleming (2004), and Jack Sasson (2015). These scholars reveal the complexity of socio-political interactions between mobile and sedentary components of the kingdom, and between Mari and its political rivals and neighbors. With the online resource ARCHIBAB now available (<http://www.archibab.fr/en/accueil.htm>), the complete collection of Old Babylonian texts is readily accessible to all. This will undoubtedly facilitate research into some key questions, such as: to what extent is the nature of society and polity represented by these texts applicable to Amorrites in general? To what degree do these texts reflect pre-existing structures? What is the connection of the Lim dynasty to Mari, especially to the preceding period when the city was under the control of “governors” (*shakkanaku*) probably appointed by the Akkadian kings?

While pastoralism undoubtedly remained a prime economic factor in the centuries subsequent to the Amorrite age, specific pastoralist entities were not very prominent in ancient sources (nor modern scholarship) until towards the very end of the second millennium, when the Aramaeans first come to our attention. Prior to this, only occasional mentions are made of two groups, the Suteans, known from the Mari texts, and the Ahlamu, also first attested in the early to mid-second millennium (Herles 2007). It is striking the degree to which the academic discourse about the Aramaeans is similar to that of the Amorrites. Like the Amorrites, the Arameans are often seen as originating in the area of Jebel Bishri. Like the Amorrites, the name “Aram” is first attributed by others, only later to be used by the people so designated. Like the Amorrites, the appearance of the Arameans was understood, at least initially, as intrusive and destabilizing if not outright destructive.

This parallelism is not least because of the fact that the Assyrians themselves made an elision between Ahlamu and Aram. The earliest mentions of Aram come from the inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser I at around 1100 BCE, in the construct *ahlamu KUR armayya<sup>MES</sup>*; that is, Ahlamu in the land of Arameans. Although the association with Jebel Bishri and with the Ahlamu has long been thought enough to warrant an assumption of the Aramaeans’ pastoralist origins, these references may concern Tiglath-Pileser’s interactions with the ancestral group Ahlamu rather than Aramaeans. Or, as has been suggested, either *ahlamu* or *armayya* may indicate “tribes” or “pastoralists” rather than a people (Schniedewind 2002). In either case, this labelling tells us only that Aramaeans are associated with the Euphrates region, and specifically the river’s right bank. In descriptions of his war against the Ahlamu/Arameans, Tiglath-Pileser noted that he marched to the desert, attacking from “the edge of the land of Suhu to the city Carchemish” (Grayson 1991, p. 23), destroying six “of their cities at the foot of Jebel Bishri.” If “the land of Suhu” refers to the Palmyra region and beyond (Schou 2015), then it was not into the desert that Tiglath-Pileser went, but to its edge – the bordering steppe lands. Indeed, Schniedewind argues that the word Grayson translates as “desert” is in fact “steppe.” “Steppe” does not necessitate a mobile pastoralist, or semi-nomadic constituency, but may be exploited by the residents of nearby settlements. Since no cities have been identified immediately around Bishri, the cities thus described must be located between it and the river itself. There are several mid- to late second millennium sites located in the river valley along the right bank of the Euphrates, such as el-Qitar, Tell Hadidi (ancient Azu), Tell Meskene (ancient Emar), Tell Thaddayen (ancient Abattum?) and potentially many more as yet undiscovered settlements further south. In sum, the early attestations of the name “Aramaean” are simply insufficient to conclude the mobile pastoralist origins of people so named.

For those who do accept that the Aramaeans were pastoralists, the apparently conflicting evidence that Aramaeans were entrenched in cities at this early date (1100 BCE) has been variously resolved as proof that they were semi-nomadic (Pitard 1996), or that sedentaryization of the Aramaeans was already in place by the time Tiglath-Pileser encountered them (Szuchman 2008). But despite apparent similarities between Amorrites and Aramaeans, the situation at the end of the second millennium is rather different to that at the end of the third millennium. Climatic catastrophes such as drought have been shown to be spasmodic, variable, and with a range of outcomes evident across the Near East at the end of the third millennium. At the end of the second millennium, in contrast, there is evidence from multiple sources of multiple events and disasters that led to the collapse of the Late Bronze Age urban centers (Cline, 2015 but c.f. Knapp and Manning 2016). Earthquakes, pirates, famine, and war sent not only the Near East, but also the eastern Mediterranean and Aegean, into turmoil out of which vast population dislocations, beyond the scale of anything seen earlier, gave birth to a great many new political identities. The Arameans and Israelites were but two such identities. All these newly emerging polities incorporated multiple ethnicities and populations from multiple previous political entities.

Although it could be argued that refugees from collapsed states and destroyed or abandoned cities become nomadic pastoralists if any length of time elapses before resettling, this is not necessarily the case. There is little theorization in archaeology about what would differentiate homeless forced migrants from mobile pastoralists, or resettling refugees from sedentarizing nomads. The archaeological characteristics of early Iron Age settlements in both Syria and the southern Levant match refugee populations as much as they do pastoralists abandoning a mobile way of life for permanent settlement. Insubstantial architecture, defensively arrayed; circular houses or houses with large courtyards for keeping animals; a preference for portable goods; and a lack of elaborate material culture are equally indicative of a population impoverished from displacement as they are of mobility.

One of the key factors substantiating for many scholars the nomadic nature of the Aramaeans, however, is their own way of naming. The Aramean kingdoms that emerge in the first millennium are recognizable because they are called *bit* – Bit Adini or Bit Agusi. *Bit* means “house” which would therefore indicate that the Aramaeans perceived themselves as organized on the basis of kinship. Kin-based socio-political organization is assumed by many to be synonymous with tribe.

## The Socio-Political Organization of Pastoralists

There is a good deal of confusion on this topic. It is widely assumed that pastoralism is synonymous with tribalism, and that tribe and state are mutually exclusive affiliations, but this is not the case on either theoretical or empirical grounds. Many sedentary societies are classified as tribes, and some pastoralist communities are classified as states, for example, the Xiongnu (Honeychurch 2014). The most problematic issue here is definitional. While some version of Weber’s original delineation of the state is the universal basis of archaeological approaches, characterizations of the tribe are contentious. At issue is the degree to which social structures and practices overlap with political ones. Because much early

research on non-Western societies was driven by the colonial need to find a way to rule groups that had no overt forms of government, the focus was on the way the social aspects of these groups – kinship and descent – functioned as political structure. One outcome of this research, E. Evans-Pritchard's (1940) segmentary opposition, or segmentary lineage, theory, has proved highly influential. Evans-Pritchard argued that when tribes are composed of lineages based on descent from a founding ancestor, those lineages will align with each other according to closeness of relationship. This means they will then oppose those further away from them in the descent system when conflict arises.

This view has had several outcomes, two of which have had particular salience for scholarship on the ancient Near East. One, conflict – “blood feud” – is believed structural and innate to the tribe; two, that structure provides the rules of governance for the tribe. If tribes are structurally predisposed toward violence, especially to those who are distantly, or not at all, related, then it seems logical that they would attempt to destroy sedentary, urban, state societies, just as would appear to be the case in the Sumerian literary stories. The result is that tribes are understood to be an undesirable socio-political formation, less than, and in conflict with, the state. Dismissed by many anthropologists of pastoralists, but accepted with little reexamination by others, segmentary opposition is hardly demonstrated from ancient evidence. Rather, it is imposed on the past from modern, but problematic, anthropological theory.

One further unfortunate byproduct of this situation is that since violence would seem so closely associated with societies labelled segmentary (Sahlins 1961; Kelly 2000), evidence of violence itself having been read as evidence of segmented societies (as in Marcus 2008). For this reason, and others, the term “tribe” should be abandoned. Africanists long ago abolished it as racist, and anthropology as a whole now understands that no societies are limited to blood relations as the basis of membership, as they also accept a variety of socially constructed means of creating kinship. The tribe has also been shown to be, in some instances, a form invented in reaction to colonialism (Fried 1975; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). In archaeology the tribe has historically been seen as a kind of organization and/or a stage in the evolution of political complexity. By now, it means so many different things that it means nothing, so that some archaeological anthropologists opt for “politically autonomous village societies” (Carneiro 1987; Marcus 2008) instead.

Where does that leave mobile pastoralists then? As long ago as 1961, Fredrik Barth demonstrated that people of different ethnicities, speaking different languages, with different religious beliefs, could all belong to the same pastoralist group. For a host of reasons, and under widely varying circumstances, pastoralist groups can operate to include or exclude unrelated others at different times. If there is a constant, it is that whether fictive or historical, manipulable or rigidly maintained, descent from a common ancestor is a key group identifier. Therefore, the term “ancestral group” is more useful than “tribe”. It is not, however, exclusively applicable to mobile pastoralists. In fact, ancestral relationships seem to be a critical component of social structure and practice in settled societies of the Ancient Near East across time (for textual evidence, see van der Toorn 1994; and for archaeological examples, see Peltenburg 1999; Porter 2012).

Rather than impose modern theoretical constructs on the ancient world, it is better to look at the evidence. It is clear that mobile pastoralists in the Ancient Near East may or may not have been politically autonomous and that membership of a tribe did not

preclude membership of a state or kingdom. It is not uncommon to find people – mobile and sedentary people – identifying themselves by both an ancestral identity and a political one. Most of the attestations of this come from the so-called Amorrite, or Old Babylonian period (second quarter of the second millennium), among which the titulary of Zimri-Lim as “King of Mari and the land of the Hana” is best known. Such labels, however, are but a superficial indicator of a much more profound social situation. The Mari texts present a world where the constituents of the kingdom are defined not by place of residence nor by subsistence practice (Durand 2004; Fleming 2004), but by kin relations. That kin relations may be socially constructed rather than biological, and that they also define interactions beyond the world of the Mari kingdom, is abundantly clear in one particular text. This is Ibal-el’s letter to Zimri-Lim (A2730; for editions of this text see Charpin 1988, p. 33 and n. 24; Durand 2004, pp. 120–121; [www.archibab.fr.](http://www.archibab.fr/)).

Ibal-el is a *merhum*, a position commonly translated as “chief of pasture”. He is in charge of the pastoralists belonging to the Simalite group and is responsible for the well-being of both the people and their animals. His letter describes the breakdown of a critical relationship between the Simalites and certain kings of Ida Maraş, a relationship that had been established by “a pact of blood” – that is, socially constructed kinship. Because a biological kinship did not already exist, a pact was made. Other texts indicate that the performance of a ritual, often in the ratification of a treaty, created ties that were the equivalent of a biological relationship. The blood that underpinned this relationship came from the sacrifice of a donkey. In the case of Ibal-el, this kinship, understood as deeply traditional, established a system of mutual rights and obligations between its members that included the duty to send troops when requested, and, most particularly, to allow grazing rights for the Simalites in the territory of Ida Maraş. Moreover, the Yaminite group is listed as having the same kinds of pact with three other kingdoms: Yamhad, Qatna and Amurru (Durand 2004).

Just as it is the Mari texts that provide the most evidence for socio-political organization, it is the Mari texts that make clear that not all Amorrite, let alone all mobile pastoralist, groups are structured, or work, in the same ways (Durand 2004; Fleming 2004). This is a lesson that needs to be borne in mind no matter the time and place. Some mobile pastoralist groups are more closely associated with towns than others. Some have leaders called “kings” and are quite hierarchical in organization, while some are corporate in nature. Distance from political centers is not necessarily a product of independence, nor is it necessarily enduring, but may rather reflect shifting environmental and/or geopolitical conditions.

The prominence of kinship in the Amorrite period (and in the Aramaean) is one of the factors that has led to the widely held idea that somehow the Amorrites were different to the urban populations of both southern, and even northern, Mesopotamia. It is this kinship that is taken as evidence that, one, Amorrites were tribally organized, and that, two, this tribalism was responsible for what seems to be unusually intense conflict in this period. The problem here is not so much understandings of the tribe, but assumptions as to the state. It has long been an anthropological mantra that kinship is associated with small-scale and/or lesser societies. The appearance of the city and its correlate, the state, required the dissolution of kinship as the structuring principle of society. On the one hand, these larger socio-political formations could no longer work on a face-to-face basis, understood as the

essence of kin-structured societies. On the other hand, since the new cities and polities comprised unrelated populations, they were inherently unstable unless allegiance was transferred from the kin-group to the state. And as the processes leading to the emergence of city and state were based in increasing socio-economic differentiation, class came to form the structuring principle of society. In this view, state, based on class, and tribe, based on kin, are two separate and incompatible systems. But the more we understand the evidence, the more it is apparent that inhabitants of ancient polities across time maintained a complex mix of relationships and alliances with the political center (that is, the palace), local neighborhoods and individual households, as well as with larger kin groups. Local community leaders dealt with some aspects of life, the palace others, the precise details of which varied from place to place. In these regards there is little qualitative difference between the socio-political systems of sedentary communities and mobile ones, with variability to be found in both sectors.

The assumption therefore that the prominence of kinship is a feature peculiar to the tribally organized Amorrites and Aramaeans, and that this is a product of the status of both groups as mobile pastoralists, must be re-examined. For one, it is worth noting that the essence of kinship, as creating a system of rights and obligations, is also clear but underappreciated in the correspondence between the kings of various polities in the Near East and the Egyptian Pharaoh known as the Amarna Letters. It is not therefore purely a pastoralist and/or tribal construct. There are three further issues to consider. The first is evidence of continuity in practices that create and perpetuate kinship across time. The second is the idea that identities are usually explicit when they are at issue in some way. The third is the nature of the historical moment in which we encounter these groups.

That sedentary society is framed by ancestral identity is evident in records from the early third millennium called *kudurru* (Gelb et al. 1991). These texts document the sale of land, houses and orchards for which not only the current owners but also preceding generations must be compensated. Archaeologically, a range of mortuary practices, from the burial itself to post-funerary commemoration, indicate the importance of ancestors from at least the third millennium onwards. But the constant *assertion* of identity, especially that of individuals, does not seem relevant until the early second millennium, when a notable increase in conflict and upheaval may have called identities into question. Is this conflict a result of pastoralist hostility to the sedentary world? There is no theoretical validity to such a proposal. Rather, this period bears witness to a number of expansionist rulers – Samsi-Addu and Hammurabi to name but two – who as the Mari letters show, are constantly jockeying for allies in their campaigns for dominance. Statements of ancestral association make it very clear with whom allegiances lie, although both ancestral group and allegiance are certainly changeable conditions. One text, A981, shows just such a transference (for further discussion of this text see Durand 1992; Sasson 1998; Fleming 2004). The elders of Dabiš decide to leave the Yahruru, who are Yaminites, to join the Nihadu, who are Simalites, and they are able to accomplish this through a blood pact.

Finally, the explanation for any similarities in socio-political organization and practices between Amorrites and Aramaeans lies not so much in geography, although there certainly is some overlap here, nor in lifeways, but rather in history. Undoubtedly, the strongest evidence for both groups comes from the region stretching from the Middle Euphrates to the Habur, but it would be both methodologically and empirically incorrect to assume

that people in northern Mesopotamia were differently (tribally) organized than anyone else. The ancestral nature of both groups becomes evident at times when the state does not consume our focus. Whether this is because of a civilizational collapse or simply a matter of unrecovered texts is not really the issue. The history of the Near East has been traditionally narrated as the rise of states, their collapse and a subsequent reversion to primitive, tribal systems. But it is our view that is changing, not the nature of the world at any given point of time. The social lives of elites and non-elites, urbanites and steppe dwellers, is an intersecting combination of kinship and household, one writ large, one writ small, and it remains essentially unchanged in its broadest parameters from prehistory to modern history.

The state itself is framed by, and operates, in this way – be it the language of family structuring relationships in the Mesopotamian state (Gelb 1979; Schloen 2001), the socially constructed kin relationships of all the participants in the Amarna letters, or the correspondence of the Mari letters. Overlaid on top of the social is the political – the Near Eastern state, that is neither entirely autocratic nor all-controlling. It is the political that the history of archaeology and philology has been dedicated to revealing, and that it continues to focus upon despite seismic shifts in theory and practice in these fields. Then for economic or political reasons, drought or invasions, the state disappears, leaving only the social world beneath it. It is only then it becomes visible because the state is not directly concerned with it. This kind of social knowledge is carried in the minds and practices of all elements of society, as scholars who study kinship in a variety of times and places well know.

The state does not monitor who is related to whom nor how, or at least not comprehensively. Genealogies such as that of the Dynasty of Hammurabi (Finkelstein 1966) and the Assyrian King list (Gelb 1954) are an exception to this, and their manipulation is as revelatory as their contents. By writing down a history of descent, whether actual or fictive, relationships become set, as it were, in stone, and the claims, rights, and obligation of those involved, indisputable. Whereas we in the modern world tend to read such documents as exclusionary, aimed at establishing one person's right to rule, in the past the inclusionary nature of both these texts would have been well understood. Several named ancestral groups – 17, in fact, spread over a vast geography from the foothills of the Zagros to the Mediterranean coast – become linked within the one political entity. Not only does this imply the right of the last descendent in the list to rule such a territory; he becomes embedded in a widespread network of mutual support.

## FURTHER READING

For a general survey of pastoralism from the perspective of anthropological archaeology see Honeychurch and Makarewicz (2016). For pastoralism in the Ancient Near East, see Porter (2012). Extensive discussions of Mari, and citations of the relevant texts, are to be found in the many works of Dominique Charpin, Jean-Marie Durand, Daniel Fleming and Jack Sasson. Some suggestions are as follows: Charpin (2010, 2015); Durand (1992, 2008); and Fleming (2004). For the Mari letters themselves, see Durand (1997, 1998, 2000) and Sasson (2015). The Aramaeans are thoroughly treated in Niehr (2014). See especially Sader's contribution there on history (2014).

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## CHAPTER NINE

# Money and Traders

*Christopher M. Monroe*

## Attractions of Early Economy

Money and trade are separate but related socio-economic phenomena, the former a means of pursuing the latter, which is taken here as the buying and/or selling of goods and services. Studying them together leads into all kinds of interesting material and beyond that, into hidden implications and indictments. As urban life emerges in Mesopotamia and Egypt, goods, services, and even people are exchanged and increasingly commodified through a variety of modes and means. Archaeological and written documentation of these activities is perpetually incomplete, leaving each generation of experts a fresh puzzle of new evidence, methods, and perspectives.

Much of it is bone-dry detective work involving numbers, metrology, and tracing the movement of materials – things tending to cancel romantic notions about the past. But the bigger questions are profoundly humanistic and seek to understand how ancients conducted both their dullest daily activities and their grandest schemes, as individuals, communities, corporations, or rising and falling empires. It is still a relatively arcane subject, but any dreariness dissolves as one becomes immersed in the richer, even poetic, evidence of ancient economic life.

Authors of early Near Eastern literature understood tacitly how trade and money enriched the material conditions of civilization. One of Mesopotamia's enduring myths, Atrahasis, which includes a world-transforming flood, arguably develops out of a mundane labor dispute: a revolt against the higher gods by gods assigned to work the land is pacified by the creation of human beings, the new working class (Foster 1993, pp. 158–201). An early Sumerian tale, Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta alludes to the long-distance trade between the great city of Uruk and a kingdom far to the east, rich in tin and lapis lazuli (Jacobsen 1987, pp. 275–319). Of course, myth and literature were not merely allegories for socio-economic undercurrents, but understanding how the ancients valued

goods, services, and people draws us deeper into a perspectival view of Ancient Near Eastern sources. Money and trade can be approached as topics for their own sake, usually within the scope of ancient economy, or as a quest for context from which to better view Ancient Near Eastern literature and myth.

A clash between capitalistic and patrimonial world-views simmers subliminally in New Kingdom Egyptian wisdom literature, anticipating the commercialism of the eleventh century BCE thriller, Report of Wenamun (Lichtheim 1976, pp. 224–230). By that point the old magic – about 2000 years of belief in the power of a charismatic, divine king to provide for a people’s needs – was losing ground to the lure of profit and individual wealth not derived strictly from royal favor:

Let your hand preserve what is in your house  
 Wealth accrues to him who guards it  
 Let your hand not scatter it to strangers,  
 Lest it turn to loss for you.  
 If wealth is placed where it bears interest,  
 It comes back to you redoubled.

(Instructions of Any; Lichtheim 1976, p. 138)

[Tjeker-Baal of Byblos says to Wenamun:] “On what business have you come?” I said to him: “I have come in quest of timber for the great noble bark of Amen-Re, King of Gods. What your father did, what the father of your father did, you too will do it.” [...]

“True they did it. If you pay me for doing it, I will do it. My relations carried out this business after Pharaoh had sent six ships laden with the goods of Egypt, and they had been unloaded into their storehouses. You, what have you brought for me?”

He had the daybook of his forefathers brought and had it read before me. They found entered in his book a thousand *deben* of silver and all sort of things. He said to me: “If the ruler of Egypt were the lord of what is mine and I were his servant, he would not have sent silver and gold to say: ‘Carry out the business of Amun.’ It was not a royal gift that they gave to my father! I too am not your servant, nor am I the servant of him who sent you!” (Lichtheim 1976, p. 226)

The standard reading of Wenamun’s misfortune is that the world was turning under his feet, and that Egypt’s command no longer held economic force in a post-imperial, more commercial world. Mesopotamian literature lacks a comparable, hapless protagonist, and this is sometimes explained as the Babylonians having become used to money and markets earlier than Egyptians. This contrast is probably overstated, for what has actually turned is our understanding of Egypt as a static, marketless economy driven by state redistribution: it turns out that Ozymandias’ world was not so different from Gilgamesh’s as once thought.

## The Politics of Ancient Economics

Readers may be pleased to learn that the early twenty-first century is a golden age for our subject. After important syntheses and sustained input from anthropology in the 1970s and 1980s (Adams 1974; Hawkins 1977; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Curtin 1984;

Appadurai 1988), the field moved away from particularism and parochial debates in the 1990s toward a more productive discourse (Hudson and Levine 1996).

In the older literature one is more apt to find rigid interpretations, often embedded in translations, that are no longer tenable. In the Early Bronze Age (or third millennium BCE) one already has a good deal of evidence in Egypt and Mesopotamia for money, profit, entrepreneurialism, markets, and finance. A quarter century ago such a statement would have been regarded as anachronistic or formalistic, meaning too similar to modern economies. Since then a more balanced view of ancient political economy has prevailed (as one can readily appreciate via Snell 1997, pp. 145–158). Virtually all economies have historically been “mixed economies,” neither purely state-run nor private, a perspective that allows us a fuller view of the complexity and range of written and archaeological sources (Smith 2004). These days, trade, money, and markets (in goods, finance, land, labor) tend to play a greater role in socio-economic analyses (Hudson and Van de Mieroop 2002; Monroe 2009; Peyronel 2010; Warburton 2016; van Bavel 2014; Moreno Garcia 2014).

The reconstruction of ancient economies relies on two kinds of evidence that sometimes contradict and other times cohere. Archaeology is our sole guide to imports and exports in pre-urban times and reveals that Mesopotamian trade in the Gulf was underway already by the fifth millennium. We know that Mesopotamians imported tin (used with copper for making bronze), lapis lazuli and carnelian from the east, wood from the west, copper from the south, and obsidian from the north. Our knowledge of the first interregional economic system in world history, the expansion of the Late Uruk culture of southern Mesopotamia that reached the Upper Euphrates around 3200 BCE, is through the distribution of small, utilitarian bowls, sometimes accompanied by tablets inscribed with the earliest form of writing (Algaze 1993). Cylinder seals from the Uruk and Jemdet Nasr periods also suggest an organized form of early long-distance trade in southern Mesopotamia and Iran. Royal Egyptian annals noted the Levant mostly in terms of conquest, but Egyptian pottery, scarabs (amulet-seals carved like beetles), statuary, and metal objects found in Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria suggest more peaceful modes of exchange at play. Local trade can often be inferred where household archaeology shows surplus production. But how long-distance exchange was organized, and what standards of value existed, is poorly understood if at all before the third millennium, whence come our earliest intelligible archives of cuneiform records.

With records comes the identification of goods, individuals, and institutions, either as recipients or distributors of goods, sometimes accompanied by prices – all the stuff of administrative records numbering in the tens of thousands. The more informative third millennium archives come from mostly southern Mesopotamian towns – Umma, Lagash, Fara, and Adab; we also have tablets from a major Syrian palace at Ebla, far to the northwest. Later in the third millennium we begin to see letters, legal cases, and law collections – less numerous than administrative texts, but often more revealing.

From the economic historian’s perspective the evidence is still insufficient to define indicators such as the balance of private versus state-run trade, gross national product, or balance of foreign versus domestic trade, though prices of some goods and services can be roughly charted over time. There are no texts that set out the economic principles of Ancient Near Eastern institutions or towns, objectively describe the experience of traders, chronicle supply and demand forces, or offer similar analytic descriptions. A chart of available sources over

time would not be a smooth curve rising from relative darkness into later periods of illumination. Rather, after the mid-third millennium we have a generally constant abundance of laconic, biased materials punctuated by chance archaeological and textual finds of great significance.

Mesopotamian examples include “balanced accounts” of Ur III entrepreneurs (Snell 1982), and the Old Assyrian trading colony found at Kültepe, Turkey (ancient Kanesh), which provided unprecedented detail about family-organized business that connected three disparate regions in profit-making ventures for metals and textiles before 1800 BCE. Analyses of the business correspondence from Kanesh revolutionized the way most scholars conceptualized trade in the Ancient Near East and helped overturn the erroneous view that Mesopotamia was marketless (Veenhof 1972, 1997; van Bavel 2014; Larsen 2015).

New Kingdom ostraca recovered from a workers’ village at Deir el-Medina, which contain evidence of trade organized outside the temple and palace, similarly reshaped scholarly views on Egyptian money and markets (Lesko 1994; Kemp 2005; Moreno García 2014).

In the absence of such treasure troves, though certainly informed by them, one often relies on anecdotal tidbits. As the Kanesh colony was ending, another huge archive was amassing in the palace at Mari, on the mid-Euphrates. Pure commerce is rarely front and center in this royal correspondence, and yet one learns much in passing: boats for supplying the king with fancy woods and metals are scarce and must be hired for silver, not simply requisitioned; an official in Carchemish reveals the prices (in silver) for wine and boats, and moreover that the latter’s value would depreciate tenfold downstream in Mari; others relay information of a mixed political-military-commercial nature, such as the lack of ferry service, lack of grain and carts to ship it in, or how a trader has learned where Babylonian kidnappers are holding Zimri-Lim’s nephew (Heimpel 2003, pp. 188–189, 407, 413, 414, 467). As with the later Amarna letters, such epistolary allusions can be deeply revealing.

The interpretation of the Kanesh tablets marked a turning point in a century-old intellectual battle known as the substantivist-formalist debate. Understanding this debate is essential to comprehending how facts have been shaped into information and history. Formalists tend to see the capitalistic rationality of modern Western societies represented throughout human history, as if the laws of modern economics (supply and demand, rational choice, etc.) were universal. Substantivists, on the other hand, stress that economies are “embedded,” or defined by deeper, traditional ideologies particular to time, place, and people. They deny that societies existing before modern capitalism could exhibit capitalistic traits.

By the 1950s, substantivist followers of sociologist Karl Polanyi (1957) were winning this debate. Two intellectual streams were broadly responsible. A steady stream of sociological works analyzing and criticizing the tenets of capitalism was met by another stream of anthropological studies, especially ethnographies, that had been defining the economics of so-called pre-monetary societies, including many in the Pacific Islands. In these settings trade was organized as either barter, redistribution by a ruling institution, or ceremonialized as gift exchanges between elites. Essential was the embeddedness concept, that is, that the economy was determined by a deeper social ideology. Absent, supposedly, were rationality, prices, profit, and capitalistic motives.

Many Assyriologists and Egyptologists found tempting parallels in these works, and the notion that early states were economically primitive took firm hold. Despite plentiful evidence for trade, prices, and money in Old Babylonian texts from 2004 to 1595 BCE and Middle Babylonian texts from the Syrian coastal kingdom of Ugarit from 1400 to 1180 BCE, entrepreneurship tended to be dismissed as formalist inference or downplayed as secondary, something merchants did to supplement their income from the palace or temple.

Political philosophy was long a silent partner in the substantivist-formalists and related debates. Marxist scholars propagated the view of ancient society as consisting of two competing sectors – urban dependents of palaces and temples versus free rural peasants (Diakonoff 1982; Zaccagnini 1983; Liverani 1990; Renger 1994; Heltzer 1999). In this two-sector model, trade is considered primarily an arm of the urban ruling apparatus that exploits the rural population. Marxist approaches thus tend to stress the corrosive effects of capitalistic trade and its corruption of benevolent despotism; this is true also of Polanyians, who see early trade as reciprocal, becoming more depersonalized and ruthless over time until one has capitalism.

Other scholars have adopted parts of sociologist Max Weber's (1947) theory of the patrimonial household: here the kingdom is organized as a pyramid of bureaucrats connected by blood and personal obligations to the king, with all the realm's wealth and information magically defying gravity in its flow from the many parties at the bottom to the royal apex. In this model, which analogically draws upon medieval and Ottoman evidence, trade is primarily an economic component of rulership (Schloen 2005).

Since 1974, Wallerstein's world-system concept has suggested to many already used to Marxian approaches that early states built asymmetrical center-periphery relationships to procure raw materials (Edens 1992; Wilkinson et al 2011). Post-colonial approaches of the past 20 years or so question the hierarchical assumptions in world-systems thinking, placing greater agency with the local sphere, or what used to be called the periphery (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997; Stein 1999). The past decade has seen some archaeologists adopting network theory and materiality to assign relative agency even to objects or the informational links that connect peoples, places, and things (Hodder 2012). Such directions could lead to entirely apolitical approaches to trade; in other words, could Egyptian gold, Lebanese cedar, or Babylonian clothing have sold themselves? If nothing else, shifting theoretical winds force the scholar to question how his or her own political-economic context affects one's reading of ambiguous evidence.

Regardless of paradigmatic fashions, private ownership of land and movable goods is evident in the earliest sources, as are traders buying and selling these goods for temples, kings, and individuals. If money and trade-for-profit did not exist in the earliest states of the late fourth millennium, then they appeared soon after. The sources are simply inadequate to determine which came first – trade or the state. But one thing is clear from looking at transactions in the texts themselves: by commodifying the value of objects and services, people at some point began to commodify each other, however indirectly. Because of this inherently antisocial aspect to trade and money, successful merchants have always taken care to appear equitable in their dealings (Parry and Bloch 1989).

How societies should distribute wealth among different groups is the question that gave rise to a science of political economy. One can look to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* or

Plato's *Republic* for its origins, but the question clearly concerned Ancient Near Easterners too. Customs, laws, and literature show an intention to balance the profit motives of merchants with competing interests of other social groups. Hammurabi's "code" is probably the best known example, a royal monument that begs the gods and a literate few to bear witness to his justness in protecting the interests of merchant and customer alike (Roth 1997). A lesser known, but more direct window into this dynamic, is the decree in Akkadian from Ugarit (RS 17.130+) that forbade a group of merchants from predatory lending in the winter at around 1200 BCE. The merchants from the Cilician port city of Ura were under the authority of the Hittite overlord, so the king of Ugarit (also a Hittite vassal) had legal recourse to prevent further loss of his domain, a politically undesirable effect of his citizens selling their homes for silver (Beckman 1996, pp. 162–163, no. 32). More generally, balancing the needs of traders versus society at large was a matter for the gods: the Mesopotamian sun-god Shamash (Utu in Sumerian), and Anubis in Egypt, were both invoked to oversee the weighing process and guarantee the honesty of merchants. Proverbs (11:1) and Psalms (62:9–12) in the Hebrew Bible also speak of a higher power overseeing commerce.

## Mesopotamian Monies and Weights

Money and coinage are not the same thing. Practically all coinage is money, but not all money is coinage. The most useful dictionary definitions focus on the functions of money rather than its form. Indeed, the form eludes us simply by virtue of its plurality and fluidity. Money today becomes increasingly electronic and digital, bitcoin being an extreme example. Money can be anything, as often noted, and now can also be virtually nothing. So it is irrelevant to define money as beads, metal bullion, stamped metal (coins), paper, plastic, or invisible 0s and 1s. What money does is more instructive, and minimally, it does the following: it provides a medium of exchange; stores value of something perishable, like grain, in a more stable form; standardizes value or prices for goods and services; and it facilitates the accumulation and accounting of wealth (Snell 1995).

Money is thus not so much a physical good but an information technology. Like writing, it articulates and communicates. And because the information communicated is concerned primarily with prices of things, one can conceptualize a given monetary system as a silent language of value. It has lexemes (such as the talent), a grammar of morphemes (such as minas and shekels composing the talent), syntax (sexagesimal counting in Mesopotamia, decimal in Egypt), and a semiotic range consisting of concepts of value, specific to those who understood and used a particular monetary system as currency. So, like the linguistic kaleidoscope that is the ancient Near East, we are here discussing multiple monies or monetary systems, to which we now turn.

Archaeology and textual evidence attest that money was used in the third millennium BCE. In form it consisted mainly of weights of precious metal, semi-precious metal, and barley. Earlier examples show a wide variance in mass ranges and form, but reforms attributed to the Old Akkadian period (2334–2194 BCE) imposed a far-reaching and long-lasting standardization. The oldest unit, which remained constant throughout the history of ancient Mesopotamia and beyond, was the talent of about 30 kilograms or 66 pounds, the

conventional amount bearable by a single worker. This large weight was divided into 60 minas, each about 500 grams, which in turn was divided into 60 shekels of about 8.33 grams each. The shekel was further divided into “little minas” (a shekel), “little shekels” (1/60 shekel), and “grains” or “barleycorns” (1/180 shekel) for the purpose of weighing small amounts of highly valuable silver and gold (Powell 1990).

Though the evidence is not consistently robust after the Old Babylonian period, the Akkad system apparently changed little over time, at least regarding the talent and mina. The shekel, on the other hand, was dynamic, differentiating itself into local standards recognizable by various shapes and masses. By the Late Bronze Age, and probably before, three major systems had developed from regionally distinct shekels. Mesopotamia proper had a mina of 60 shekels; Syro-Palestinians were using slightly larger shekels that counted 50 to a mina; and merchants of the Hittite empire used even larger ones, only 40 per mina. At Emar, on the Upper Euphrates between competing empires, these three systems were used simultaneously. Neo-Assyrians used three different weight standards for silver: the king’s, the merchants’, and the Carchemish standard. In Neo-Babylonian times and later, the shekel underwent further subdivisions (Powell 1996).

Stone weights have been found on many archaeological sites, including some 550 found at Ugarit. Over a hundred weights were recovered from the Late Bronze Age shipwreck found at Uluburun, Turkey. At least nine distinct sets, each consisting of stones carved to fit a local weight system, were on board. With these weights the ill-fated merchants could have transacted payments in metal or other commodities with Aegeans, Hittites, Syro-Palestinians, Assyrians, or Egyptians (Pulak 2008). The weights are illustrative of the complexities in discussing money and trade. Even in the case of royal gift exchange, the most frequently posited mode of trade attributed to the Uluburun shipwreck, royal merchants needed to know the major currencies of the day.

Currency came in many forms, from the everyday and transitory to the exotic and permanent. Grain was probably the earliest standardized indicator of the value of goods, as it signified basic subsistence. Barley was adequate for local trading, since its caloric value would have been sustained over short journeys. For long-distance trade, however, something more concentrated and durable was required. Shiny metals were highly desired, because of their malleability and potential for ostentatious display as vessels, other household items, and weaponry. They were also relatively sturdy and low in bulk, making them ideal for long-distance trade.

Prices in Mesopotamia and Egypt were sometimes stated in gold or copper, but silver was the most common measure for most of the Bronze and Iron Ages. In Mesopotamia, for most of its history, barley, lead, copper or bronze, tin, silver, and gold (in order of increasing value) functioned as money. These may be divided into cheap (barley, lead, and copper and its alloys), mid-range (tin), and high-range (silver and gold) monies (Powell 1996). The relative value of tin is especially notable considering its rarity in the core areas of civilization.

Weighed coils and smaller broken-off pieces of silver, copper, gold, and bronze were used as currency in Ur III to Old Babylonian times (2112–1595 BCE); metal rings may also have been the basis for the Egyptian weight system. In the Late Bronze Age (1500–1200 BCE) gold became less rare and even gained on silver due to an influx of Egyptian gold into the interregional network, but throughout Mesopotamian history value was

most commonly stated in weights of silver or barley, the latter being used for what Powell (1996) called “small change.” During the Neo-Assyrian period (883–627 BCE) there was a shift to copper being the dominant metal money, and then back to silver, perhaps as the result of huge amounts of metals imported by conquering armies.

Money and trade met in the figure of the moneymen, an individual with lots of currency who sought to increase it by local trading, foreign trading, or lending silver or barley at interest. We can lump the trader and creditor together in the class of moneymen (which included women) while recognizing that there were various sorts of moneymen; one of the most surprising examples is that of an Ur III period shepherd who was also a local money-lender (Garfinkle 2004). All were entrepreneurs in the sense that they accumulated wealth not primarily by producing, but by providing access to goods or services generated by others. As experts who knew what was available, where, and for how much, they understood the information network that defined the market.

Throughout history moneymen have typically paid a price for their success known as the “trader’s dilemma” (Evers and Schrader 1994; Parry and Bloch 1989): in short, the more money made, the more suspicion endured from the consumer and producer sectors of society. This was understood already around 1900 BCE in a Sumerian proverb: “a scale set with sinews is a pitfall for the feet. A man should not take a merchant for his friend” (Alster 1997, 3.64). Whether merchants were honest or not is beside the point: the potential for fraud was widely perceived, as it was also when the Middle Assyrian Hymn to Shamash described the two paths (and the means) open to the weight-wielding moneymen:

He who [commits] fra[ud] as he holds the balances  
 Who switches weights, who lowers the [ ],  
 (His) profits are illusory, and he los[es the capital] [skipping lines 110–117]  
 The honest merchant who pays loans by the [ex]tra(?) standard, thereby to make extra virtue,  
 Is pleasing to Shamash, he will grant him extra life,  
 He will make (his) family numerous, he will acquire wealth,  
 [His] seed will be perpetual as the waters of a perpetual spring.

(Foster 1993: 541, lines 107–109, 118–121)

This can be compared to the Ramesside Instructions for Amenemope, in which the student is admonished not “to move the scales nor alter the weights,” for Thoth, the god of writing, magic, and wisdom would know of it in the end (Lichtheim 1976, pp. 156–157).

## Buying and Selling in Mesopotamia

It is wrongly claimed that the Lydians of southeastern Turkey invented money, when all they really invented was coinage. Here it is helpful to note that, even after the introduction of coinage, weights were still used to check the actual worth of coins and conduct business in bullion (Snell 1995). Contrary to a longstanding theory about the invention of coinage, recent studies of Phoenician silver hoards from around 1000 BCE show that

“hacked silver” was not an evolutionary step toward coinage but a technique for verifying bullion quality before it was weighed (Eshel et al. 2018). Since the late seventh century BCE, coinage and weighed bullion have coexisted; even today in economies where inflation runs high one can still find weighed amounts of silver or gold metal being used for payment; in less stable economies, even recycled copper can become money.

Despite its innovation of form, functionally the coin was just a quantity of metal, weighed and sealed by the state. Thus it is more accurate to refer to the Mesopotamian economy as “pre-coinage” rather than “pre-monetary.”

The language of buying and selling was highly developed early on. In the third millennium the stone weight was identified in Sumerian as *na*, and throughout Mesopotamian history afterwards as Akkadian *abnu*. The Akkadian term “to buy” was *šāmu* (in Sumerian it was *šam* and *sa*), and was used well into the first millennium BCE. Verbs meaning “to weigh” (Sumerian *la* or *lal*, and Akkadian *šaqālu*) also meant “to pay.” A curious expression for “pay off in full” or “be paid off in full” emerged in Middle Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian texts; it was based on the common verb for greeting and being healthy or whole, *šalāmu*. Selling was expressed in Sumerian by the verb “to give” (*sum*) with accompanying expressions for “what is paid” or “full price.” Old Assyrian traders at Kanesh expressed selling similarly, as “to give for a price.” In Akkadian texts from Old Babylonian times and on, “to give for silver” (*nadānu ana kaspi*) expressed the concept of selling. The concept of profit was expressed as *nēmelu* in Old Assyrian, Old Babylonian, and Nuzi texts (eastern Iraq, around 1400 BCE), but more typically must be deduced from context.

Evidence for wages and prices for goods and services come from many sources throughout Mesopotamian history, from which one can draw a representative sample. Sargonic period workers made about 8 liters of grain per day, or 240 liters a month, equivalent to 1 shekel of silver. In Ur III and Old Babylonian times a worker could expect to receive 10 liters of barley a day or 300 liters a month. In silver this amounted to 6 grains a day or 1 shekel a month (Powell 1996). At Nuzi the monthly wage was also equivalent to one shekel of silver per month. Ugarit’s copious archives have provided numerous prices, mostly from ca. 1300–1180 BCE (Heltzer 1999; Stieglitz 1979; Vargyas 1986; Monroe 2010). One shekel of silver bought 150 liters of barley; half a shekel bought a jar of olive oil; and a third of a shekel bought a jar of wine. Donkeys cost from 10 to 30 shekels of silver each; oxen, 10 to 17 shekels; sheep, 1 to 1.5. Persons, some valued at 40 or more shekels, were traded as servants. Many entered service willingly while others were coerced by debt. Skilled artisans and wives were exchanged as gifts between royal households.

As in later Mediterranean history, wine was already produced for consumption and trade in the Bronze Age Near East. It was one of Ugarit’s major agrarian products (Zamora 2000), as it was at Emar on the Upper Euphrates (Viano 2016), and may have been part of the Uluburun cargo (McGovern and Hall 2015; Monroe 2016).

Seventh century BCE Neo-Assyrian contracts exhibit wages ranging from 1 to just under 4 shekels silver per month, depending on the status and skill of the worker (Radner 2007). In Neo-Babylonian times the payment in silver was remarkably the same as in the third millennium, but the equivalent payment in barley was considerably less, 6 liters per day or 180 per month (Powell 1996; Scheidel 2010).

Ratios of value between metals varied over time, space, and with different qualities of metal. The gold:silver ratio ranged normally from 2:1 to 10:1 throughout the Bronze Age, and from about 6:1 to 15:1 in the Iron Age after 1000 BCE. Silver was about 180 times more valuable than copper; and silver was 10 to 40 times more valuable than tin (Powell 1990). Prices are also found in law collections where they serve to foster the ruler's charisma as a man of justice. While Mesopotamian law is popularly understood as "an eye for an eye," reality was more monetary. Law collections often prescribed death for homicide, but they were also full of prices, stated both as guidelines, a sort of price control, and as penalties for various harms done (Roth 1997). Usually the intent was to replace what had been lost by a transgression. This entailed the taking of one life to replace another wrongfully taken, or the replacement of lost persons with slaves from the community of the offender. But for various other crimes the compensation was in silver, and the amounts differed not only by transgression but by social class of the victim.

Thus in the Hittite laws, a free person's sight was worth 20 shekels of silver, but a slave's only 10. To prevent cycles of blood-feuding, it was customary for the host community to pay large amounts of silver to the family of the dead if a murderer was not caught. In fact, there was no death penalty for homicide in the Hittite laws, only an undefined monetary reimbursement. The penalty for killing merchants was particularly steep at 100 minas (4000 shekels), perhaps to deter actions potentially harmful to the smooth functioning of the empire.

The Akkadian term, *malīru* (Sumerian *ki-lam*) usually referred abstractly to "market," in the sense of "current rate of exchange" or "fair market price," rather than to a physical place of business. Indeed, there is no solid archaeological evidence for a structure corresponding to what Sumerian or Akkadian speakers meant by their terms for "market-place." This is probably because fixed marketplaces did not exist as we know them.

The one place where trade and money abounded, and also left textual and archaeological documentation, is the *kārum*, translated variously as embankment, quay, harbor district, merchant quarter, trading colony, and so forth. All these meanings appear related to early descriptions of places where boats docked. Thus far the only excavated place known to correspond to this term is the Old Assyrian merchant colony at Kanesh in central Turkey. Other important harbor towns have been excavated, such as Ur (Iraq), Minet el-Beida and Ras Ibn Hani (near Ugarit, Syria), and most of the Phoenician cities (Lebanon), but none has produced such a wealth of explicit textual information on the *kārum*.

We know about institutions and officials connected with the *kārum* from different times and places down to Neo-Babylonian times, but have no complete understanding of its function in any one situation. The "house of the *kārum*" was the office or building representing the authority of the *kārum* and was probably indistinguishable from the modern customs or exchange house in its functions. It was where one paid import taxes, which were divided among the local administration and the traders in charge of the *kārum*.

The *kārum* was especially important to the merchants themselves, since this is where they resided, stored goods, kept money and archives, and formed partnerships with other merchants. Such partnerships were necessary to amass capital and are known from a particular form of "purse-money" contract in the Old Assyrian archives and in references to groups of merchants in Old Babylonian sources. In Old Babylonian texts and Middle Babylonian texts from Ugarit, we learn of the *wākil kārim*, "overseer of the quay," who

was legally responsible for transactions and accidents that occurred in the merchant quarter or harbor. Similar duties may have been the responsibility of a person designated as “man of the *kārum*” a millennium earlier at Ebla in northern Syria. Indeed, the institution of the *kārum* and its personnel appear to be extremely long-lived if one considers the duties of the *wakil at-tujjar*, “overseer of the merchants,” an official who legally represented foreign merchants in medieval Cairo around 1000 CE (Curtin 1984, pp. 113–115).

Many traders known to palace or temple administrations bore the Akkadian title *tamkārum* (Sumerian *dam-gār*). The meanings of the term are many (trader, merchant, trade agent or official, and entrepreneur) and have long been debated. Some were known to the palace as traders but were not necessarily royal dependents or agents. Unfortunately most of our material is not as specific as that from Ugarit, where “merchant of the king” and “merchant” were distinguished (Heltzer 1999). Many traders and moneymen documented in our texts bear no title or term whatsoever; one simply has to recognize the nature of their transactions and track their names and those of their associates through the available archives. Some merchant assistants are identified in Old Babylonian texts (Leemans 1960), but this sort of identification is rare.

From Ur III through Old Babylonian times, *dam-gār* and *tamkārum* applied to both trade agents working for the great households and to those conducting private enterprise. An unusually illustrative group of Ur III records called “balanced accounts” states allotments, expenses, and debts of merchants working for the palace. In general they show the palace selling off its surplus foodstuffs to the merchants, who then pay off their debt with various goods, including imported luxuries (Snell 1982). It is clear from Old Babylonian sources, including the early Isin-Larsa phase, that the term *tamkārum* was applied to those engaged in local mercantile business as well as long-distance trade. Local merchants made a living redistributing palace goods or buying debts owed to the palace by tenant farmers.

Merchants could buy goods with favorable repayment contracts that allowed them to make a substantial profit for themselves. Perhaps more importantly, merchants working for kings or temples had access to vast capital, usually silver, which they could translate into many forms and increase in a variety of ways. At Ugarit such merchants were referred to as having royal endowments of silver called *mandattu*. The palace benefitted by transferring its responsibilities for transportation and debt collection, as well as keeping perishable commodities circulating in and out of palace storerooms.

Unlike the generic term “merchant,” Early Dynastic records mentioned a profession that seems specifically involved in long-distance or foreign trade. Hittite long-distance traders were known in Late Bronze Age texts from Ugarit, but it is unclear whether they were state functionaries or entrepreneurs employed part-time by the Hittite king (Klengel 1986). The Neo-Assyrian merchant was mainly a royal agent who obtained luxury imports for the court (Radner 1999). Private enterprise in the Neo-Assyrian texts is shown, however, in a group of texts mentioning the “master of the road or venture.” Private archives of the Egibi family provide abundant evidence for organized entrepreneurship, lasting through several generations and continuing under Persian rule; the Murashu archive documents a similar family enterprise that flourished under the Persians (Stolper 1985).

It is difficult to say if merchants commonly specialized in local or long-distance trade. It is tempting to conclude they did, since specialized skills were required. Long-distance trade

was always more profitable than local, but with greater risks. Overland trade was always threatened by bandits, and some argue that long-distance trade without state protection was unthinkable. More would argue that trade has usually gone before the flag in world history, though rather than argue who came first, one may observe how symbiotic the state–trader relationship usually was in the Ancient Near East (Monroe 2009; Warburton 2016).

The Old Assyrian *kārum* system was especially lucrative, bringing profits as high as 200% to the traders, though this rosy picture does not accurately account for expenses. The prices and profit in this trade were largely a function of distance. Assur was relatively close to the eastern tin supply and could charge two or three times as much in Kanesh or other colonies what the tin cost in Assur. Tin and textiles constituted the bulk of the cargo, all born by donkey caravans, which was traded for silver and gold in Anatolia. Not all of the profits came back to Assyria. Many traders lived double lives or lived mostly abroad, conducting familial matters through correspondence (Larsen 2015).

The maritime trader led a life apart, wielding special skills and taking peculiar risks in the hopes of great reward (Monroe 2011). It is curious that even in the riverine civilization of Mesopotamia and Egypt this life was documented so spottily. Some of the better sources come from Old Babylonian Ur and Larsa, which traded in the Gulf and with the Indus Valley civilization, called Meluhha. We know little about the ships that sailed those seas, though they likely were well under 20 tons (Monroe 2007). Tablets also mention sailors, about whom little is known. The *tamkārum* did the trading, and some are specifically referred to as “one going to Dilmun,” a phrase alluding to the important entrepot that was probably centered in Bahrain. Oman (ancient Magan) was important to Mesopotamian towns for its copper production (Oppenheim 1954).

At the upper end of the greater Mesopotamian world, two named ship captains from thirteenth century Ugarit bear mention, Shukku and Sinaranu: the former was probably a Hittite and was found guilty of intentionally wrecking his boat on the dock; the latter was honored by the king with a tax-free exemption for his business with Crete (Hoftijzer and van Soldt 1998). In Neo-Assyrian and Persian times the Phoenicians carried much of the trade for their overlords and became famous as maritime explorers in the process (Aubet 2013).

Archaeological and textual evidence for shipping in the eastern Mediterranean is abundant enough to warrant its own subject. Chief sources include shipwrecks from Turkey, Cyprus, and Israel, funerary boats from Egypt, excavated harbor towns, and texts from Late Bronze Age Ugarit, and later sources such as Herodotus (Bass 1995; Potts 1997, pp. 122–137; Wachsmann 1998; McGrail 2001; Monroe 2013). Some merchants involved in only domestic trade still had to be experts in river transportation. Much of this business, which involved pilots, towers, loaders, and dues collectors, was organized by *kārums* and groups of merchants. Most of what is known about donkey caravaning, probably the commonest means of overland hauling, is known from the Old Assyrian Kanesh tablets.

## Money and Trade in Egypt

Egypt has long been characterized as a socialist supply state with a redistributive, marketless economy (Altenmüller 2001). Even Barry Kemp’s history, which stresses the perpetual balancing of private demand versus state control, has commercial features only becoming

apparent as Egypt engaged in interregional networks of the fourteenth century BCE (1989, pp. 302–335). Today more scholars resist this characterization, noting the dependence on sources representing the ruling class and a failure to appreciate evidence from the Old Kingdom (2575–2160 BCE) and Middle Kingdom (1991–1782 BCE, especially the Heqanakht Papyri) that speak to trade, markets, and private enterprise. Middle Kingdom ship parts, goods, and inscriptions recently excavated at Mersa Gawasis, for an archaeological example, shows that trade on the Red Sea was not just royal boasting (Moreno García 2014; Warburton 2016, pp. 166–193).

Janssen (1975, 1994) compiled the most evidence for prices, debt, and credit, and thus laid the foundations of what we know about Egyptian economics. As in Mesopotamia, Egypt had a system of standardized weights for bullion, which constituted its “money,” though it was not as fully developed a technology as in Mesopotamia. The common measure for weights of metal was the *dbn*, a word related to words meaning “ring,” which weighed about 13 grams in the Old Kingdom (2575–2150 BCE) and 91 in the New Kingdom (1539–1075 BCE). Though Egypt was rich in precious metals, especially gold, they never took on the same significance as money as in Mesopotamia. The Amarna letters tell us that demand for Egyptian gold was keen in the Near East, and in Egypt it was certainly highly valued: the gold:silver:copper equivalence was about 200:100:1. But gold was not used as a standard, and silver was in prices only rarely, for example at the workmen’s village at Deir el-Medina, where copper was still the more common standard.

The role of Egyptian traders (known as *šwty*) in the New Kingdom is debatable and poorly documented relative to Mesopotamia. Some scholars view them as conducting private business, but only in the New Kingdom, where the pictorial evidence from tomb paintings and recorded confessions of tomb-robbers offered rare and incontrovertible proof of private enterprise. As in Mesopotamia, temples employed traders and sailors to help distribute the grain supply. Whereas barley appears to have been the earliest form of payment in Mesopotamia, in Egypt we have bread and beer being the standard rations given to workers. Ten loaves and a jug or two of beer per day was a common payment. In terms of metal, a half liter of grain cost 1 copper *dbn* bought in Ramesside times (1292–1075 BCE), when we have the most evidence for prices. Grain prices fluctuated significantly, especially in the Ramesside period, and prolonged famine may have contributed to alternative economies such as that seen in the tomb-robbing papyri.

While there is no word for profit (as there is in Mesopotamia), the concept is essentially present in the term “good price” (Kemp 1989, p. 252). The vivid paintings from tombs of New Kingdom officials like Ipy and Kenamun display some kind of market-place, but we have no way of knowing whether the exchanges are barter or price-based (Kemp 1989, pp. 324–325). It is apparent from tomb paintings and a few texts that Syrians played a vital role in their maritime trade with their northeastern neighbors. Texts mention foreigners living in a harbor community around Memphis during the New Kingdom (Redford 1992, p. 228).

In contrast to the rich merchants who thrived in Ugarit, Kanesh, Assur, and Ur, it appears the Egyptian trade official held low status. Foreign traders living in Egypt probably had more wealth than the indigenous *šwty*-traders. A Dynasty 20 (1185–1070 BCE) scholastic text known as Be a Scribe portrays the Egyptian merchant’s life in unenviable terms:

The merchants travel downstream and upstream. They are as busy as can be, carrying goods from one town to another. They supply him who has wants. But the tax collectors carry off the gold, that most precious of metals. The ships' crews from every house (of commerce), they receive their loads. They depart from Egypt for Syria, and each man's god is with him. (But) not one of them says: "We shall see Egypt again!". (Lichtheim 1976, p.170)

Of course one must take into account the scribe's perspective as inherently bureaucratic and unsympathetic to any appeal the trader's life may have held. The text also suggests that Egyptian merchants did indeed travel abroad, an idea supported by the presence of Egyptian names at Ugarit. Private ownership of vessels is well-documented in the Ramesside period and contributes to the overall picture of trader-state symbiosis in Egypt (Castle 1992).

## **Routes and Metals**

Many studies of ancient trade are concerned with defining the routes by which prized commodities flowed between regions. The history of the Ancient Near East could be written in terms of the constant competition and cooperation to attain resources that were distributed unequally throughout the region. Some of these were natural raw materials, and others were the work of skilled palace artisans. Trade routes were like water, following paths of least resistance to their destinations. The main routes went up the Euphrates and Tigris and then through mountain passes, tributary valleys, and wadis running east and west.

Mesopotamia was rich in fish, reeds, bitumen (an all-purpose petroleum product used for glueing, coating, etc.), various animal products, dates, and mud, but had little of a luxurious or ostentatious quality. With urbanism came increased needs for payments and the need to display one's status prominently in ornate households. From Syria-Palestine they could obtain olive oil, wine, ivory (both hippopotamus and elephant), purple dye, glass and building woods like cedar, fir, and cypress. The gulf trade brought in exotic shells, copper from Oman, and exotic goods from the Indus River valley. From somewhere across the Zagros, perhaps Afghanistan, came tin, lapis lazuli, and other precious stones (Potts 1997). Egypt seems to have had more gold than other regions, and exotic woods and animals from Africa. Silver had to be imported to Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Levant, probably from Anatolia. Toward the end of the second millennium a lot of perfumed oil was arriving from the Aegean in Mycenaean jars (Wijngaarden 2010), and during the first millennium the Arabian incense trade rose in importance.

The role of copper in the major trading networks of the Bronze Age seems especially crucial. After the mid-second millennium, what had been a central role of the Gulf trade in Mesopotamian economics was usurped by an influx of Cypriot copper (Edens 1992; Kassianidou 2013). Indeed the geopolitics of the later second millennium and early first millennium hardly make sense without considering how surrounding empires competed for access to Cypriot copper and Levantine timber. At some point early in the first millennium iron began replacing copper in key weapon and tool industries, causing another major shift in the networks that left Cyprus in the economic periphery (Zaccagnini 1990).

## Prospects for Study

Traders and money were closely related and can be viewed together as part of a process that profoundly shaped early and later states. Most approaches to the subject have been materialistic to some degree, following Marx's method of determining how a society creates and distributes its wealth. Because the dominant mode of production in early states was not capitalist (that is, organized to facilitate profit-based trading), many twentieth-century scholars relegated trade to the epiphenomenal dustbin of history. Later scholars, influenced by sociology and anthropology, noticed how important demand for luxury goods was in some cases (the idea of conspicuous consumption in particular), and started seeing long-distance trade as more pivotal in how societies changed over time.

At this point archaeologists, Egyptologists, and Assyriologists have made great strides in figuring out how money and trade relate to both production and consumption (or supply and demand) in the Ancient Near East. We have learned that discoveries like Ugarit, the *kārum* at Kanesh, and the Uluburun shipwreck can change the field nearly overnight and reveal lives of traders who operated in social and geographic interstices between the great centers. There was a world of particular social relations and means related to consumption and production, but it had its own dynamics, determined by other relations too. Technologies such as money, accounting, business correspondence, sailing, caravanning, loading, and weighing were defining activities we continue to learn about. Legal protections, endowments by palace and temple, trader partnerships, ethnic and familial bonds, and the suspicion of merchants and their resultant coping strategies – these are all social relations of trade whose dynamics are beginning to be studied. There is still room for promising discoveries in libraries as well as in archaeological sites. To penetrate this challenging aspect of the Ancient Near East, students will do well to follow the progress of sociology and economic anthropology, as well as excavation reports and text editions.

## FURTHER READING

Kemp (2005), Postgate (1992), and Van de Mieroop (2015) remain highly recommended, economically informed histories of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Recent works on the broader impact of trade include Wilkinson et al. (2011) on interregional networks, Aubet (2013) with an accent on Phoenicia, Broodbank (2013) with a maritime and Mediterranean focus, and Kristiansen et al. (2018). Larsen (2015) presents the most readable account of the Kanesh texts.

Monroe (2009, 2015) offer an Assyriological and a summarized analysis concerning traders at Ugarit and elsewhere in the Late Bronze Age. Alphabetic texts from Ugarit dealing with trade are available in English (McGeough and Smith 2011), though all conclusions based on translations of Ugaritic are inherently tentative. Impact of the Uluburun shipwreck on the scholarship of Bronze Age trade is too enormous to catalog here, but Pulak (2008) supplies a beautifully illustrated partial catalog of the finds.

Recent important studies of first millennium BCE Mesopotamian economy include Slotsky and Wallenfels (2009), Jursa (2010), and Pirngruber 2017. Allen's (2002)

translations of the Heqanakht Papyri at the Metropolitan Museum have stimulated recent interest in early Egyptian economics. Moreno García's (2014) summary of the state of economic research on Egypt is recommended.

While not great reading, a few electronic aids to Assyriological research include Oxford University's Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature ([etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk](http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk)), posting recent transliterations and translations, and the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago shares PDF files of its Chicago Assyrian Dictionary at <https://oi.uchicago.edu/research/publications/assyrian-dictionary-oriental-institute-university-chicago-cad>.

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## CHAPTER TEN

# Law and Practice

*Bruce Wells*

The societies of the Ancient Near East provide us with the oldest written legal records in the world. When considering these societies from a legal point of view, scholars find that a number of questions arise. How can one gain access to their law and discover what it was? What did these societies view as their sources of legal authority? In describing the practice of law in the Ancient Near East, what types of issues must we consider? What is the relationship between this – the oldest law known to us – and other legal systems, both in antiquity and in more modern times? Although this chapter cannot cover all issues related to these matters, these are the basic questions that it seeks to address, by focussing on three general areas. The first has to do with the quest to discover Ancient Near Eastern law. How does one go about this task and what are the key questions to be faced? The second looks at particular issues that arise in any attempt to describe the law that was actually practiced in Ancient Near Eastern societies. Finally, in the third section, the chapter considers a few of the connections between Ancient Near Eastern law and the later systems of early Greek and Roman law. It should be noted that this chapter restricts itself to what might be called societal law and does not delve into issues related to ritual or strictly religious law.

### Looking for Law in the Ancient Near East

Efforts to identify the law that was in effect in Ancient Near Eastern societies must invariably come to grips with the issue of sources. This is a two-pronged problem that requires a distinction in how the term source is used. First, the term can be used with a view to the past to refer to those items that functioned as sources of law for the societies of the Ancient Near East. That is, it can refer to the entities that contained the law, just as constitutions and legislative statutes do for many modern societies today. Second, the term

can refer to those items that have been preserved from the Ancient Near East and that are, in the present, sources for historians in their effort to discover Ancient Near Eastern law. Regrettably, we have limited access to the former type of source. At times it is apparent that certain royal decrees contained authoritative law, but for the majority of the rules that seem to have governed these societies, there is virtually no mention in the surviving documents regarding their source. Many scholars believe it was simply custom that functioned as the principal source of law for the inhabitants of the Ancient Near East.

First, the possible sources at the disposal of modern scholarship for doing legal-historical study of the Ancient Near East must be considered. The items that could potentially serve as sources for the legal historian are vast – so much so, in fact, that the research to date has yet to encompass them all, much less to analyze them sufficiently and synthesize their data. There are tens of thousands of extant documents (mostly clay tablets from Mesopotamia with cuneiform inscriptions) that could be characterized as legal. The difficulty comes in deciding which material yields clear insight into the law of Ancient Near Eastern societies and which only appears to do so. Some material offers evidence that could easily lead to a distorted picture of Ancient Near Eastern law. It is problematic to accept the provisions of contracts, the stipulations of law codes, or even the verdicts of trial courts at face value and to assume they are untarnished sources for the historian.

## Law Codes

This can best be demonstrated by an issue that has received a great deal of scholarly attention, namely, the nature of the so-called law codes or, more accurately, law collections. Nine such documents have survived – seven in the form of cuneiform on clay and two from the Hebrew Bible. They are: the Laws of Ur-Namma (LU), the Laws of Lipit-Ishtar (LL), the Laws of Eshnunna (LE), the Laws of Hammurabi (LH), the Hittite Laws (HL), the Middle Assyrian Laws (MAL), the Neo-Babylonian Laws (NBL), the Covenant Code in Exodus 21:3, and the Deuteronomic Code in Deuteronomy 12:6.<sup>1</sup> These codes or collections have been the primary focus of much of the legal-historical study of the Ancient Near East.

The most famous of these is LH, and its suitability as a source for studying Ancient Near Eastern law has been under scrutiny for some time (Kraus 1960; Westbrook 1985; Bottéro 1992a; Fitzpatrick-McKinley 1999; Roth 2000). It contains approximately 280 law-like stipulations. A cursory glance at the code's epilogue would seem to show that these stipulations formed the law of the land. There, King Hammurabi of Babylon states:

In order that the mighty not wrong the weak, to provide just ways for the waif and the widow, I have inscribed my precious pronouncements upon my stela ... Let any wronged man who has a lawsuit come before the statute of me, the king of justice, and let him have my inscribed stela read aloud to him, thus may he hear my precious pronouncements and let my stela reveal the lawsuit for him ... May any king who will appear in the land in the future, at any time, observe the pronouncements of justice that I inscribed upon my stela. May he not alter the judgments that I rendered and the verdicts that I gave ... (Roth 1997, p. 134)

A close analysis of the actual stipulations in the code reveals, however, that the code, in and of itself, would not have made for very effective law. First, the collection of rules in the code is far from comprehensive, omitting a number of important issues, including murder.<sup>2</sup> Second, many of the provisions in LH assume a certain amount of legal savvy on the part of the reader. This suggests that there was a substantial body of law apart from LH, and the authors of LH believed their readers would have knowledge of it. Third, quite a few of the laws treat situations that were unlikely to occur; they appear to be essentially hypothetical.<sup>3</sup> In addition to all of this, it is not at all clear that LH was treated as law by the ancient Babylonians themselves. Perhaps the most telling sign is that LH was never cited in any of the hundreds of trial records stemming from the same general time as LH as the legal basis for a trial court's verdict. Other documents of practice – legal texts such as contracts and letters – also omit mention of the code (for two possible but uncertain references to LH, see Roth 2000, pp. 22–29). This is in contrast to the frequent reference in such documents to royal decrees and edicts, about which more will be said below.

The purpose of Hammurabi's publication of these laws, then, must have been for some other reason than to enact legal statutes for the governing of his land. After much study of the collection, along with its prologue and epilogue, most scholars now agree that the code was created to justify and legitimize Hammurabi's reign. Simply put, LH is political propaganda. Its target audience was the gods and the ruling elite, and its provisions were meant to show the wisdom, fairness, and equity of the king. The prologue to LH virtually says as much. Hammurabi himself probably had little to do with composing the individual provisions in LH and most likely assigned the task to a group of his officials and scribes.

The other law collections are subject to the same basic critique. Based on their own prologues, LU and LL also appear to be propagandistic tools in the hands of their respective kings. The biblical codes are used in the service of a religious agenda. LE and NBL come to us on scribal exercise tablets. They may well have been copied from larger monumental inscriptions and, thus, may be interpreted in the same manner as LH, though it is conceivable that they were really nothing more than scribal exercises. Both HL and MAL come from royal archives and may have had some applicability within the confines of the palace personnel, but there is no indication that either was intended as binding legislation. Thus, it is likely that the primary purpose of each of the codes had little or nothing to do with establishing societal law. To be sure, they yield important insights into the various Ancient Near Eastern societies from which they come – insights into royal ideology, politics, scribal training, and religion. But do they tell us anything about law?

This question is still one of sources, but it takes us one level deeper. We must now ask what were the sources for the provisions in these law collections. This is where scholarship diverges and disagreements are keen. The starting point is usually the idea that the codes are the product of the same pseudo-scientific efforts that gave us other collections or lists: god lists, astronomical lists, omen lists, mathematical lists, and medical lists (Bottéro 1992a). All of these lists appear to be products of scribal schools; thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that the law codes – or law lists – are as well. But whence did the scribes obtain the individual stipulations contained in the codes? Did they simply make them up? For some of the provisions, particularly the ones that seem more hypothetical, this may in fact be what happened. Some have argued, though, that virtually all of the provisions in the law codes derive entirely from scribal intellectual activity and constitute scribal wisdom

or, as one scholar dubs it, scribal advice (Fitzpatrick-McKinley 1999). According to this view, there is very little connection, if any, between the provisions in the codes and the law that was in effect in Ancient Near Eastern societies. Conversely, other scholars believe that the codes are an excellent source for the historian to learn about Ancient Near Eastern law (Westbrook 1989; Greengus 1995). They argue that the scribes drew heavily upon the law that was being practiced in their societies as they formed the codes or law lists. From this perspective, then, the stipulations of the codes are descriptive, rather than prescriptive, and they are an important point of access into the law of that time.

There is evidence to support both points of view. Several studies have highlighted points of correspondence between contemporary practice and certain provisions in the law collections (Petschow 1984; Ries 1984; Oelsner 1997). It is true that documents demonstrating such correspondence are not abundant, but they do raise the possibility that the codes contain descriptions of operative law. On the other hand, there are studies that have shown that some provisions in the codes were not followed in practice – that there are, in fact, contradictions between what was done in real life and what was called for by the codes (Jackson 1973, p. 10; Fried 2001, pp. 74–5). There is not, however, an abundance of this material either. Ultimately, it seems that the law collections represent the practiced law of their societies accurately to some degree and inaccurately to some degree. But in either case, we do not know to what degree. Further research may help to clarify the situation.

## Documents of Practice

Documents that chronicle legal transactions are often one of the most fruitful sources for legal historians of the Ancient Near East. These are texts that record property sales, marriage agreements, wills, loan arrangements, rental contracts, trial records, letters, and the like. Reading these documents uncritically, however, can also run the risk of a distorted view of Ancient Near Eastern law. Such documents do not carry legislative force; rather, they operate within the bounds of existing law. As Westbrook states, “A contract is not direct evidence of legal norms, but of the reactions of the parties to those norms ... The norms of positive law remain a shadowy presence behind the terms of the individual transaction, still to be reconstructed by the historian” (2003, section 1.1.2.6).

Let us take marriage agreements as an example. Several records of marriage agreements from the Old Babylonian period state what should be done to the wife if she divorces, or attempts to divorce, her husband. They specify rather severe punishments. The following text (Meissner 1893, text 90) is typical:

Rimum, the son of Shamhatum, married Bashtum, the daughter of Belisunu, the priestess of Šamaš and the daughter of Usi-bitum. Belisunu has received [?] shekels of silver as the bride-price of Bashtum. Her heart is satisfied. If Bashtum says to Rimūm her husband, “You are not my husband,” Bashtum will be thrown into the river (to drown). If Rimūm says to Bashtum his wife, “You are not my wife,” he will give her 10 shekels of silver as her divorce payment.

Documents like this one might lead to the conclusion that wives were forbidden by law to divorce their husbands during this period. After all, if the woman who was part of this

marriage tried to divorce her husband, she would have suffered the ultimate punishment, death. But, because contracts do not constitute statutory law, this conclusion is unwarranted. The very fact that divorce by the wife was treated as it was in this document points to the opposite conclusion: that divorce by a wife was legal. The woman above was not prevented from divorcing her husband by law but by contract. If divorce by a wife were already treated in this manner by societal law, the contract would have been silent on the issue. Contractual stipulations, therefore, should not automatically be equated with law.

Trial records are another important source of law for the legal historian, but they, too, must be handled with care. Owing to the fact that extenuating circumstances often influenced court decisions, not every verdict in a trial can be assumed to reflect precisely the law governing the issue at trial. To compound the situation, large numbers of extant trial records contain no verdict, leaving scholars at a loss to know how the ancient courts ruled on many of the matters brought before them.

Even when it comes to trial law and procedure, trial records can be perplexing. The one site from which more trial records come than any other is that of ancient Nuzi in central Iraq. In a number of instances at Nuzi, one of the parties at trial brought one or more supporting witnesses, and it was the testimony of those witnesses that won the case for that party. Some important details, however, were not made clear. To begin with, there are no recorded cases in which both parties brought witnesses to court (Liebesny 1941, pp. 132–133). It seems hardly possible that this situation never occurred, but we simply do not know how judges acted when confronted by witnesses from both sides. In other trials, a party brought witnesses, the witnesses testified in favor of that party, but the judges were not satisfied. Instead they required that one of the parties or their witnesses go through a particular ritual, the lifting up of the gods (Frymer-Kensky 1981). It was by means of this ritual that the winner was determined. The document given in Chiera (1934, text 347) provides an example:

Tehiptilla entered into a dispute, concerning a stolen sheep, with Arsimika before the judges. The witnesses of Tehiptilla gave testimony before the judges that Arsimika was in the process of stealing the sheep of Tehiptilla from the midst of the [pen?], and the witnesses caught him in the act. The judges spoke to Arsimika and said, “Lift up the gods before the witnesses.” Arsimika lifted the gods before the witnesses. Tehiptilla won the case. And the judges imposed upon Arsimika a fine of 12 sheep to be paid to Tehiptilla.

It is not clear why the judges at Nuzi would issue an immediate verdict after hearing the testimony of some witnesses and why they would call for the lifting-of-the-gods ritual in other instances when they have heard witness testimony. Trial records are often drafted tersely, and the procedural law they reveal is sometimes rather obscure.

## Royal Edicts

Documents known as royal edicts or decrees are another important source for law in the Ancient Near East. Into this category fall extant documents recording decisions made by kings in several Ancient Near Eastern societies, including the Hittite kingdom

and Egypt. They seem to have been occasional, *ad hoc* rulings covering a variety of matters including administrative instructions, the fixing of prices and tariffs, and the release of debts. Such decrees were frequently referred to in documents of practice, but the actual text of only a few decrees is preserved. One of the best preserved is the Edict of Ammisaduqa, a king from the Old Babylonian period. It is one of the so-called debt-release decrees.

The purpose of a debt-release decree was essentially the same as a modern-day economic stimulus package. The economies of ancient city-states and small kingdoms often fell on hard times. This could be due to war or drought or any number of factors. Signs of a serious economic downturn usually included large numbers of people who were so deeply in debt that they were losing property and selling their family members or even themselves into slavery to stave off starvation. Debt-release decrees would be enacted in order to rejuvenate the economy and give people a fresh start. Many debts owed to the government and private citizens would be canceled, and property or persons that had served as collateral and had gone into the possession of creditors were allowed to return to their original owners and families. It was traditional for rulers who issued these decrees to characterize themselves as establishing justice throughout their lands and doing great favors for the economically disadvantaged. The following excerpt from the Edict of Ammisaduqa outlines that decree's overall intent:

Whoever has given barley or silver to an Akkadian or an Amorite either [as a loan at in]terest or as a demand-loan [...] and has had a (legal) document drawn up (about it) – because the king has established equity for the land, his tablet will be voided; he may not collect barley or silver according to the wording of the tablet. (Hallo and Younger 2000, p. 362)

These decrees sound like legislation. The chief difference, however, is that Ancient Near Eastern debt-release decrees sought to regulate actions that had taken place in the past, while modern legislation typically seeks to regulate future behavior. Moreover, the decrees pertained only to a specific period, canceling debts and other obligations that had taken effect during that time. Scholars generally assume that the provisions of the decree functioned as binding law but that they applied to very specific situations and were only temporary.

## Gaps in the Law

Law codes, records of trials and legal transactions, royal edicts, as well as other types of documents such as lexical lists and letters, provide the legal historian of the Ancient Near East with an untold wealth of data. These sources require careful treatment, since they reflect Ancient Near Eastern law imperfectly, each in their own way. For the historian studying one particular society within the Ancient Near East, another type of problem arises. The sources that relate specifically to one society fail to provide a complete picture. Inevitably, there will be significant gaps in the reconstruction of that society's law. In light of this, is it methodologically legitimate to look to the data from other Ancient Near Eastern societies in order to fill in those gaps?

This question speaks to the issue of continuity versus discontinuity. Some have argued that the societies of the Ancient Near East operated on a shared set of legal customs and procedures, that is, there was a great deal of continuity from one legal system to another (Westbrook 1985). There certainly were differences in the details. Nevertheless, the commonalities were so great that one may speak of a common legal culture that spanned the Ancient Near East chronologically and geographically. According to this view, it is legitimate, even desirable at times, to look to one society to fill in the gaps in the law of another.

There are also strong advocates for a view of discontinuity, though they often differ on how to understand the nature of the discontinuity and will allow for varying degrees of continuity (Finkelstein 1981, pp. 17–20; a number of the essays in Levinson 1994 that respond directly to the work of Westbrook; Yaron 2000). Some Ancient Near Eastern societies were separated from each other by a great swathe of distance, time, and language. Why should the law of one be presumed to reflect the law of another? Furthermore, it is difficult for the proponents of discontinuity to conceive how a common legal culture would have spread across the Ancient Near East. It may be understandable that certain legal traditions were spread by the scribal schools that were prevalent in Mesopotamia. But would this transmission of legal customs and concepts have made its way into western Syria and Palestine?

Both points of view – continuity and discontinuity – face difficult questions. The continuity school has no clear evidence to show the dissemination of law from one culture to another. It draws inferences from the legal commonalities among various Ancient Near Eastern societies, but it lacks a clear mechanism for explaining how those commonalities came to be. It is these very shared features, however, that pose a problem for the discontinuity school. Is their existence due simply to coincidence, or to the characteristics that agrarian societies from that region of the world should be expected to share? A number of studies have drawn attention to points of connection between the legal systems of different Ancient Near Eastern societies, far removed from each other in terms of both time and space. This phenomenon deserves an explanation, but a truly satisfying one remains elusive.

## Tradition and Custom

To return to the first part of the source question, it would appear that we can be no more precise, as of yet, than to say that tradition and custom were indeed the sources of the rules that possessed legal authority for Ancient Near Eastern societies. Certainly, there is no Ancient Near Eastern society for which it can be said that a particular document or collection of documents contained that society's law. Bits and pieces, or even large portions, of that society's law may appear in some texts, such as the law collections, but those texts themselves were not the repositories of the law, merely the reflections of it. Instead, the repositories were most likely bodies of knowledge that were transmitted orally from one generation to another. When the first legal records appeared in the mid-third millennium, much of this knowledge seems already to have been in place and to have had the authority of law. Moreover, many of the legal tenets that were in force early on remained unchanged for much of Ancient Near Eastern history. Practices that were in use in the third millennium

regularly reappear throughout the second and even well into the first. Many components of the societies and cultures of the Ancient Near East changed very slowly over the course of time, and law appears to have been one of the most conservative.

## **Describing the Law of the Ancient Near East**

Despite the problematic nature of many of the historian's sources, scholarship has been able to ascertain many components of the legal rules that governed Ancient Near Eastern societies (Westbrook 2003). Detailed studies have been done on a range of topics, including contract law (Greengus 1969), litigation (Falkenstein 1956–1957; Dombradi 1996), marriage law (Roth 1989), and lending practices (Westbrook and Jasnow 2001). Any attempt to describe the law that was actually practiced, however, faces issues that stem from the nature of the Ancient Near Eastern societies themselves. Here we shall highlight three of those issues. The first has to do with the concept of status and the function of slavery. The second issue comes from the role that gender played within Ancient Near Eastern societies and how it affected the issue of inheritance. The third relates to the modern distinction between civil and criminal law – a distinction that appears to be missing in Ancient Near Eastern legal systems.

### **Status and Slavery**

An important distinguishing factor that Ancient Near Eastern law used in its treatment of individuals had to do with status. The most basic distinction lay between freedom and slavery. If a person was a free citizen, one set of rules applied; if a slave, then another set took effect. Other types of status were also important. If a person was a pledge who had been set aside as security for a debt, yet another set of rules often applied. Adult children still living with their parents were frequently treated as having their own particular status.

The status of slavery presents further complications. As far as can be determined, there were three basic types of slaves in the Ancient Near East: the chattel-slave, the debt-slave, and the famine-slave (Westbrook 1995). A chattel-slave was owned virtually in the same manner as any other piece of property; certain rules, however, regulated owners' actions (for example, owners could be punished for killing a slave, Exodus 21:20–21). People became chattel-slaves most often when captured in war or when born to a female chattel-slave.

Debt-slaves, on the other hand, were sold into slavery. It was the sale transaction that transferred them from the status of free citizen to the status of slave. This typically occurred when the due date to repay a loan arrived and the debtor was unable to pay. The latter would sell himself or herself or a family member to the creditor as a slave. As opposed to chattel-slaves, it appears that debt-slaves could not then be sold to a different owner. They were usually in the possession of their first owner (the creditor) until they could be redeemed. Redemption occurred when the debt and any necessary interest were paid. Debt-slaves could also be released at the issuance of a debt-release decree, and some legal systems placed limits on the amount of time a person could remain in debt-slavery (LH 117, three years; Exodus 21:2–6, six years).

It was not uncommon for parents, during times of war or economic distress when there was too little to eat, to sell their children as famine-slaves so that the buyer would feed the children and the money from the sale would buy food for themselves. The text below (Arnaud 1986, Emar text 217) from central Syria in the 1300s BCE is a poignant example:

Zadamma and Ku'e, his wife, have sold their two sons and their two daughters – Baalabia, Adad-belu, Ishma-Dagan, and Baal-ummi, a daughter at the breast – into slavery for 60 shekels of silver, the entire price, to Ba'al-malik, the diviner. If anyone sues to reclaim the four children of Zadamma, they must give ten other persons as compensation to Ba'al-malik. And now Zadamma, their father, and Ku'e, their mother, have pressed their feet into clay.

It was also possible for famine-slaves to enter slavery for no sale price whatsoever. They would put themselves into slavery simply in order to survive. While famine-slaves who were sold into slavery could usually be redeemed when the purchase money was repaid, another group of famine-slaves often had stipulations inserted into their contracts describing the conditions under which they could go free. The most common provision was that a substitute slave be provided to take the place of the famine-slave.

One of the most perplexing issues that the status of slavery raises comes from situations where a person appears to be a slave in one context and a free citizen in another. The situation of a Jewish woman in Egypt during the fifth century is a case in point. The woman, Tamet, is mentioned in several Aramaic papyri from Elephantine. In the document in Porten and Yardeni (1986, B3.3), she marries Ananiah, who appears to be a perfectly ordinary free person. Twenty-two years later, in Porten and Yardeni (1986, B3.6), a man named Meshullam manumits her and her daughter from slavery. In the meantime, however, she has been playing the role of a free person, taking possession of a piece of property in Porten and Yardeni (1986, B3.5) and acting as a seller of property, along with her husband Ananiah, in Porten and Yardeni (1986, B3.12). It seems as if Tamet, during the first 22 years of her marriage to Ananiah, functioned as a free spouse with respect to Ananiah, but as a slave with respect to Meshullam.

Other Ancient Near Eastern documents, particularly from the Old Babylonian period, reveal similar situations. In the Ancient Near East, apparently, it was possible for a person, man or woman, to possess the status of slave with respect to one person, but the status of free citizen with respect to another (Westbrook 1998). While this seems to be the most reasonable conclusion based on the extant evidence, the full nature of these situations has yet to be explicated.

## Gender and Inheritance

Related to the issue of status is that of gender. Throughout Ancient Near Eastern history, women appear to have had nearly as much legal capacity as men. They could sue in court, testify, own property, sell property, and function as parties to contracts. This view must be tempered, however, by the consideration that many, if not most, of the women who acted on their own in these roles were very likely widows. While still married, they probably would have been expected to act in conjunction with their husbands. Thus, even

though Ancient Near Eastern women may have enjoyed greater legal privileges than many of their counterparts in more recent centuries, notions of equality cannot be seriously entertained.

This is especially true when it comes to gender and inheritance. In many parts of the Ancient Near East, daughters were not legally entitled to any share of their father's estate, the exception being Egypt, where daughters had inheritance rights the same as sons. Daughters received some compensation for this in the form of a dowry, but even that often disappeared into the assets of their husbands upon marriage (Ben-Barak 1996). If a man had no sons, however, it was possible for his daughters to become his heirs, though certain conditions often applied. In ancient Israel, for example, daughters who inherited from their father were required to marry into their father's extended family (Numbers 36:7–9). This ensured that their father's property would remain in his clan and would not be transferred to another clan when the daughters married. Texts from the Late Bronze Age sites of Nuzi and Emar reveal a different approach. If a man had only daughters for potential heirs, he would adopt them as sons, as in this document (Lacheman 1976, pp. 133–134, text 2):

This is the tablet of the testament of Unaptae to his daughter, Shilwaturi. He drew up a will for her. This is what Unaptae said: "I have established my daughter Shilwaturi as a son.<sup>4</sup> All of my fields, my buildings ... all of my property ... its entirety ... I have given to Shilwaturi, my daughter, whom I have established as a son." Unaptae also said: "I have established my wife, Shakutu, as a father for my daughter, Shilwaturi. As long as Shakutu is living, Shilwaturi shall care for her. When Shakutu dies, Shilwaturi shall mourn her, and she shall bury [her]."

Apparently, the legal fiction of converting a daughter into a son satisfied the law and made inheritance by the daughter permissible. This stands out as an imaginative strategy for circumventing the obstacle of gender and complying with the letter of the law.

## Civil and Criminal Law

As opposed to most modern systems, the legal systems of the Ancient Near East do not appear to have had a distinction between civil law and criminal law (Renger 1977; Westbrook 1992). Misdeeds such as murder and theft were considered wrongs against an individual victim in the same manner as adultery, fraud, failure to make a required payment, and flight from slavery. In all of these situations, victims could take their case to the courts to seek redress. In the case of murder (about which there are very few texts), the victim's closest relatives would be the ones to initiate the quest for justice. Moreover, it was typically the wronged party who had the right to decide, within the bounds of the law, what type of redress to seek and to whom any compensation was paid. LH paragraph 129 contains a provision along these lines with respect to adultery:

If a man's wife should be seized lying with another male, they shall bind them and cast them into the water; if the wife's master allows his wife to live, then the king shall allow his subject (the other male) to live. (Roth 1997, p. 105)

The fate of the adulterous wife was ultimately in the hands of her husband. As the wronged party, he could decide if the death sentence should be carried out or if the penalty should be mitigated. Similar rules seem to have applied to theft and even murder. If the family members of a murder victim could be convinced to accept monetary compensation in lieu of executing the murderer, then they had the right to choose that option. One of the responsibilities of the law courts was to ensure that victims did not exact a penalty that outweighed the severity of the wrong itself. In the case of assault and physical injury, for example, the penalty could take the form of the same injury being inflicted on the perpetrator, but any greater penalty was disallowed. Again, the right to choose either the fullest extent of the law or a less harsh penalty rested with the victim.

## Connections with Later Legal Systems

The long-acknowledged ancestor of the two great modern legal systems – the common law and the civil law systems – is ancient Roman law. Early Greek law, too, played an important role. It is becoming increasingly apparent, however, that the Greco-Roman systems have their ancestors to some degree in the Ancient Near East. This points to the Ancient Near East as the source of at least some of the legal ideas and customs that have accompanied human civilizations throughout much of history. Although scholars can now trace many of the legal connections between the societies of the Ancient Near East and those of the Greco-Roman only in outline, identifying these connections is a crucial step toward understanding the historical development of law in general.

Both early Greek and Roman law seem to have been the beneficiary of what was the primary method of legal reasoning in the Ancient Near East. This mode of reasoning is perhaps best characterized as the case law method. Most of the individual provisions in the Ancient Near Eastern law collections are formulated as conditional clauses beginning with a term equivalent to “if.” A scenario is presented in the protasis (an “if” clause); the resolution to that scenario comes in the apodosis or conclusion. This type of formulation prevails in the Greek Code of Gortyn from Crete (Willett 1967) and in many works recording early Roman law, including the Twelve Tables (Crawford 1996, pp. 578–583; Wolff 1951, pp. 98–99).

More specific connections between the legal systems of the Ancient Near East and Roman law include issues related to flood damage to agricultural fields (see LH paragraphs 53–56 and the Roman legal texts cited in Watson 2001: 138–147), penalties for assaulting free citizens and slaves (see HL paragraphs 1–4, 7–8, 11–16; LH paragraphs 196–205; and the Twelve Tables I 14, Crawford 1996), and the distinction between theft at night, theft in the daytime, and the different levels of liability of one who defends against such theft (see LE paragraphs 12–13; Exodus 22:1–2; and the Twelve Tables I 17–18, Crawford 1996).

Another possible point of connection between Ancient Near Eastern and early Greek law has to do with oaths in court. There is no question that the judicial oath originated in the Ancient Near East, the earliest evidence stemming from Mesopotamia in the late third millennium. Throughout much of Ancient Near Eastern history, trial courts frequently required one of the parties at trial to take an oath in the name of one or more gods. By

taking the oath, parties would swear to the veracity of their claims and thereby subject themselves to divine punishment if in fact they were lying (Lafont 1997). If the party required to swear went through with the oath, that party automatically won the case.

A notable development occurred, however, in Mesopotamia during the mid-first millennium, the Neo-Babylonian period. The number of instances when a court required someone to take an oath dropped dramatically. Instead, courts much more frequently demanded further evidence from parties, primarily in the form of witness statements. The jurisprudential scene became one in which the courts demonstrated a preference for testimonial evidence over oath-taking as a means of deciding a trial. This is similar to an attitude reflected in the Greek Code of Gortyn, which dates to the mid-fifth century. There, reference is made to several different types of disputes about which the text instructs judges to make their decisions based on witness testimony. Only if there are no witnesses, or if there are conflicting witness statements, might the judge, according to the code, decide the case by taking an oath himself and then rendering a verdict.<sup>5</sup> Thus, a tendency to prefer witness statements over the use of an oath appears in early Greek law as well. Whether a connection in fact exists, and what the nature of that connection might be, are issues that warrant further investigation.

Similarities between Ancient Near Eastern and early Greek law occur in other areas as well, primarily in family law. Issues related to inheritance (LL paragraph 2; Numbers 27:8, 36:8; Gortyn VII 15–24), divorce (LH paragraphs 138–41; Gortyn II 45–55), the handling of a wife's dowry (LH paragraph 163; Gortyn III 30–35), and adoption (LH paragraph 191; Gortyn XI 9–17), reveal a number of striking resemblances between the two.

All in all, there can be little doubt that the Ancient Near East was home not only to the world's earliest legal records but also to principles and practices that spread to other civilizations. The few connections outlined above between the legal systems of the Ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world mark the beginning of a long period of transmission. While the current debates within legal scholarship of the Ancient Near East will continue, some of the most important work in the future may relate to the task of describing the role that Ancient Near Eastern law played in the overall development of law and in the formation of modern legal systems.

## NOTES

1. The cuneiform codes are listed in chronological order. For a discussion of their probable dating, see Westbrook (1985). Scholars are divided in their opinions on how to date the biblical codes. The priestly or levitical codes from the Hebrew Bible are omitted from discussion in keeping with this essay's goals.
2. It is possible to infer from LH paragraph 1 about false testimony that the penalty for murder was death. Still, there is no provision in LH directly dealing with homicide.
3. For instance, LH and several other codes treat the issue of a pregnant woman who was caused to abort her fetus due to being physically struck – accidentally or intentionally – by another. This situation is not mentioned in any other extant documents from the Ancient Near East. The goring ox laws that occur in three of the codes are another case in point. See Finkelstein (1981, pp. 17–20).

4. This is the exact same language as that used when males from another family were adopted as sons.
5. This use of the oath in Greek judicial practice differed from Mesopotamian use where a party to the dispute took an oath (Willetts 1967, pp. 32–34).

## FURTHER READING

The most up-to-date and comprehensive analysis and description of Ancient Near Eastern law and practice is Westbrook (2003), a massive work that involved the collaboration of more than 20 scholars. For a much more concise treatment, though at times oversimplified, see Versteeg (2002). Roth (1997) provides a superb and convenient set of translations for all of the law codes. The essays by Otto (2000), Roth, Westbrook, Lafont, and Yaron contain excellent discussions of the issues surrounding the nature of the law codes. For studies of the royal edicts, see Kraus (1984) and Veenhof (1997–2000). Joannès (2000) contains a very nice collection and analysis of trial records. For biblical law, one of the best starting points is still Patrick (1985).

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# Working

*David A. Warburton*

### Introduction

The fundamental transformation that changed Neolithic societies into Near Eastern Bronze Age economies was the creation of the state. The farmers and builders of the Neolithic Revolution transformed economic parameters by creating the germ of a sedentary production economy that contrasted with the wandering extractive societies of the Paleolithic. One of the most important changes in transforming Neolithic village culture into an urban civilization was demanding that people work, either performing services for, or delivering goods to, the newly arisen “authorities” of the Bronze Age: virtually unknown in the Paleolithic and slightly disagreeable in the Neolithic, work was elevated to a routine which has decisively determined human behavior since the Bronze Age.

Sedentary Neolithic village life created the burden of labor as house construction and maintenance complemented preparing furrows, sowing, harvesting, threshing and herding. Houses transformed storage and hoarding, enabling wealth. Thus, after millennia of development, Bronze Age sedentary villages were concentrations of immovable wealth and almost as immobile residents, all of which states could remove as booty – if thieves could be kept at bay. Only the institutions and their representatives in the elite guaranteed protection of property from neighbors or marauders. In return, they assumed a right to expropriate taxes and/or rent, which led to increased production, and thus more work. And this power demanded legitimacy which created another domain of creative work: philosophical speculation offered gods who required temples, absorbing labor and becoming economic centers in their own right. Thus the major buildings of the Bronze Age cities became stages for the display of power, providing opportunities for a new elite to indulge themselves while channeling the villagers to serve them indirectly with craftsmanship and food or directly as servants.

Monitoring, guiding, and justifying these activities also increased the demand for work. The early written texts reveal that the states exploited labor through (a) new professions, (b) new means of compensation, (c) enhanced direct control with obligatory or forced labor, (d) taxation, and (e) the gradual recognition of the right to the acquisition land, allowing tenants to till land for larger landholders.

The rural world consisted of villagers managing small plots and large landholders. Smallholders could tenaciously cling onto their plots (either owned, leased or assigned as a source of income in return for services), working them inefficiently – so long as they paid their taxes and/or rents while providing for the family. By contrast, von Reden (2007, p. 7) observed that millennia later:

[...]For those who participated in the economy of scale – estate holders and the king himself – by the exaction of taxes and rents on grain land in kind [...] grain [...] provided the background to the economic development of early Ptolemaic Egypt.

This had, of course, been going on for around three millennia before the Greco-Roman period: as peasants were reduced to poverty and debt, the institutions and members of the elites acquired land, the former owners being thrown into dependency, tenancy or the labor market. One of the great differences from the first millennium onwards was the gradually growing tendency to monetize tax and rent payments, hastening the inclusiveness of the market by forcing peasants to sell their grain when the price was low at harvest season, to acquire the coins necessary for paying debts and leases.

Yet, while the growing monetary wealth of the institutions enticed skilled craftsmen and crafty merchants to satisfy the demands of the urban elite, the economies nevertheless remained largely agricultural for a millennium after the end of Classical Antiquity. The vast majority of the population of almost all such societies is tied to the land. Quite aside from the peasants producing agricultural products, shippers and merchants were transporting and dealing with agricultural merchandise; money-lenders were financing shipments of agricultural products or drawing income from agricultural production; institutional bureaucrats and estate managers supervised silos filled with grain and enjoyed the products of orchards – all carefully recorded in accounts. The luxury trade encompassed not only costly materials but also incense, wine and olive oil. Even the major industry of the pre-Industrial world – textiles – was based on flax and wool, with grain paying the workers.

In this sense, these societies are completely foreign to our urban societies. However, the contrasts go beyond the superficial. Philosophers (e.g., Arendt 1958, Méda 1995) understand modern Western people as living in “societies based on labor”, understanding “work” as “employment” allowing one to earn a living. On the one hand, remuneration for paid work allows “employees” to become “consumers” and indulge what economists call “preferences”. On the other, in our societies, social mobility and freedom to choose a profession mean that employment selections reflect social aspirations. It is assumed that virtually everyone participates in the labor market – where “full employment” is the postulated norm – and the manifestation of this participation reflects personal choices. In this sense, in our societies, labor is a matter of social, cultural and individual identities.

Beyond that, in our world, there is the obsolete – but omnipresent – concept of the labor theory of value, which mythically ascribes labor not only a social value (as participation in society), but also an economic one, expressed in prices demanded for the products produced by labor. In this view – which is still widely endorsed in our societies although dismissed by economists – labor (together with land and capital, the other “factors of production”) itself bequeaths enduring value to the objects produced by labor.

This conceptual framework is embedded in the concept of scarcity, whereby labor increases productivity and production, and thereby renders both the individual and the society economically wealthier. In this sense, the economic value of the product (price) goes beyond the value of the work itself (wages) but also contributes to the creation of “value”, as the product incorporates the value of the work as an “addition” beyond the wages and materials of which it consists. The aspirations expressed in the choice and performance of professional activity directly contribute to economic growth, as “productivity” soars. “Working” is thus the fashion in which society is embedded in the market economy.

Therefore, almost everyone in our societies – rural and urban alike – requires a profession to assure income, and identifies their income with their work. For us, this is work – and in the West, there is a tradition that labor is somehow valued in and of itself; through “hard work”, one can allegedly scale the social ladder. These views are compatible with an economy dominated by the production of goods, overcoming scarcity, and assuring perpetual economic growth.

Yet most in Western societies are in the services sector, which is more about performance and precarious subordination than the creation of value, productivity, and identity. Appreciating this reality should enable one to understand labor in the ancient and modern worlds alike.

Whatever one’s views about modern thought, the conceptual world conjured up by contemporary philosophers and economists would have been foreign to the Ancient Near East. Those performing exhausting *corvée* labor or paying exorbitant rent on the fields experienced work as a loss. And yet, over generations – father and son passing on ways of life – they became accustomed to this. The peasant was tied to the land; wage-labor brought neither wealth nor freedom, let alone social prestige. Even the value of the work of the craftsman who made a bronze vessel disappeared when it was sold: the price thereafter was decided by the weight of the metal alone. Labor served the elite and was therefore demeaning. Making money through commerce and money-lending was a means of achieving a degree of freedom, but it did not offer respectability.

The values of the elite revolved around inherited wealth and leisure – all guaranteed by the exercise of political power expressed through economic calculations based upon income from taxes and rents. Yet economic realities meant that for most of history most of the population lived below the poverty limit while the wealth of the tiny elite grew ineluctably.

## The Setting

The economies of antiquity were agrarian. Peasants remained by far the largest group in all societies until the Industrial Revolution. However, long before our own recent transformation, the bureaucratic poets of the Bronze Age had already created a new urban society, one

with powerful institutions of hereditary power legitimized by divine support – and this became the foundation of a new socio-economy (see McMahon, Chapter 2).

Thus for most of the population of the world, the principal elements of rural sedentary and pastoral agricultural activity – villages, crops, grazing, and so on – gradually became the norm from the earliest Neolithic onward. Yet the Ancient Near East brought forth the first cities in history, and the dominant urban world yoked the villagers to satisfy their requirements. The agrarian economy served the urban society; whereas most of the population lived in rural poverty, most of the professions were determined by the institutions of urban society. Although the Bronze Age developed a few tools useful in the agricultural world – such as the plow – most technological development was spurred by the urban society where the palaces and temples had to be adorned, embellished, and renewed. Beyond that, a new service sector – serving the wealthy elite and their institutions – arose with the industrial sectors.

It is relatively certain that the Bronze Age state-sponsored creation of systematic taxation and compulsory labor increased pressures, changing life in the villages. The legal systems establishing private property and allowing the collection of rents by large landholders also included the sanctioning of money-lending – and inherently and inevitably led to the emergence of a class of people without access to land, destined to become slaves, institutional dependents, or casual wage-laborers. Together these forces generated the emergence and consolidation of new social categories in the rural world.

The wealth that the peasants delivered to the cities formed the basis for an urban economy that was totally new, and thus contrasted with the gradual changes in the rural hinterland. The most immediate of the new professionals were the bureaucrats, but from the third millennium onwards we meet merchants, money-lenders, artisans, and servants.

For most of history, the rural and urban worlds have been linked by the large landholders who made up the elite. Their wealth was rural in origin, but their lives and occupations were urban. Just as the wealthy elite of Classical Athens were landholders who dabbled in politics, Bronze Age Near Eastern landowners served as administrators. It should be evident that they did not depend upon the income of their urban professions to live, but rather could exercise their professions as a result of their rural wealth (and in fact, endowed land-holdings proffered by the state may have assured a significant part of their state income, rather than salaries in the modern sense).

## **Institutions, Economies, Societies, and Employment**

Superficially, the importance of the institutional economies cannot be overestimated. During the Third Dynasty of Ur (ca. 2000 BCE), the grain paid out to the 40 000 state dependents totaled some 30 million liters annually (Waetzoldt 1987, p. 118). Data from Ramesside Egypt imply expenditures of a similar magnitude (Warburton 2000, pp. 69–70, 74 n20). One Mari letter from near today's Syrian–Iraqi border records a royal offer to dispatch five million liters of grain on donkey-back with a merchant (Durand 2000, p. 3: 18).

Yet the millions of liters of grain recorded in the administrative texts pale in comparison with the spectacle of the pyramids, temples, and palaces. The 2.3 million blocks of stone in Khufu's great pyramid at Giza had to be put in place in some 23 years: around 100 000

a year or one block every two minutes. This required some 25 000 to 30 000 workers for a score of years (Lehner 1997, p. 224). Even if they worked in annual and seasonal shifts, the administrative ordeal did not cease. And this was not an aberration. Sneferu, Khufu's father, piled up a cubit meter volume in his two pyramids which almost doubled that of his son, and one of Khufu's successors almost equaled the great pyramid itself (Kemp 1983, p. 88).

Yet, if the buildings before and after this half century of toil are disappointing by comparison, it is merely due to administrative laxity: whether rotating or working full time, the work of 30 000 men was hardly a burden for a society numbering a million and more. It is crucial to understand that this institutional urban economy reflected the values of the urban elite – but it was merely a fraction of the overall economy; the greater part remained agricultural.

Nevertheless, the administration of labor was an essential aspect of display in the major states. Thus the walls around the pyramid enclosure of Djoser at Saqqara are of a higher quality than those around the contemporary city of Arad in Palestine, and a half-kilometer longer. The walls around the New Kingdom temple at Karnak enclose an area larger than most of the contemporaneous cities. The existence of Mesopotamian palaces, temples, and ziggurats, along with the Egyptian pyramids, underscores the capacity of the state to command labor. This power gave the state a decisive edge. Yet the symbols of power reflected a craving for legitimacy based on the will of the gods. Nevertheless, despite the wealth and the divine legitimacy related to justice, the “rations” for the workers and the elite do not bear comparison (see Brunke 2013). That labor was cheap does not diminish our awe – and the psychological effects in antiquity will have been greater.

The bureaucratic institutions determined employment and investment strategies by controlling the surplus agricultural production, allowing the institutions to invest in textiles; and it was the institutional agricultural surplus that kept grain prices low, so as to ensure rural poverty among small-holders. In many cases individuals were assigned land from which they drew income while executing state tasks, such as supervising textile mills or performing temple rituals. Scribes assured that the whole functioned, forming an essential part of the elite with a vested interest in increasing their own wealth and the strength of the institutions.

Yet the elite and the immediate dependents of the institutions made up an insignificant proportion of the total population. What gave the institutions economic power was not an overwhelming economic role, but their leverage. Labor was far more valuable than technology, and the command of labor decisive – but this value was not reflected in market value.

## Illustrating Institutional Control of Labor and Labor Value

To grasp this we turn to concrete examples. In one administrative text (Englund 1991) from the Third Dynasty of Ur, around 2000 BCE, a single foreman was responsible for the annual workdays of a group of 40 female laborers. He had to account for 13 419 days; the records reveal a deficit of 7422 days: the difference between what the women were expected to work

and what they actually worked. Due to the record-keeping system, making the women work more was impossible. They did not meet the quota and would die in forgotten penury.

The supervisor, however, would be held responsible for the missing days, reckoned as being worth one grain of silver for each workday, so 7422 days would be 41.25 shekels or about 345 grams of silver. The foreman had an annual income of 20 gūr of barley (ca. 6000 liters), usually evaluated at 20 shekels of silver or about 167 grams. Concerning the foreman's debts, Englund (1991, p. 279) remarked dryly that this "would have been no easy sum" to repay: it would have annulled more than two full years of administrative remuneration. If he did not pay, however, after his death his family could become laborers like those he had overseen. In this case, we have no idea of the market value of products of the labor involved. However, the marginal value of the labor was negative for the women and the manager alike.

We can compare this with productivity. Jursa (2013) summarizes the situation in southern Mesopotamia:

The average return on seed was [...] very high (twenty-fold and above), but ancient Near Eastern yields per surface area are roughly comparable to those achieved by traditional agricultural practice in the region in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This suggests no progress between the third millennium BCE and the second millennium CE, but also underscores that productivity was high. It is unfortunately rare for the documents to provide an estimate of the individual productivity of a single worker, as we usually have documents that record harvesting, threshing, plow teams or even labor at harvest time, and thus one can rarely gauge any specific level of productivity. However, there is an Egyptian document (Wente 1990, pp. 130–131) – dating to about a thousand years after our Ur III text – recording that a mayor placed a single laborer with a team of oxen on 4 *arouras* of land that happened to have been flooded. After the work was over, this one laborer produced 40 sacks of grain ( $\approx$  3000 liters/ha).

Although exceeding yields in nineteenth century Europe, this figure was considered to be disappointing and is thus a minimum. In Ramesside Egypt this grain would have been hypothetically valued at about 70 grams of silver. More interesting, however, is that at this rate, the efforts of a relatively small proportion of the population of Egypt (perhaps 160 000 workers; Warburton 2016, p. 10) could have produced far more than enough grain to nourish the entire population (of millions) comfortably (for calories, cf. Miller 1991). This reality accounts for Egypt's capacity to maintain regular annual exports over centuries to Greece, Rome, and Constantinople in Classical times.

The inherent overcapacity providing for the urban middle classes – craftsmen and administrators alike – was but a detail of administrative procedures ensuring that someone worked the fields: the Mesopotamian manager and the Egyptian mayor forced people to work. And such officials needed to control only a fraction of the population directly; institutional farmers used plough teams of oxen (donkeys in the third millennium), accomplishing economies of scale impossible for the small-holders who merely had to pay taxes. Harvesting was done by sickle on institutional and private fields alike until the European Middle Ages, and was thus very low tech – but this did not prevent extraordinary surpluses in the Ancient Near East.

For the classical era, von Reden (2007, p. 16) makes the point that "it was grain for export that supplied the Ptolemies with the largest part of their cash resources" even at a

time when there is hardly a hint that “taxes were collected in cash” (von Reden 2007, p. 34). Thus, during the Bronze Age – when massive exports of grain were unknown – the grain surplus will simply have contributed to abundance and low prices with correspondingly unenticing wages. Early on, the institutions simply mopped up the surplus and restricted access to it; from the early second millennium – at the latest – onwards the state sold grain tax income on the market for silver (Stol 1982; Charpin 1987), and this became more important from Classical times onwards. The second millennium documentation includes references to economic refugees, fleeing labor obligations in Egypt (Hayes 1972), and corresponding notes about the difficulties of finding labor at harvest season in Mesopotamia (Birot 1993, p. 11-13). Lack of labor simply reflected institutional frustration and not a real shortage of labor. Rather than prosperity, policymakers transformed abundance into artificial scarcity by restricting access to the surplus.

We may not share much sympathy for a poor administrator whose workers failed to meet expectations, but we should understand why there are over 90 000 texts preserved from the Ur III period; the institutions had to contend with the inducements to corruption created by overcapacity, and requiring written records was one way of fighting that. All across the Near East, each administrator’s accounts were scrutinized. Even the transport of records was recorded (Veldhuis 2001, p. 90).

## Rural Life

But most were not part of this world of “economies of scale”. The drudgery of village life offered tasks but few rewards. There was grain enough for everyone, if only because those without access starved to death, and those near death could avoid that fate by falling into the claws of the institutions. Thus most sought to avoid either fate, acquiring grain from their own parcels. Some leased land, delivering grain as rent; scribes and other institutional dependents could pay their own salaries by cultivating plots assigned them for income – or by employing soldiers or casual wage laborers to do the work.

The institutions merely had to make sure that the people had sickles to harvest grain, millstones to grind it, and facilities to store it. Mercifully, Mesopotamia had enough clay for the necessary storage buildings and vessels – as well as the tablets to keep track of everything. Yet virtually everything else had to be imported, including much of the wood for the ships to move the stuff around. The grain was produced locally, but the flint for the sickles and stones for the grinders was imported. The market allowed Mesopotamia to concentrate on the production of manufactures and agricultural products for export, to acquire the silver to pay for the other goods desired as imports. The ancient economies were thus oriented heavily towards trade and production for export.

Markets ensured that imbalances were eliminated. A good harvest would drive down the cost of grain, punishing overproduction. A bad harvest would drive the price up, rewarding those in possession of reserves (as the Old Testament tale of Joseph relates). Locusts and bad harvests could bring ruin, allowing neighboring institutions to corner the market. One Old Babylonian official landed in a northern district that suffered from bad harvests, locusts, and crickets in succession (Birot 1993, pp. 73–87). The same type of thing would happen in the same region during the Middle Assyrian era – with wars to

boot (Cancik-Kirschbaum 1996), and likewise during the Neo-Assyrian era as well (Radner 2002). Each catastrophe opened the way for large landowners to foreclose on the small.

The officials were held responsible, and the palaces could view such catastrophes with equanimity; at one point, a neighboring king offered to send five million liters of grain to another. The offer was proudly declined (Durand 2000, p. 3: 18). The institutions could cope; reserves acquired through taxes and rents gave them decisive leverage.

## Other Rural Pursuits

The work of the foresters in the Levant has gone largely unrecorded, as has that of most of the wood-gatherers elsewhere in the Ancient Near East who provided timber for the cities and fuel for the furnaces and kilns. Steinkeller (1987, p. 101) noted that the Ur III period marked a time of systematic exploitation of resources; yet, in reality the system of quotas represented the systematic exploitation of labor rather than resources. The deliveries of wood to the community of workmen at Deir el-Medina in New Kingdom Egypt were also recorded, but it is unclear whether the entire “forest sector” was organized as in Mesopotamia.

The Mesopotamian Umma foresters were usually members of the same nuclear family organized into working groups by forest. They were classified according to the rations they received and worked in rotation for several months, compatible with sowing, harvesting, and gathering wild plants. Since the “foresters” were also soldiers, they were free to campaign during the summer and gather wood during the winter, and thus it is more probable that this determined their annual schedule rather than the weather or the agricultural cycle. Tamarisk, willow, and poplar grew along the banks of the Euphrates, among reeds and grasses. The foresters not only delivered logs and beams, but also levers, pegs, stakes, plow shares, and other prepared forms of wood. The deliveries were made directly to the authorities of the state. During this period, the foresters were provided with barley and wool. Their rations of 60 liters a month were thus for subsistence and supplemented their other income as beneficiaries of land grants.

The administration of the third millennium Mesopotamian gardens and orchards involved unskilled laborers working with supervisors bound to the urban society through obligations and family connections (Greco 2015). There were clear quotas stipulating deliveries and the performance of services, but the degree of freedom beyond those limits is hardly clear.

Possibly in a similar way, fishermen in Egypt were obliged to pay an in-kind tax on their revenues, resulting in the state receiving tons of fish, some of which was passed on to state dependents. Some fishermen were employed by the state in Mesopotamia; their produce delivered to the state authorities was sold on the market.

## Crafts

The institutional economies were obliged to produce piles of documentation. The family firms were implicitly encouraged to maintain track of resources, so they might have had a practical value – but at the same time they had to avoid the attention of rapacious authorities with an incentive to tax, coerce, and otherwise despoil them, and records would

prove disabling. Some of these private activities are thus visible in the documents, when palaces made purchases or arranged contracts. In other cases, the activity is visible only in the archaeological record. Private contracts only become more common in the first millennium BCE.

In the core areas of the Ancient Near East, many craftsmen were employed by the state or institutions. Some of these were free craftsmen who sold their labor, or the products of their labor. In Egypt, potters were required to deliver part of their production to the state as an obligatory payment (Warburton 1997, pp. 237–260).

Institutional craftsmen were given raw materials and specific instructions to manufacture a given product (Sallaberger and Westenholz 1999, p. 277). The raw materials were acquired by purchase at near and distant markets by merchants responsible for palace acquisitions. These were weighed in the palace and then delivered to the craftsmen with instructions (Sallaberger and Westenholz 1999, pp. 282–283). Ivory from India was imported by state organs, through markets in the Persian Gulf (Leemans 1960, pp. 25–26). The palace at Mari purchased lapis lazuli when available on the open market in Mesopotamia (Durand 2000, p. 3: 15–18), usually coming overland from Iran. At the palace at Mari, craftsmen would be issued materials for fashioning, for example, a chariot (Limet 1986, p. 21). Pieces of furniture and other articles would be produced in the same fashion, with a record of the item, and the official responsible (Limet 1986, pp. 37, 54). In other cases, the material would be specified in bulk, and the desired products enumerated as issued to particular specialists; 5 kg of ivory was transferred to an ivory cutter who transformed the raw material into figurines (Sallaberger and Westenholz 1999, pp. 277–278). The finished products were collected and weighed and the workers compensated. In many cases, the finished products were designated in advance as intended for use in temples or palaces or as diplomatic gifts.

The artisan was compensated for the labor and the actual value of any raw materials he supplied; the value of finished products was resolved by the authorities. Lack of access to raw materials limited the freedom of the craftsmen and thus their choice of both clients and employment. Again, the institutional wealth enabled the acquisition of precious materials and provided leverage.

## Deir el-Medina

The activities of the craft workers in the Theban community at Deir el-Medina in Egypt are among the best documented in the ancient world (Cooney 2007; Janssen 1975; Valbelle 1985). During an economic downturn at the end of the reign of Ramesses III, the workers went on strike. Otherwise, they worked regular hours, across the ridge from their village in the Valley of the Kings.

The masons cut the tomb out of the rock and the draftsmen decorated the walls. The state provided and kept track of tools. Although their duties may have been onerous while excavating and decorating a royal tomb during a short reign, many found time to excavate, decorate, and equip their own tombs as well. Not only are wage lists preserved, but so are the tombs they were paid to excavate and decorate, as well as the inherited state housing in which they lived.

The documentation is abundant for the Ramesside period at the end of the Bronze Age. Various institutions were responsible for providing their income, with regular wages of almost 5000 liters of grain annually supplemented with cakes, firewood, dried fish, pottery, and other oddities (Janssen 1975, pp. 455–493).

They used leisure time to manufacture funerary goods for the upper classes, selling goods to supplement their state income (Cooney 2007). Like others, they were expected to account for their official time. Record-keeping was precise: illness was a major excuse for absence, but workmen could get a day off for a daughter's birthday, or because their wives were having their periods.

"Carrying stones for the scribe" is among the explanations for absence from work recorded at Deir el-Medina (Janssen 1980). It might have been harsh duty in comparison with celebrating a birthday, but these workers were hardly the worst off in the Ancient Near East. Their documentation demonstrates that they were hardly occupied full-time with their official duties, meaning that even for institutional dependents "titles" and "obligations" did not imply "full-time employment." The lives of the peasants may not have been as pleasant, but they will also have had more leisure time than we conventionally imagine, even while contributing to overcapacity.

## Employment

Thus although most employment and the source of all wealth in these societies was agrarian, one should have no illusions about the diversity of employment. Before the end of the Ramesside era in Egypt (about 1200 BCE), a scribe recorded a list of possible subordinates: "craftsmen, manual laborers, office workers, administrative officials, time-servers, stewards, mayors, village headmen, empowered district officers, department heads, scribes of offering tables, commissioners, envoys, administrative messengers, brewers, bakers, butchers, servants, confectioners, cake bakers, wine tasters, project managers, supervisors of carpenters, chief craftsmen, deputies, draftsmen, sculptors, miners, masons, wreckers, stone workers, guardians [...] statue sculptors [...] wood workers, [...]" (after Gardiner 1937, pp. 136–137; and Caminos 1954, pp. 497–501). Although abbreviated here, what the author strove for could not compare with the almost exhaustive lists of professions being maintained in then contemporary Mesopotamia; perhaps daunted by the competition, the Egyptian author declined to make a comprehensive account. Suffice it to say that the urban world of the Ancient Near East was familiar with more than the essentials.

Yet not all of these people were "working" – even if they held down jobs with regular income. One must distinguish between sources of income and professions. Among those working in the agricultural sector were shepherds, cultivators, farmers, gardeners, vintners, and field-workers; other rural occupations included fishermen, foresters, and bitumen collectors. Among the active craftsmen were builders, seal-cutters, bow-makers, potters, sculptors, masons, carpenters, basket-makers, and boat-builders. These must be distinguished from the more industrial occupations, such as weavers and smiths. Among the working professional classes were merchants, barmaids, prostitutes, physicians, barbers, priestesses, managers, governors, and scribes. Sailors and soldiers wandered between the

various professions, acting at times as merchants and farmers. Some of these “jobs” are mere titles associated with comfortable sinecures; others will have been backbreaking but unrewarding.

In some cases, the occupations were year-round activities, such as bakers and sandal-makers. In others, occupation and source of income differed, such as soldiers and foresters who were also farmers, deriving their income from fields, but obliged to perform other services to secure their rights to the fields. In spring and summer, the armies would move across the plains, destroying the crops of the enemy at harvest season, so that soldiers could return to sow and harvest their own crops back home. State-employed artisans and governors benefited in the same way from assigned fields. But while they pursued their administrative tasks, others assured the production of their fields. Governors and scribes employed other workers, including soldiers, to work their fields. Some loafers were simply rounded up to work at harvest time. Bureaucrats were ubiquitous, keeping records and assigning workers but too busy to do any real work, as the Egyptian scribes proclaimed with pleasure (Caminos 1954, p. 247).

Yet ordinary labor as such had no premium value: the surplus grain meant that increasing production on family plots could achieve nothing except to drive the price down at harvest time – while the underemployment of peasants and overproduction drove wages for casual labor to the floor. Working harder yielded rewards neither for those worked to death by the institutions, nor for the peasants. Neither peasants nor craftsmen were working anywhere near full capacity; only a tiny minority was pushed beyond the reasonable. Those with small plots lived in penurious leisure, while a small elite of well under 5% of the population shared responsibility for ensuring that the work was carried out. Only skilled craftsmen able to satisfy the “preferences” of these urban elites could gain by working harder – and the needs of the elites were limited, but the desire to serve them and thereby improve one’s chances was great.

Probably 75–90% of the population tried to eke out a living between the lowest levels of society and the elite, perhaps occasionally performing odd jobs such as those listed by our Ramesside scribe above. Most could only hope to avoid joining the unluckiest souls at the base of society from which there was no escape (except death): independent peasants could never aspire to wealth through a life of toil; their lot was paying taxes and performing obligatory labor. The elite viewed the peasants in the same way that the gods viewed mankind: as convenient laborers assuring divine leisure (Monroe, Chapter 9, refers to the Mesopotamian creation of humanity as an incident in a “labor dispute”; the Greek gods were likewise dependent on mankind for their offerings, but mainly concerned with their own affairs).

This led to a clearly defined social structure with each group having interests differing from those of the others. Despite differences, society did not change fundamentally: there was no class consciousness to express itself in social conflict. If anyone intended to change things, it was a social aspiration to aim at a higher role in existing society. It is difficult to justify speaking of “social tensions” because (a) the various social sectors of ancient societies were frequently permeable (as Robertson, in this volume, points out) but (b) those who climbed out of the lower rungs of the bureaucracy or left tribal life to become an urban king did not intend to subvert the social structure so much as to exploit the weaknesses of the social fabric to gain power, while leaving intact the injustices that might hypothetically have given rise to “social tensions.” These could be eased without undermining the social structure by

a “benevolent” king occasionally cancelling debts (incidentally injuring those aspiring to social mobility through commerce and money-lending).

The structure of society was not put into doubt. Plato’s idea of transforming the social structure itself was inconceivable; explicitly aiming at a just system was not even part of contemporary imagination. Bronze Age justice and advancement were framed by the existing system.

## **Textiles: the Real Industry of Antiquity**

One of the most significant changes in the Bronze Age was the gradual emergence of an enormous pastoral sector with herdsmen following sheep and delivering wool to families and institutions. The pastoral herdsman with responsibility for many sheep in peripheral areas from the third millennium onwards created a new profession and a new way of life (see Rosen 2016).

In the very earliest documents from the fourth millennium BCE, Englund (1998, pp. 143–153) finds differences between herds of a bit more than a thousand sheep and mostly less. And those herds of sheep supported an important sector. In ancient Mesopotamia, “wool and textile production were at all times [...] the second most productive sector of the Babylonian economy” – after agriculture. This industry grew: the third millennium Mesopotamian “textile industry [...produced...] ordinary [...] garments [...] to clothe thousands of dependent laborers [...] and to supply [...] trade agents with large supplies destined for internal and external exchange [...]” (Englund 1998, p. 151). Production in one case may have exceeded the requirements of the local market by a factor of 10, implying a dependence upon export markets (Englund 1998, p. 151 n.342). And all low technology: wooden looms and donkeys were the backbone upon which manual workers and bureaucrats alike were dependent.

The 2000 people in the Ur III grain-grinding industry pale into insignificance when placed beside the 15 000 in the contemporaneous textile industry in the province of Lagash (Waetzoldt 1987, p. 119). Across the ancient world, women and children spent days and nights spinning fibers and weaving textiles which were weighed and passed through the administration. The manufacture and sale of textiles was a very important commercial industry across the entire Near East, from the Aegean to Iraq (Breniquet and Michel 2014). It was largely this industry that paid for the imports.

The economic importance of the pyramids is diminished when we appreciate that one provincial textile industry involved a labor force of a similar magnitude – and that this went on for the millennia of the Bronze Age, rather than remaining a mere exception (as the pyramids were).

Aside from exports, textiles were used as a means of remuneration for institutional dependents (e.g., Prentice 2010, pp. 85–86). Sometimes this trade was under the control of central authorities, exploiting labor maintained through rations to transform wool into textiles (Dossin 1964). Elsewhere, women would spin and weave at home and possibly retail products to state firms (Condon 1984). The power of institutional textile distributors affected private economics well beyond southern Mesopotamia, quite aside from the state dependents. With a few exceptions, those producing textiles never recognized any value in their endless toil, as the financial gains were realized by the merchants and states.

## Movement of Goods and People

As the most important export industry, textiles became objects of entrepreneurial interest as institutional authorities sold such articles for resale. Merchants and shippers were entrusted to convey state products to assigned destinations. Vessels belonging to the institutions and the elites could also employ entrepreneurs to trade.

There were effectively five different systems organizing the output of work in antiquity. For the first, a good part of the “free market” production lay beyond the control of political actors in the core regions; prices dictated the production and acquisition of silver, copper, tin, lapis lazuli, and so on. Within the regions controlled by the institutions, four further systems prevailed. One involved the collection of levies where taxation or “rent” was based on the provider voluntarily relinquishing part of the yield of harvests of fish or grain or pots from normal activity, without a corresponding payment made in return. Another involved state control of labor, with the workers controlled by remuneration or coercion, as in grain rations for textile workers. In return for subsistence support, the state appropriated the labor or its products. Another system involved the sale of articles acquired through taxation or the use of *corvée* labor. This formed part of the local market, whereby the institutions and members of the elite could purchase articles from the population of their own community, but funneled through the institutions. And finally, the last is the least well documented, but easily reconstructed system whereby institutional dependents will have satisfied their obligations, and then supplied additional production to the markets, as in Deir el-Medina, and probably likewise for those leasing garden obligations in Mesopotamia, for example.

The international market fed by textile production determined the flow of silver and thus, ultimately, the markets determined all economic activity. Prices and coercion were alternative means of encouraging people to abstain from leisure. Those under the control of the institutions could be shipped around. Egyptian physicians could be sent to the Hittites, Syrian builders from one city to the next, Egyptian laborers into the deserts to drag rocks. Rationed laborers could remain in the Mesopotamian alluvium, but be assigned different tasks from day to day (Englund 1991). Even specialists could be assigned agricultural tasks when required (Zaccagnini 1983).

Individual specialists moved in search of work or inspiration. The Greek craftsmen who worked in Yemen during the Roman era (Weidemann 1983, p. 18) exemplified an older phenomenon. The artisan who made the Jebel Arak knife handle in fourth millennium Egypt combined Elamite art with Egyptian form; regardless of whether he was an Elamite in Egypt (Boehmer 1991) or an Egyptian familiar with Elamite forms (Pittmann 1996), the product reveals travel. Independent craftsmen who crossed borders reflected a trend contrasting with the equally typical one of the workers converging at the royal cities of the Persian Empire.

There were also those who remained in place and served a market niche, such as lapis lazuli workers at Shahr-i Sokhta in Iran, or amulet-makers at Thebes in Egypt. The former were stay-at-homes who served the international market. The latter were stay-at-homes who served the local market. The workers in Iran exploited close proximity of the material and the scale of the market. The lapis lazuli came from the mines to the craftsmen who prepared it for re-export. The workers at Thebes relied upon the local passion for funerary

and prestige goods, acquiring materials through trade and retailing products. The clientele was the elites; an Egyptian could purchase an article of lapis lazuli imported from Central Asia and transformed locally into an Egyptian beetle-shaped amulet.

Via the markets and the institutions, virtually every member of society in Egypt and Mesopotamia was incorporated into the system. Aside from market niches, there were differences: legal guarantees and commercial activity in Egypt differed substantially from city-states such as Ugarit, and also from empires in Mesopotamia. Whereas the Egyptian state took income in grain, and remunerated its servants in land and grain (Warburton 2000, pp. 68–89), the palace at Ugarit paid its agricultural employees in silver (Heltzer 1982, p. 39). While Pharaohs had an army of bureaucrats to look after things, King Samsi-Adad of Assyria had to ensure that his son (a viceroy) understood how, when, and from whom to expect grain, silver, oil, and wine (Durand 1997, pp. 122–124), while he himself led his armies. Zimri-Lim of Mari held his own officials responsible if the harvest failed and people starved (Briot 1993, p. 75). Kings supervised the distribution of metals and the plucking of sheep. Much of the “working life” of early antiquity can be reconstructed from the documents. Most of this reflected the view of the official world, but allows a glimpse at the social organization of labor.

## **Land, Labor, Technology, Administration, and Markets**

Much of our modern understanding of development in antiquity has been strongly influenced by interpretations of modern Western economic history, emphasizing “private property” and “technological innovation,” assuming that these are universal principles of economic development related to free enterprise. Yet “private property” played a crucial role in financial development, and “technological innovation” played virtually no role in economic change between the Chalcolithic and the Industrial Revolution (4000 BCE to 1750 BCE); only the creation, maintenance, and expansion of irrigation systems in the south of Mesopotamia were really new. The wealth of the centers lay not in technological superiority exploited for economic purposes, but rather the exploitation of low skilled labor, allowing the purchase of raw materials from the periphery that were transformed into works of art.

The documentation from Mari reveals the strained relationship between rulers and craftsmen concerning grain, metals, and labor at the beginning of the second millennium (Durand 1997, pp. 221–317). Samsi-Adad and Zimri-Lim were both concerned about accounting for silver and gold. Administrators could find themselves worrying about silver and grain, and arguing with craftsmen and rulers (Rouault 1977).

The results were of this interaction are curious. In the third millennium, the value of 300 qu ( $\approx$  250 liters) of grain was one shekel ( $\approx$  8 g) of silver; by the middle of the second millennium this had fallen to 150 qu ( $\approx$  125 liters) (Zaccagnini 1997, p. 367). The fall in the value of silver reflects the economic power of the institutions, expressed in market terms. Barley had not acquired a universal convertible value by the Ur III period (Veldhuis 2001, p. 100). Only after barley prices rose in terms of silver did a universal system allow direct conversions between silver, copper, oil, labor, and barley, by simple mathematical

equivalencies. Before that period, the value of labor performed a role in transforming value which was not measured in either grain or silver – and even later not accounted for in terms of income for the laborer.

By the mid-second millennium BCE, labor, land, and grain had prices defined in terms of silver; any other commodity was valued in the same fashion, from the Aegean to the Indus. Second millennium conversions linked wages, rations, and costs. However, even by the end of the first millennium BCE, linking the value of the harvest to the cost inputs, including labor, was impossible. The costs remained constant, but the value of the harvest depended upon the price of grain, regardless of the costs.

By the Persian period, awards of land plots allowed entrepreneurs to manage land for the aristocrats, and thus the entrepreneurs (rather than institutions directly) were responsible for arranging the labor (Stolper 1985). The contrast between the millennia in the documentation clearly reflects a growing role for the market and increased opportunities.

## Value and Remuneration of Labor

The world economy grew in the 12,000 or so years separating the beginning of the Near Eastern Neolithic and the end of the European Middle Ages. Yet the character and productivity of the agrarian economies remained more or less constant since the Bronze Age states made land tenure and forced labor ordinary elements of the rural landscape. Average wages seemed to have remained stable at a very low rate from the Bronze Age through the European Middle Ages (Scheidel 2010; Farber 1978; Warburton 2016). Wage income will hardly have been economically significant, as rural households will have avoided both hiring and performing wage labor. Instead, low wages and incomes induced them to avoid the market, producing what they had to.

There cannot therefore have been much meaningful economic growth for the greatest part of the population of the ancient world, in the sense that the quality of life probably did not increase very much for most people. The production of grain and textiles far outstripped local demand, and thus should have opened the way to leisure and prosperity. Instead, most people lived below the poverty line.

Above, von Reden was quoted placing grain as the key to wealth and economic growth – for those enjoying economies of scale. Significantly, von Reden (2010, p. 92) also documents an extraordinary increase in the dimensions of financial activities during the brief millennium of the Greco-Roman era. As there was no real “economic” change in the agricultural sector, it must be assumed that the rents and taxes flowing into the hands of the elite formed the most significant change in economic activity between the beginning of the Bronze Age and the end of the Middle Ages. Hickey (2007, p. 302) demonstrated that in Late Antiquity the strategy was to lease the land on a large estate and collect rents from tenants in gold coins (nearly 60kg annually for one lucky family – after taxes) rather than employing hired labor and selling the harvest. Income accrued effortlessly to those fortunate enough to own large estates – without overworking the peasants as the managers of the Ur III period had sought to do more than two millennia earlier.

The economist Lewis (1954, p. 189) noted that if an agrarian land industrializes, the workers are drawn from “subsistence agriculture, casual labor, petty trade, domestic

service, wives and daughters.” He suggested that “the marginal productivity of labour” in societies with an “unlimited supply of labour [...] available at a subsistence wage” was “negligible, zero, or even negative” (1954, *passim*, esp. pp. 180, 189).

In the Ancient Near East, the production of the agricultural surplus required virtually no labor – and neither the pyramids nor the textile industries absorbed much labor either. These economies were hardly stretched to the limit: even if a good number of poor souls had to work hard, most did not. Some found work doing laundry, guarding doors, serving guests or taking messages. Yet most will have remained peasants tilling small plots inefficiently – and paying high rents, financing finance.

For these agrarian economies, “labor-saving technological innovation” was a *non sequitur*. For ancient policymakers, the problem was not absorbing that superfluous labor which contributed to the negative marginal utility of labor, but rather devising tasks allowing bureaucrats the means to allocate access to the abundant grain available. Pyramids were one solution, and textiles another.

Yet technology nevertheless developed in the small urban economies where the work of the craftsmen was appreciated. It seems that from the second half of the second millennium onwards, glass and faience production, for example, interested the elite, who purchased original stones and synthetic imitations. This nevertheless remained a cottage industry in comparison with the low-tech textiles which dominated industrial production throughout history.

Thus, despite extreme wealth and technological development over millennia, technology and craftsmanship were economically insignificant until the Industrial Revolution marginalized craftsmanship. Modern industrialization used low-skilled, low-wage urban labor (drawn from unproductive subsistence agriculture) to marginalize high-wage craftsmen (Allen 2015) while increasing productivity. Within two centuries or so, modern industrial overcapacity overtook the agricultural overcapacity of the Bronze Age.

From the Bronze Age onwards, financial realities determined decisions, with institutions aiming at production for the market and individuals aiming to avoid dependence on remunerated unskilled labor. This allows us to understand Lewis’ paradoxical conclusion that “capital can be created” by unproductive agrarian labor. The peasants of the ancient world inadvertently paid for the finance to support the craftsmen whose creativity was associated with labor. Overcapacity, rural poverty, and underemployment dominated the agricultural economies of the pre-Industrial World – while the agrarian hinterland provided a constant supply of increasing capital for financial investments.

Under an efficient financial regime, underemployed workers can generate capital by being pushed to work. Much of the work is pointless, onerous and badly rewarded but lets finance blossom (among other things, by lending money to those whose wages are inadequate – today and in the past). By aspiring to allocate grain to those who worked, the bureaucrats of the Bronze Age Near East set the world on the path to our “society based on labor” with “full employment.” Western economists have since transformed this Bronze Age bureaucratic policy into a modern industrial free enterprise dogma.

The economists postulate hypothetical links between prosperity, “productivity” and “labor” while disregarding the documented reality that economic history is about millennia of overcapacity impoverishing the quality of life through “work,” while generating financial wealth. This neglected reality of consistent “overcapacity” led to the “services”

economy of the Bronze Age being expanded in the “Post-Industrial” world, while the concept of “productivity” being associated with “labor” was retained.

## FURTHER READING AND CAVEATS

Englund (1991) is enlightening on details; for surveys of practices, see Cooney (2010), Powell (1987), Steinkeller and Hudson (2015), Valbelle (1985), and Warburton (1997). For references on ancient economies, see Jursa (2014), Warburton (2016), and the articles on economy, agriculture, and craftsmanship in Sasson (1995) and Bagnall (2013).

Emphasis here was on the contrast between the urban and rural economies of the ancient world and their relationship to our world. We have surveyed activities, results and implications, without distinguishing between “slaves” and “free” since “slaves” were effectively to be found in virtually all of the occupations, working alongside and occasionally employing the free (see e.g., Dandamaev 1984). Neglected was likewise the philosophies which could be extracted from the philology of “work” in Egyptian, Sumerian, Akkadian, Greek, and modern languages.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

# Social Tensions in the Ancient Near East

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*John Robertson*

Outside utopian fantasies, no human society has ever existed without tensions and conflict. If we had an Ancient Near Eastern counterpart of the *New York Times* or *Guardian*, we would readily recognize the social forces at work: the poor and weak being dominated by the wealthy and powerful; rural folk envious and skeptical of sophisticated, privileged city dwellers who mocked them as deplorable country bumpkins; natives disdainful and suspicious of immigrant outsiders.

In reconstructing tensions within Ancient Near Eastern societies we are stymied by the paucity and the partiality of our sources. With the exception of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and later Greco-Roman and Syriac sources, most of our written sources for the history of Ancient Near Eastern societies are hard won – or clandestinely acquired – fruits of archaeological excavation or of the study of often badly weathered, fragmented monuments, barely legible papyri or ostraca. Although thousands of documents are available to us, they do not provide a continuous or comprehensive record in time or space. Compounding these inadequacies, many of these documents were recovered from the large mounds that are the remains of ancient cities and especially of the powerful city-based institutions of temples and palaces, and thus may not be representative of most of the people who lived in the country.

Also, literacy in the Ancient Near East – even after the invention and spread of the Phoenician and Aramaic alphabets – generally was the prized possession of a tiny part of the population. The scholars and bureaucrats who produced most of the documents were city-dwelling men conscious of their special status as wielders of the tools of reading and writing – a status that they often owed to the powerful institutions they served. The records and works that they produced reflected those institutions' interests and perspectives. We can tease from the evidence, however, echoes of the Ancient Near Eastern “street.” Scholars have also used evidence about traditional societies in the contemporary

Middle East to develop complex reconstructions of ancient societies that incorporate non-urban components, thereby partially offsetting the urban prejudice of the ancient scribes.

## **Survival and Identity**

This essay focuses largely on two factors: (1) the imperative to ensure survival of the individual and the group by promoting access to the essential necessities of existence; and (2) the construction and demarcation of identity, recognizing that an individual might belong to different social groups and thus possess overlapping, complementary, or competing identities. Historically, such identities have been based on various criteria, including:

1. blood or kinship ties;
2. differences in ways of life, principally defined by a group's traditional mode of subsistence;
3. conflict between interests of rulers and interests of those whom they ruled, including the conflict between conquering or transplanted newcomers and conquered or indigenous inhabitants that developed with the formation of an empire;
4. differences based on ethnic identity or on a sense of others as "foreign" or "outsiders," and
5. differences created by conflicts of religious beliefs.

## **Survival, Environmental Instability, Societal Tension, and Change**

In northern Mesopotamia, Iran, Anatolia, Syria, and Palestine, food production was based on agriculture dependent on rainfall. Even a small reduction in the normal amount of precipitation could significantly diminish the harvest; periods of drought would result in famine, leading to undernourishment, disease, and death. But along the lower Tigris and Euphrates rivers and the Nile, where rainfall was insufficient to sustain agriculture, great civilizations were based on irrigation through trapping and distributing the rivers' waters. The rivers of Mesopotamia were notorious, however, for disastrous spring floods that wiped out a portion of the harvest. Sometimes one of the rivers left its banks and carved a new course, leaving settlements high and dry. On some occasions, a ruler upstream from a rival city diverted the river's flow in order to harm that rival. In Egypt, on the other hand, the Nile was famous for the regularity and beneficence of its annual summer flood, whose life-giving water and silt sustained Egyptian civilization. A flood too high or too low could spell disaster, however, reducing the area that could be cultivated, diminishing the harvest, and threatening the population's survival – and perhaps their sense of the king's efficacy and legitimacy.

Except for mythological tales of great floods, ancient sources reflected little awareness that even short-term environmental change could cause major societal conflict. But

modern scientists have reconstructed climatic shifts and changes in rivers' courses that might have caused the famines and population movements reflected in the textual and archaeological record. For example, the period 2200 to 2000 BCE witnessed a shift to a drier climate. These more arid conditions contributed to the decline and fall of the empire established by the Akkadian king Sargon and his grandson Naram-Sin, and to a decline in urban settlement and population. In Palestine especially, most of the major urban communities of this time seem to have been abandoned, and their former inhabitants turned to seminomadic pastoral herding supplemented with small-scale farming. The social instability involved must have been severe.

This period of increased aridity coincided in Egypt with the transition from the highly organized Old Kingdom to the decentralized, chaotic conditions of the First Intermediate Period. Increased aridity and consequently diminished rainfall in central Africa probably produced a series of low Nile floods. The Egyptian state's survival was linked to the efficacy of those floods. The literary composition known as the *Admonitions of Ipuwer* provided eloquent, if hyperbolic, testimony to the chaos of this calamitous time:

... A man looks upon his son as his enemy ...  
The virtuous man goes in mourning because of what has happened in the land ...  
Foreigners have become Egyptians everywhere ...  
The land is full of gangs, a man goes to plough with his shield ...  
Indeed, the ways are blocked, the roads are watched,  
Men sit in the bushes, until the night traveler comes, in order to plunder his load.  
What is upon him is taken away; he is thrashed with blows of a stick and criminally slain ...  
Indeed, the scribes of the land-register – their writings are destroyed, the grain of Egypt is  
common property.  
Indeed, the laws of the council-chamber are thrown out,  
Men walk on them in public places,  
Beggars break them up in the streets ...  
Beggars come and go in the Great Houses [law courts].  
Indeed, the children of princes are cast out in the streets ...  
The king has been disposed of by beggars.

(Hallo and Younger 1997, pp. 94–96)

This description might have been exaggerated for didactic effect or to add legitimacy to the ascension of a later new ruler. Nonetheless, it vividly recounts the chaos that ensued when society broke down and people's survival was threatened.

Some historians and climate scientists have posited that almost two millennia later, during the Ptolemaic era, Egypt was again plagued by a period of low Nile floods likely caused by an unusually large number of volcanic eruptions globally, spewing tons of ash and sulfur into the atmosphere, which led to the suppression of the African monsoon and therefore lower Nile floods. This heightened volcanic activity correlates closely with evidence of lower flood levels during the Ptolemaic era, along with textual references to popular revolts (most notably, a revolt at Thebes that began in 207 BCE and lasted for 20 years), priestly decrees to bolster royal authority, and increased hereditary land sales – all of which are evidence of socio-economic stress (Manning et al. 2017).

## Tensions among Farming Villagers, Pastoral Nomads, and City Dwellers

Scholars recognize three social categories based on way of life: peasant village farmers, beginning at least as early as the eighth millennium BCE, nomadic pastoral herders, who developed in response to the establishment of agricultural villages, probably by the sixth millennium BCE, and the inhabitants of urban settlements, starting with the first cities of Sumer, already well founded by the mid-fourth millennium. The boundaries between these categories, however, were permeable.

### *Village Peasant Farmers*

Ethnographic studies of traditional Arab societies reveal that social values in villages are egalitarian, and dominated by kinship ties and strong attachment to the land. Ancient texts from Mesopotamia, Syria, and Israel reflect the importance of village elders in regulating disputes both within and between villages and in representing their villages before state authority. For example, from around 1800 BCE the letters from the city of Mari, now on the Syrian–Iraqi border, show that Amorite farming villages were managed by headmen who were appointed by the palace administration. Women's informal social networks at both the intra- and inter-village levels likely promoted mutual support among village households as women worked together. They also enhanced inter-village cooperation, since women from other villages were sought as marriage partners; the resulting kinship webs helped to “maintain peace among contiguous settlements and increase the likelihood that related families would come to each other's assistance in times of economic or personal troubles” (Meyers 2003, pp. 190–192).

Nowadays conflict can erupt when the attachment to the land, water rights, or basic social values such as motherhood, marriage, and children, respect for parents and the elderly, and cooperation are threatened (Barakat 1993, pp. 55–56). Disputes tend to be resolved through mediation and reconciliation within the community itself, on the basis of custom and precedent, without resort to outside legal authority.

Social tensions in ancient villages were rarely mentioned in the records produced by the city-based scribes. Evidence of such tensions can be inferred, however, from the records of the administration of rural lands controlled by temple and royal authorities, and lands from which local villagers were required to deliver a cut of the harvest. In regions of rainfall agriculture, villages tend to be more isolated and dispersed, and so less susceptible to control by a central authority; they also manage their water resources locally and are more autonomous. But the early historical development of the state depended on its ability to dominate the countryside by controlling farmland and enforcing the delivery of crops by rural villagers. Villagers not only had to produce enough to feed themselves but also had to turn over part of their harvest in taxation, and perform required labor service as well. The palace records from Ebla in western Syria around 2350 BCE reveal the extension of palace control into the countryside, as the king, members of the royal family, and high officials were assigned lands in outlying villages. One such official, for example, was assigned more than 30 000 units of land that included fields in 21 different locales.

Personnel connected with the Ebla palace administration were regularly dispatched to collect the villagers' crops, and cultivation was an obligation fulfilled by forced laborers. These villagers also had to contribute livestock to the Ebla palace (Archi 1990, pp. 17–19).

Some of our best evidence of the extension of city-based interests into rural villages comes from the town of Nuzi, east of the Tigris in northern Mesopotamia, in a region along the interface of rainfall-based and irrigation-based cultivation. The more than 6500 cuneiform tablets recovered from Nuzi dating from 1500 to 1350 BCE document the activities of the royal elite, but also of a class of major landowners who had suburban residences at Nuzi but also owned land in villages outside the town. We also see a class of smaller landholders living at a subsistence level. Especially striking in these records is how they reveal “progressive economic polarization” and “general pauperization within the private economy” as small landholders, perhaps because of poor harvests or growing indebtedness, were bought out and reduced to tenant farmers or even debt slaves (Maidman 1995, pp. 943–944). This contravened a basic value of peasant village society, kin-based attachment to the land, and associated feelings against alienating that land outside the family. At Nuzi, this fundamental social value was circumvented by the “adoption” of the wealthy buyer into the family of the seller, after which the seller might give the buyer his “inheritance” reciprocated by a “gift” that equaled the purchase price of the land. The seller and his family might continue to work the land and support themselves as tenants of the new owner, but their status had changed from independence to dependence. We see in the Hebrew Bible the importance of the family retaining its ancestral lands. For example, in Numbers 36:5–9, Moses ordered that the daughters of Zelophehad marry a man from a clan of their father’s tribe on the principle that “No inheritance shall be transferred from one tribe to another.”

Kinship ties and attachment to the land were similarly important social values in the irrigation-based farming villages of the Tigris–Euphrates floodplain and the Nile. However, because in Lower Mesopotamia cultivation was linked to the irrigation water from the rivers and canal systems, villages tended to be clustered near waterways and were less dispersed. This made them more susceptible to control by city-based managers and landlords, especially during periods of strong political authority such as the Akkad, Ur III, and Old Babylonian dynasties (2334–1595 BCE). These kings’ inscriptions celebrated their construction and maintenance of extensive canal systems that provided water for the cultivation of thousands of acres and facilitated the transport of the harvest to temple and royal granaries. Study of earliest Mesopotamian civilization has often focused on the roles of “Great Institutions,” the temple and the palace. While the evidence shows an important component of private land ownership in the Old Babylonian period (2000–1595 BCE) alongside lands controlled by the palace, the records of the mid- and late third millennium BCE are most informative about the temple- and palace-based administration of huge cultivated acreages. Records from the Sumerian city of Girsu dating to the mid-third millennium BCE reveal highly organized central planning by city-based bureaucrats who organized planting and harvesting, as well as year-round water management that was carried out by residents of the countryside, from whom the urban authority required labor service. After the harvest, the city-based managers extracted from individuals a grain tax that was then transported to city granaries (Powell 1990). The records of Girsu’s scribes showed no concern for the personal interests of the villagers and workers whose lives they were organizing.

In Egypt most of the administrative records were written on perishable and thus long-disappeared materials, or they lie buried in ancient towns whose remains lie beneath their modern successors. Our reconstruction of Egyptian rural village life must therefore be based on monumental or official texts often designed to extol the virtues of the pharaoh's rule or on literary compositions that were intended more to edify other Egyptians than than to inform us now.

What emerges is an image of a seemingly tranquil countryside, where city-based elites set themselves up in villas to escape squalid urban existence. The villages come off as peaceful but crowded, their inhabitants contented with life within their immediate families but also respectful of their obligations within the larger community. Tomb paintings commissioned to portray an idyllic situation depicted people working together in the epitome of communal harmony and solidarity.

The reality was quite different. The image perpetuated by royal documents, of an all-powerful king with monolithic control over the country's resources, has not stood up well to scholarly analysis. The management of irrigation, in fact, seems largely to have been left in local hands. Nonetheless, especially during periods of effectively centralized authority (the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms), the royal administration strove to ensure constant revenues to support itself and its monumental construction projects, "collecting, storing, and disbursing revenue in grains, animals and animal products, raw materials, and finished items" (O'Connor 1995: 320–1).

The official version of all this effort promoted an image of stability and contentment, but the intrusion of government agents empowered to help organize cultivation, ensure the collection of grain taxes, and compel men to leave their families and villages for months in forced labor caused stress within village societies, fostering a sense of shared identity among villagers who felt hard pressed by the state's demands. Abuse of a peasant by a state official was the theme of the Middle Kingdom composition *The Eloquent Peasant*, in which a simple farmer was robbed and beaten by the subordinate of a high steward. The *Satire of the Trades* similarly suggested that peasant farmers were subject to ridicule and abuse by the elite servants of the state, although we cannot be certain whether this text simply employed exaggeration for the purposes of satire. The farmer:

wails more than the guinea fowl, his voice is louder than a raven's; his fingers are swollen and stink to excess. He is weary ... A peasant is not called a man, beware of it ... See, there's no profession without a boss, except for the scribe; he is the boss. Hence if you know writing, it will do better for you than those professions I've set before you, each more wretched than the other. (Hallo and Younger 1997, pp. 122–125)

The literary composition known as the *Instruction of Amenemope* from around 1000 BCE enjoined the royal "overseer of grains" to be fair in his dealings, and listed several reprehensible acts the scribe should not commit – thereby suggesting how rural farmers were all too often victimized:

Do not cheat a man through pen on scroll, the god abhors it; ... do not assess a man who has nothing, and thus falsify your pen. If you find a large debt against a poor man, make it into three parts; forgive two, let one stand ... Beware of disguising the measure, so as to falsify its

fractions ... Measure according to its true size ... Do not accept a farmer's dues and then assess him so as to injure him. (Hallo and Younger 1997, pp. 119–120)

### *Pastoral Nomads*

Modern studies of traditional nomadic groups indicate that fundamental to their social values and organization is the framework of blood and kinship ties, within which are embedded values of tribal solidarity, egalitarianism, communal ownership, and consensus-based decision-making. Nomadic groups tend to resist control by city authority, and during periods of weak central power they assert their autonomy in the countryside. Nomads tend to disdain village farmers as weak and submissive and their attachment to the land as humiliating; they similarly regard city dwellers as corrupted, soft, and cowardly. In return, farm villagers see the nomads as parasites, “irresponsible, uprooted vagabonds bent on raids and thievery” (Barakat 1993, pp. 54–55).

We must also bear in mind that, for most of early antiquity, we are not dealing with camel-herding Bedouin, who do not appear on the Middle Eastern social landscape until after 900 BCE, but with sheep and goat nomads. Because their flocks as well as the donkeys upon which these groups moved needed regular access to water and pasturage, these nomads did not venture as far into the desert. Their lifestyle was more tied to the peasant villagers, and sometimes they farmed part-time to supplement their food supply.

Archaeological techniques to detect the remains of nomad camps promise to further our understanding of ancient nomadic societies. Otherwise, our knowledge of the social organization, values, and tensions within Ancient Near Eastern nomadic groups is meager. Their tribal organization was evident in the Mari letters, with their many references to Amorite pastoralists and villagers who were grouped under a number of tribal divisions and subdivisions (Fleming 2004). The Mari texts also revealed that the government's relations with Amorite groups were volatile, but could include cooperation or co-optation, as exemplified in the use of Amorite leaders to assemble tribesmen for labor and military service. Further east, the ruler of the city of Eshnunna married the daughter of a local Amorite chieftain in the hope of managing tensions with local tribesmen (Whiting 1987, pp. 48–49). A less carnal symbiosis was celebrated in the Sumerian composition *The Herdsman and the Farmer*, which highlighted the complementary activities and products of the two disputants (Averbeck 2003, p. 52).

What looms large is the nomads' propensity to prey upon villages, and thereby undercut the central political authority. The nomads' aggression against villages and cities might have stemmed from a periodically heightened need for agricultural commodities, perhaps after an environmental breakdown of village farming societies, response to military harassment, or simply the allure of wealth and opportunity (Schwartz 1995, pp. 254–255). The Akkad dynasty's fall was traditionally ascribed to the Gutians, non-sedentary mountaineers from the Zagros region. The history of late third and early second millennium BCE Mesopotamia was dominated by the encroachment of Amorite tribes and their gradual assumption of political control. The towns of the Hittite kingdom in Anatolia, even its great capital city Hattusha, were under constant threat of raids by the non-sedentary peoples known as the Kashka, who inhabited the region along the southern Black Sea coast.

Ancient sources reflected the scorn and apprehension with which the city-based intelligentsia regarded nomads. Mesopotamian literature often ridiculed Amorite manners and customs. Egyptian literature projected a similarly dim view of pastoral nomads, the “Asiatic” desert dwellers who infiltrated the eastern Nile Delta to weather the summer months. The Middle Kingdom Prophecies of Neferti reflected wariness of them: “The land is burdened with misfortune because of those looking for food, Asiatics roaming the land” (Hallo and Younger 1997, p. 108). Finally, a New Kingdom letter described them as thieves who hid in the bushes, who stood more than seven feet tall and had wild faces, and whose “thoughts are not pretty” (Hallo and Younger 2002, p. 13).

### ***City Dwellers***

Cities were the pre-eminent centers of political authority and hubs for the economic activities and administration of the villages around them, and this is also why they are our chief source of documentation concerning societal values, organization, and conflict in general. Their populations were large, dense, diverse, and internally differentiated into socio-economic classes. They were places where internal social tensions festered. Cities and their inhabitants were resented from the outside, by villagers and nomads alike, as intruders who demanded the products of their labors or tried to control their movements. At the same time, though, the wealth and opportunities that cities represented had a strong attraction for people of the countryside.

Old, traditional urban centers of the modern Middle East comprise a mosaic of quarters and subquarters differentiated by ethnic, religious, or socio-economic characteristics and relatively self-sufficient, even insular. We ought not simply to conclude that similar conditions typified ancient cities of the region. The internal structure of ancient Egyptian cities is extremely poorly known because those cities long ago disappeared under later occupation. A similar dearth of physical evidence holds true for most of the rest of the Near East, although the evidence from some regions is more substantial, such as the residential areas at Ur and Eshnunna, and at the site of Mashkan-shapir. The waterways within these cities determined internal geography, along with streets that paralleled or ran into them. At both Eshnunna and Mashkan-shapir, the blocks demarcated by these streets encompassed about 1 hectare (about 2.5 acres), which, as it so happens, is “both the average size of small Mesopotamian village sites and the size of residential neighborhoods – the face-to-face communities that served as the building blocks of those pre-industrial cities outside Mesopotamia that have been studied” (Stone 1995a, p. 240). Rich and poor lived next to each other, at close quarters, in houses along intricate networks of narrow, winding lanes, similar to what one finds today in the older quarters of Middle Eastern cities.

Mesopotamian sources suggest that one’s residence in a local neighborhood or quarter was an important determinant of social and legal identity, and that one’s more immediate family ties mattered more to city dwellers than did tribal or clan allegiance. Local quarters were monitored by officials empowered to issue warnings or convene hearings about matters of public concern, such as houses in dangerous disrepair or domestic animals that might cause harm. Local residents could also “be called upon … to investigate the conduct and chastity of a woman who repudiated her husband” or be enjoined to watch out for strangers (Greengus 1995, p. 469).

Some prayers to the sun god suggest that, for the Mesopotamian city dweller, peril was almost omnipresent, and inescapable without divine assistance. One prayer beseeched the god “because of the evil of unfavorable signs and portents which are present in my house, which have stymied me … On account of the evil omen of a snake which I saw come right into my house for its prey, I am afraid, anxious, frightened … On account of this dog that has urinated on me, I am afraid, anxious, frightened …” (Foster 1996, pp. 633–634). Another prayer asked for deliverance from anything “unlucky for mankind,” “whether, as I walked through a street, an accursed man touched me, or, when I crossed a square, I stepped in a puddle of wash water, or, I walked over nail pairings, shavings from an armpit, a worn-out shoe, a broken belt, a leather sack (holding things) for black magic, a leper’s scales …” (Foster 1996, p. 653). Compounding such seemingly happenstance threats to urban dwellers was the potential harm from an equally dangerous, insidious human source lurking within their own society: witches, or sorcerers. In Mesopotamian sources, sorcery is often equated with spittle-magic or dirt-magic, reflecting a belief that a sorcerer (frequently identified as female) could use those substances to bewitch a victim. The Laws of Hammurabi and the Neo-Babylonian Laws, as well as the Hittite Laws, in many instances prescribe that sorcerers be put to death – surely an indication of how seriously was taken the threat of malevolently intended magic.

Although Egyptians seem not to have been similarly preoccupied with the threat of witchcraft, life in Egyptian towns seems to have been no less frightening, given the many magical devices their residents employed in hopes of warding off dangers. Expressive evidence of this was discovered at Deir el-Medina, a New Kingdom settlement for the craftsmen who built and decorated tombs in the Valley of the Kings. Hence it cannot be regarded as entirely typical of larger Egyptian towns. The stone doorways of houses bore inscriptions pleading for divine protection, and the houses themselves often contained altars and niches for statuettes. Bed footboards and wooden headrests sometimes bore carvings of protective deities. Throughout Egypt, people wore amulets to ward off dangers, real and imagined – some of them listed as life’s main hazards, “fevers, childbirth, snake and scorpion bites, accidents on pilgrimages, journeys by water, and the collapse of houses” (Pinch 1995, pp. 364–365). A modern observer might consign much of this to the realm of superstition, but surely it testifies to an underlying tension and strongly felt need for protection against the perils of daily living.

Deir el-Medina is famous for its many inscribed potsherds upon which the tomb workers and their overseers, living for days at a time in huts near their actual work site, dispatched messages back to the settlement. Vividly human, they dealt with a wide range of concerns, from making sure laundry was done to letting a colleague know that his wife was cheating on him, to workers arranging to have items prepared for their own tombs. The buffeting and strains of personal relationships in a tightly knit, interdependent community emerge starkly. In one example, a worker vented his frustration with his overseer:

What’s the meaning of your getting into such a bad mood as you are in that nobody’s speech can enter your ears as a consequence of your inflated ego? You are not a man since you are unable to make your wives pregnant like your fellowmen … You abound in being exceedingly stingy. You give no one anything. (Wente 1990, p. 149)

Such tensions could erupt into conflict, even violence. To resolve grievances internally, and avoid subjecting them to royal interference, the community resorted to peer pressure and to the convening of a local tribunal. These methods likely served to reinforce communal solidarity and responsibility (Lorton 1995, p. 359).

Evidence from Deir el-Medina as well as from larger ancient towns and cities all across the Near East documented a more polar relationship of power and status: that between master and slave. Slavery in the Ancient Near East was never as extensive or as fundamental to basic economic systems as it was in the Roman Empire or the American South before the Civil War. Nonetheless, slaves appeared in very early documents, frequently as captives of military expeditions (mostly female at first; males were apparently maimed or slain). Slaves often provided the urban temples and palaces with important menial labor; often they were set to weaving. One's slave status might be marked by a haircut, branding, tattooing, or even mutilation. Some slaves worked as craftsmen and might accumulate personal wealth and purchase their freedom, although this was seldom feasible. We also find evidence of debt slavery. A debtor who was unable to repay a loan of barley with interest rates as high as 33% or even 50% placed his family and even himself into servitude to a creditor.

Whether resulting from indebtedness or captivity, enslavement fueled resentment and class consciousness. Letters, legal texts including the Laws of Hammurabi as well as the Hittite Laws, and treaties referred to the capture and return of runaway slaves, whose flight seems to have been a persistent and serious problem. Disdain for slaves as untrustworthy, as well as whiny, complaining, and lazy was clear in proverbs, as in "The dirt was not apparent to the slave girl. To her lady it kept increasing." And the lustful slave owner was warned of future problems as the proverb advised, "Do not have sexual intercourse with your slave girl, she will call you 'Traitor!'" and another noted, "Your slave girl who has been brought down from the mountains, she brings pleasure, but she also brings danger." The proverbs knew too that the slave resented the status (Snell 2003, p. 16).

## Tensions between Ruler and Ruled

The following discussion of ruler vs. ruled tensions needs to be tempered with the recognition that the extent of control that even the most celebrated of ancient Near Eastern rulers claimed may reflect more wishful thinking than everyday reality – and that the much-bemoaned collapses of great states might in fact have had relatively little negative impact on the populations supposedly ruled by those states, bringing them escape or liberation instead (Scott 2017; Richardson 2017). Nonetheless, we can contrast officially propagated images of ideal rulership and exercise of authority with evidence of how rulers successfully regulated these tensions or exacerbated them. The sources predictably glorified the virtues and beneficent intentions of the rulers, and omitted mention of problems or protest. An Akkadian proverb succinctly asserted the centrality of kingship in Mesopotamian society: "People without a king are (like) sheep without a shepherd" (Foster 1996, p. 338). In his elaborate "code" of laws, Hammurabi of Babylon called himself the shepherd whom the gods established "to make justice prevail in the land, to abolish the wicked and the evil, to prevent the weak from oppressing the strong, to rise

like the sun god Šamaš over all humankind, to illuminate the land” (Roth 1997, pp. 76–77). Instructions given to officials dispatched by the Hittite court expressed similar sentiments about dealing fairly with subjects. For instance, in the Instructions for Commanders of Border Garrisons, frontier governors were enjoined to judge fairly the cases brought before them:

Let no one take a bribe. He is not to make the stronger case the weaker, or the weaker the stronger one. Do what is just ... Judge a case for anyone who has one and make things right. If a man’s slave, or a man’s female slave or a widow has a case, judge it for them and make things right. (Hallo and Younger 1997, pp. 224–225)

Mesopotamian and Hittite legal documents, as well as the Hebrew Bible, show that royal officials might participate with town or city elders in adjudicating local grievances, and were especially relied upon in cases involving treason or homicide. Literary compositions of Middle and New Kingdom Egypt exhorted royal officials to be fair-minded and generous in their dealings with commoners. Even more eloquent, though suspiciously overblown, testimony to what one authority has termed the “justice, charity, understanding and kindness which formed the guiding ethic of Egyptian public life” is found in the biography written on the wall of the tomb of the Eighteenth Dynasty royal vizier Rekhmire in the 1400s BCE:

I judged both [the insignificant] and the influential; I rescued the weak man from the strong man; I deflected the fury of the evil man and subdued the greedy man in his hour ... I succored the widow who has no husband; I established the son and heir on the seat of his father. I gave [bread to the hungry], water to the thirsty, and meat, oil and clothes to him who had nothing ... I was not at all deaf to the indigent. Indeed I never took a bribe from anyone. (James 1984, p. 57)

To promote a sense of solidarity between rulers and their subjects, and perhaps to buffer themselves against a potentially restive population, ruling authorities sometimes transcended the good intentions of such “official versions” and effected more specific measures to provide economic relief, or even psychological release, for their subjects. For instance, Old Babylonian kings periodically issued edicts that canceled taxes owed to the palace and provided relief to those who sold property or even members of their family to pay off their debts. We find a parallel to this in the Hebrew Bible’s Book of Jeremiah chapter 34, where King Zedekiah freed debt slaves and canceled debts. Such actions surely were welcomed by most of the populace, though resisted by wealthier citizens deprived of repayment. Hittites in economic distress could petition the king for relief from tax burdens or forced labor, and in one Hittite–Hurrian bilingual text the Hittite ruler was advised to issue a proclamation releasing citizens from debt slavery (Hoffner 1995, pp. 562–563).

The alleviation of societal tensions was not limited to cancellation of debts, however. The Egyptian year was replete with religious festivals sponsored by the many temples. A feature of these festivals was the colorful procession of the god’s statue from the temple through the local community, where it delivered oracles intended to resolve questions and

disputes, but also intended, from the point of view of temple and royal authorities, “to reinforce devotion to god and pharaoh” (O’Connor 1995, p. 322). These festivals also featured the distribution of food and beer to the surrounding communities, as well as a ribald carnival atmosphere complete with acrobats, dancers, and musicians. The resulting merrymaking and general inebriation at official expense strengthened the psychological bond between the ruler and the masses.

But those ruled did suffer at the hands of their rulers, whose foremost motivation was to perpetuate their own power and prestige and ensure their revenue flow. In sharp contrast to the benevolence and fair-mindedness implied in Hammurabi’s laws and his successors’ economic-relief edicts, Neo-Babylonian literary texts from the middle of the first millennium BCE alluded to abuses and suggested that they were not always rectified by royal intervention. The composition “King of Justice” told of how the “strong would oppress the weak, while they had insufficient means to go to court for redress. The rich would take the belongings of the lowly. Neither governor nor prince would appear before the judge on behalf of the widow or orphan … a judge would accept a bribe or present and would not consider (the case),” or would throw away the tablet recording a legal decision, thereby leaving a plaintiff with no legal redress. Another text advised the ruler to regard “due process” and maintain the traditional privileges of the old cities of Babylonia, taking care not to impose fines or imprison their citizens, or force them to labor or abuse their fields or flocks – all of which surely implied that past rulers had indeed infringed upon old privileges (Foster 1996, pp. 745, 748).

Some of the most eloquent testimony to the abuse of subjects by their rulers is to be found in the Hebrew Bible. Its compilations of laws and wisdom literature abound in evidence concerning the social values and organization of early Israel. Implicit in these sources were standards and expectations of just kingship – among them, the protection of the poor and weak – to which Israel’s kings were to be accountable. Though we must remember that the books of the prophets were compiled by learned men with their own political and social agendas, it is clear in the prophetic books that Israelite kings all too often were guilty of abusing their subjects. The prophet Amos, for instance, dwelt on the many sins of Israel’s ruling elite: “... you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain ... for I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins – you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate” (Amos 5:11–12). Similarly, Isaiah condemned the rulers of Israel “who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you make the orphans your prey!” and predicted their demise at the hands of mighty Assyria (10:1–2).

The rise of Assyria was the harbinger of a sequence of imperial systems that introduced new elements into the dynamic of ruler versus ruled. The looting, destruction, killing, rape, mutilation, enslavement, and destruction of families (and concomitant production of widows and orphans) that typically accompanied military conquest had been grim facts of ancient life from earliest recorded times. The imperial systems of the first millennium BCE, however, employed still other means of ensuring political domination and crushingly systematic economic exploitation. Most famously under the Assyrians, wealth and resources were coercively extracted and transported to the imperial capitals; local economies in the empire – and with them the livelihoods and prosperity of much of the population – likely were devastated.

From the standpoint of local communities, especially destructive was the mass deportation and relocation of conquered people to regions far from their homelands. Although such practices were employed at least as early as the Bronze Age Hittite conquests, their effects are best known and depicted graphically in the wake of the Assyrian destruction of the Israelite kingdom of Samaria in 722 BCE and the later Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. The Display Inscription of the Assyrian king Sargon II records that 22,290 people were deported from Samaria, and in that process families were broken up, and the deportees were forced to subsist on meager rations (Younger 2003). Upon reaching their destinations, either Assyria itself or the region of Media in Iran, they were compelled to toil as agricultural or construction laborers, often living (or not) on too small rations which rendered them more susceptible to disease, or they were settled in regions where farming was only marginally possible. The resulting psychological trauma and deprivation of identity were vividly expressed in the Book of Lamentations with its heart-rending recollection of the devastation and abject humiliation felt by the people of Jerusalem upon their expulsion by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar:

Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to aliens. We have become orphans, fatherless; our mothers are like widows. We must pay for the water we drink; the wood we get must be bought. With a yoke on our necks we are hard driven; we are weary, we are given no rest ... We get our bread at the peril of our lives ... Our skin is as black as an oven from the scorching heat of famine. Women are raped in Zion, virgins in the towns of Judah. Princes are hung up by their hands; no respect is shown to the elders. Young men are compelled to grind, and boys stagger under loads of wood. (Lamentations 5:2–13)

Because of fear or resentment of political authority, or perhaps as refugees from social or economic calamity, people might simply opt out of being ruled and become stateless persons, moving out beyond the reach of authority. This is one possible interpretation for the term *habiru*, an imprecisely understood social designation that appeared as early as the late third millennium and throughout most of the second millennium BCE. In the Mari letters *habiru* were brigands; several centuries later they were similarly (though not exclusively) referred to as outlaws who based themselves in the mountainous areas of Palestine and Syria, beyond the reach of local rulers and Egyptian imperial authorities (Morrison 1992, p. 1157; Lemche 1992, pp. 6–7). Neither exclusively nomadic nor settled, nor identifiable with a specific ethnic group, the *habiru* represented yet another significant aspect of the complex relationship of ruler versus ruled in the Ancient Near East.

## Societal Tensions Produced by Ethnic Differences or Alieness

Tensions ascribable to ethnic differences were seldom detected in our sources; a tendency toward coexistence and assimilation more often emerged. For example, there is little evidence of ethnic tension between the Sumerians and Akkadians in early Mesopotamia. Likewise, Amorites appear to have settled peacefully among Sumerians and Akkadians as early as the late third millennium BCE, and the Kassites who ruled Babylonia after the fall

of Hammurabi's dynasty became so thoroughly assimilated that we still have little knowledge of their language. Nuzi's population around 1500 BCE included several possibly ethnic groups with no evidence of friction among them. Egyptian sources evince scorn for the Asiatic Hyksos who ruled Lower Egypt during the Second Intermediate period, but during the following New Kingdom, Asiatics who had arrived as nomads or slaves were assimilated, individuals bearing Asiatic names entered the ranks of officialdom, and Asiatic deities were absorbed into the Egyptian pantheon. Nubians and Libyans also were incorporated into the ranks of the Egyptian military. By and large, then, being of different ethnicity did not necessarily entail social disadvantage.

Complicating this assessment, though, is an Akkadian proverb: "Flesh is flesh, blood is blood, alien is alien, foreigner is foreigner" (Foster 1996, p. 346). Being a foreigner could indeed make a person "other" if a foreigner did not adopt local norms and customs. Thus, in Mesopotamia, to the extent that they remained beyond the pale of civilized behavior, Gutians and Amorites were seen as barbarians. Until they actually began to reside in Egypt, surrounding peoples were similarly regarded as despicable and uncivilized. The Hebrew Bible also revealed that resident aliens might be subject to exclusion, or be forbidden to own land (Avalos 1995, pp. 623–624). Especially notable is the stigma that was imposed on foreigners from Syria and southern Babylonia whom the Assyrians brought to Samaria to replenish its population after deporting the Israelites. Centuries later, the Jews regarded their descendants, the Samaritans, as pariahs who were not allowed membership in the Jewish community (Lemche 1995, p. 1213).

Although the instances seem rather few and far between, on several occasions, elements within ruled or subject societies engaged in significant dissent, rioted, or even rebelled violently against established authority. One of the best-known instances of the latter involved the Jews of Palestine. The Biblical Books of the Maccabees describe the Maccabee revolt against the Seleucids between 167 and 160 BCE, after the Seleucids had desecrated the Jerusalem temple and attempted to extirpate Jewish ritual; and the Jewish revolts of 66–70 (described by Flavius Josephus in *The Jewish War*) and 135 CE, when the Jews of Palestine rose up in violent rebellion against Roman domination, only to have Roman legions smash the rebels, killing thousands and devastating Jerusalem and its temple in the process.

Roman authority in the Near East could even be challenged by Roman citizens. By the fifth and sixth centuries CE, many cities of the eastern Roman empire (including Jerusalem, Antioch, and Constantinople) featured loud, boisterous, sometimes violent circus factions – most notably, the Blues and Greens, thus named for the chariot-racing teams, identified by those colors, that competed in public arenas – most famously, the Hippodrome at Constantinople. By the sixth century, the Blues and Greens had become large and powerful, and had taken charge not only of chariot racing, but other spectacles as well, from gymnastics to wild animals. They had also become vehicles for expressing dissent and criticism of imperial policy, especially at the Hippodrome, where the emperor enjoyed a private box (accessed directly from the imperial palace) where he could be cheered by the crowd or else (incited by members of the Blues and Greens) serenaded with chants to protest imperial policies. In 532, this dissent exploded into violence when hostility to the emperor Justinian's higher taxes, aggravated by the activism of the Blues and Greens, led to the Nika riots. After setting fire to the center of the city and torching the basilica of Hagia

Sophia, the rioters had to be put down by imperial troops, at a cost of as many as 30 000 lives. Controlling the poor, underemployed masses in Near Eastern cities posed a constant challenge for the emperors during late antiquity, a time when “the huge religious and political changes that the Roman Empire underwent … contributed to deracination and a loss of social equilibrium. The social mixture was explosive” (Mitchell 2007, p. 137).

Finally, the late-antique history of the Sassanid Persian empire furnishes an example of an attempt to extirpate social tensions between aristocratic elite and rural peasantry through a kind of “social engineering” rooted in religious doctrine – in this instance, Zoroastrianism (or Mazdaism), the dualistic religion championed by the Sassanid shahs. Inherent in Zoroastrianism is an imperative to establish a correct order of the cosmos. As described by Crone (2012), in sixth-century villages in eastern Iran, a local attempt to fulfill that imperative took specific form in a social movement, rooted in a local interpretation of Zoroastrianism, that fought back against aristocratic domination of the villagers’ land and their women, because they deemed that domination a threat to that correct order. As inspired by the preaching of a prophet known as Mazdak, this movement attempted to re-install that proper order by enjoining its members to abandon any claims to private property (thereby hoping to keep family-owned land from being divided up by aristocrat outsiders) and by instituting polyandrous marriage, entailing men’s equal access to women (and thereby preventing the aristocrats from possessing them). This movement culminated in a rebellion in which the villagers “emptied the granaries and the harems of the nobility” until Shah Khosrau I (531–579) brutally quelled it (Brown 2013).

## Tensions Produced by Religious Differences

The mention of ostensibly religion-based antagonism between the later Samaritans and the Jews of Judaea leads to a more general observation: except for the conflicts stemming from differences in religious belief that figured in the Hebrew Bible, Ancient Near Eastern societies seem conspicuous in the almost complete absence of such tensions. Indeed, the sources reflect a general toleration and inclusiveness with regard to the gods and cults of foreigners or newly arrived people. Noteworthy is the syncretism in Ancient Near Eastern religions, that is, the process by which attributes and beliefs associated with one deity were transferred and melded with those of another. A distinctive feature of Egyptian religion during the New Kingdom was the acceptance of Asiatic deities. In a similar vein, the Mittanian king Tushrata told Amunhotep III (1390–1353 BCE) that he was sending to the Egyptian court the statue of the goddess Shaushka of Nineveh, “mistress of all lands,” and said, “May Shaushka, the mistress of heaven, protect us, my brother and me, 100 000 years, and may our mistress grant both of us great joy … Is Shaushka for me alone my god(dess), and for my brother not his god(dess)?” (Moran 1992, pp. 61–62).

For the era prior to the conquest of the Near East by Alexander the Great, at least two episodes, both of them in Egypt, may have either engendered or been the result of tensions stemming from religious differences. Most famous was the religious reformation attempted by the pharaoh Akhenaten (1353–1336 BCE), who temporarily proscribed the cults of the many gods of Egypt in favor of his favored deity, the sun disk, called *Aten*. Although later Egyptians reversed his heresy and reviled Akhenaten for this attempt to

upset the established order, we know little of the broader social impact of his policy. To the extent that local religious festivals, with their customary distributions of food and drink to the populace, might have been affected, the impact could have been significant, but there is no evidence of religiously motivated persecution of common people in Egypt during this era.

The other episode occurred many centuries later, during the time of Persian domination. By this time a Jewish garrison had been established in southern Egypt, on the island of Elephantine. Aramaic texts from there indicate that this group's relations with the indigenous community were marred during the late fifth century BCE when conflict with the priests of the local Egyptian god resulted in the burning down of the Jewish shrine to their god, Yahweh, as well as the death of some of the Egyptians at the hands of the Jews. We can speculate that differences in religious belief or custom may have been a contributing factor.

Whatever the reasons for these events, the emergence and spread of exclusionary monotheisms in the form of, first, Judaism and, then, Christianity – along with the emergence of Zoroastrianism in Persia – between the mid-first millennium BCE and the seventh century CE injected a new and polarizing source of tensions into Ancient Near Eastern societies: the fervent assertion of – and insistence on – the belief in one supreme, universal deity, coupled with the rejection of “false” gods and beliefs, along with animosity towards, and even persecution of, their adherents. And ironically, within the communities of those ostensibly universalizing religious systems would emerge differences of belief and practice that often belied their universalizing aims. Providing a comprehensive or detailed description of how these tensions emerged and played out in Ancient Near Eastern societies is well beyond what can be attempted here. Nonetheless, a broad overview can spotlight some of their major causes and features.

## **Divisions and Tensions within Judaism and Christianity**

The several centuries after Alexander the Great's conquest of Judah witnessed its political domination first by the Ptolemaic and then the Seleucid dynastic successors of Alexander, along with significant intrusion – as well as assimilation – of Hellenistic Greek cultural influence. After the expulsion of the Seleucids and almost a century of rule under the increasingly Hellenized Jewish Hasmonean high priest-kings, Judaea and Jerusalem were conquered by Rome in 63 BCE and essentially remained under Roman/Byzantine domination until the seventh-century CE Muslim conquest. The Jewish response to external political domination and cultural intrusion during this time spawned a variety of sects that divided the Jewish community, as well as energized political-social movements that were often rooted in past history as recounted in the Hebrew Bible.

By the late first century BCE, the most prominent Jewish sects were the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Sadducees were an urban-based, deeply Hellenized priestly elite whose power and authority were tied directly to the Jerusalem temple and to their kinship ties to the earlier Hasmonean monarchy. They also were staunch proponents of the supremacy of the Written Law, or Torah, and rejected the validity of the Oral Law. In contrast, the

Pharisees were religious scholars and lay teachers who were closely linked to the urban middle class and opposed the inroads of Greek culture beyond its more superficial aspects. In stark contrast to the Sadducees, they asserted the validity of the Oral Law and professed belief in resurrection after death, which the Sadducees rejected. Also present in considerable numbers were ascetic, quasi-monastic groups like the Essenes who adopted practices like celibacy and communal poverty in a quest to separate themselves from the corruption, impiety, and impurity that characterized Jewish urban society. Likely among such groups were the inhabitants of the community at Qumran near the Dead Sea, whose members are often credited with the celebrated Dead Sea Scrolls, which were discovered nearby.

Not provided in our sources from this time is detailed knowledge of the life and customs of the rural countryside. Yet it was this element that gave much of the support for a series of first-century CE Jewish “prophets” and would-be kings and messiahs, all of whom drew popular legitimacy from prophetic and royal prototypes known from biblical tradition. These men led rebellions against Roman authority (and its Jewish urban collaborators) that drew much of their momentum from a rural peasantry who chafed under the yoke of Roman tribute and taxes, as well as the required tithes to the temple and its priesthood elite, and who sought social justice that would lead to the re-establishment of a traditional, more egalitarian society to liberate them from those burdens. All of these rebellious political-social movements were crushed in turn by Roman military might, as was the Jewish Revolt of 66–70 CE, which culminated in the destruction of the temple at Jerusalem and, with it, the Sadducees, whose authority and status – and existence – were linked umbilically to the temple. That utterly devastating revolt was fomented in part by atrocities wrought by a Jewish Zealot group known as the Sicarii (“dagger-men”), an urban anti-Roman group that carried out terror acts such as the assassination of Jewish high-priests who collaborated with Roman authority. Although common people might themselves be victims of their depredations, the Sicarii sometimes fought on the behalf of the common people – for example, when they destroyed public archives in order to destroy records of debts.

Even as the Sadducees were being erased from the mosaic of Jewish society, another Jewish sect was beginning to come into its own: the Nazarenes, inspired by the life and teachings ascribed to Yeshua (Jesus) of Nazareth and his followers’ belief that he had been the messiah promised to the Jews. The New Testament’s Acts of the Apostles, along with the letters (“epistles”) ascribed to Saul/St Paul of Tarsus (including those to the fledgling Christian communities in Ephesus and Galatia in Asia Minor), provide abundant testimony to tensions between Jewish Christians and mainstream Jews, on the one hand, and tensions within the early Christian communities – and more specifically, between the Jewish Christian leaders such as Peter and James at Jerusalem, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, pro-Gentile leaders, chiefly Paul himself, over the question of the degree to which non-Jewish converts were to be required to abide by the Mosaic law and by Jewish customs such as circumcision and food prohibitions. The early Christian leadership eventually reached an accommodation that eased Gentile entry into the community of believers; and that accommodation was sealed by the virtual destruction of the Jewish Christian community at Jerusalem in the wake of the revolt of 66–70.

That accommodation laid the foundations for an ascendancy of Christianity – after a period of intermittent persecution by Roman authorities – to become an officially legalized

religion under the emperor Constantine (who in 330 also established a “New Rome” for the Roman Empire at the site of the Greek colony of Byzantium, which came to be known henceforth as Constantinople) and, eventually, by the late fourth century, the official state religion of the empire under Theodosius I. But beginning as early as the second century, Christian communities across the Near East had been riven by conflicts often centered on Christology – specifically, the relationship between the postulated divine and human natures of Jesus Christ. The conflicts went well beyond the purely theological realm, affecting political relationships both within the imperial court at Constantinople and between the court and portions of its empire in the Near East. The ecumenical Council of Nicaea, convened by the emperor Constantine himself in 325, had debated and ruled on the so-called Arian heresy (which Theodosius made illegal in 381). The Council of Chalcedon, convened in 451 (and preceded by violence between partisans of the opposing sides), officially condemned the doctrine known as Miaphysite, or Monophysite (“one nature”), which asserted that Christ’s human nature was completely subsumed by his divine nature. (The Orthodox view, hereafter to be staunchly upheld by the emperor at Constantinople, asserted that Christ’s human and divine natures were distinct, yet combined in his person). This brought the imperial court into direct conflict with its subjects in Egypt and much of Syria, where the Monophysite version was predominant (and has remained predominant in Egypt up to the present, as the Coptic Church). The same council also reaffirmed an earlier condemnation of the doctrine commonly (though inaccurately) known as Nestorianism, which held that the divine and human natures of Christ were largely separate. The resulting pressures on Nestorian communities, especially in Syria, drove many to flee Chalcedonian domination as enforced by the imperial court at Constantinople, and migrate to the Sassanid Persian realm, where Nestorian Christianity flourished and became the foundation of what came to be known as the Church of the East.

## **Discrimination and Persecution: Pagans, Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians**

Along with the many doctrinal conflicts that sundered Christian communities from within, the late antique Near East was the arena for sometimes violent conflict – and occasional, though seldom systematic, persecution – involving great states and empires whose rulers championed Judaism (as in the case of the Jewish rulers of Himyar, in the southwestern Arabian peninsula), or their favored version of Christianity (in the case of the Byzantine emperors at Constantinople, Chalcedonian Orthodoxy; in the case of the Christian negus of Ethiopia, Monophysite), or (in the case of the Sassanid rulers of the Persian empire) Zoroastrianism. Also, and though a recent study (Moss 2013) posits that early Christian hagiographers’ celebrated stories of Roman martyrdom of Christians before Constantine are significantly overblown, Roman authorities in the eastern empire did sometimes (especially under the emperor Diocletian) vigorously persecute Christians, some among whom – as in the case of the early fourth-century Syrian soldier-martyr Saint Sergius at Rusafa – became for long afterwards a focus of veneration for Christians and non-Christians alike (Fowden 1999).

With their ascendancy having been secured by Constantine and his successors, Christians in the Near East, from the fourth century on, increasingly discriminated against “pagans” (who were identified as “Hellenes”) and Jews, with either the tacit or official approval of the imperial authorities. Despite Christian attacks on temples and defacing of statues, and though out of imperial favor, paganism persisted in many areas of the Near East well into the sixth century, long after Theodosius I had declared Christianity the official state religion of the Roman Empire and after imperial edicts had ordered the closing of pagan temples. After Constantine, Jews faced increasing hostility and discrimination both from imperial policy and from the increasingly Christian population, but nonetheless thrived in places like Sardis and Hierapolis in Asia Minor and Jerash in Jordan. And in Palestine, where beginning with Constantine, construction of Christian churches and pilgrimage to Christian holy sites burgeoned, the Jewish population grew and even managed to build impressive synagogues.

Although the Persian Sassanids had competed with Rome for control of Syria and Mesopotamia since the early third century, Roman–Sassanid relations acquired a new dimension with the ascendancy of Constantine. His elevation of Christianity at the imperial court meant that the Sassanids, champions of Zoroastrian dualism, would now be facing a Roman empire that championed the monotheism of Christianity. Largely owing to Syriac accounts of brave Christians martyred at the hands of evil Zoroastrians (e.g., Walker 2006), the overall dynamic of the Roman/Byzantine–Sassanid relationship has long been posited to have been characterized by fervent, virtually unremitting religious hostility punctuated by episodes of savage Sassanid persecution of Christians. Recent reevaluation, however, has considerably softened this characterization, positing a dynamic characterized as much by peaceful accommodation and interaction as by religious animosity (Payne 2015; Canepa 2009). As Payne (2014) has noted, within the Sassanid realm, “the Iranian court undertook violence against Christians in three specific contexts: (1) against bishops and priests who disobeyed a specific order of the king of kings Shapur II in the 340s, (2) against monks and bishops who destroyed Zoroastrian fire temples in the early fifth century, and (3) against Iranian aristocrats who abandoned Zoroastrianism to convert to Christianity. These events were restricted in scope, never indiscriminately targeting Christian communities as a whole.” The Sassanids exercised similar forbearance during the conquest of Jerusalem in 614 and the ensuing occupation (a conquest, it bears noting, that a contemporary author attributed to the corruption of Jerusalem’s Christians by their fervent partisanship of the Blue and Green circus factions!). And as noted above, the Nestorian Church of the East flourished in Iran and Mesopotamia under the Sassanids. On the other hand, the Sassanids suppressed rather forcefully the adherents of Manichaeism, which briefly had taken root in the imperial court during the third century during the life of the prophet Mani.

The Arabian Peninsula, however, became a locus of savage persecution of Christians during the sixth century. The kings of Himyar (essentially corresponding to modern-day Yemen) had converted to Judaism by the late fourth century, around the same time that the kings of Ethiopia had converted to Monophysite Christianity. During the 530s, the Jewish king of Himyar launched a ferocious persecution of Christians (including a savage and well-documented massacre at Najran) in an attempt to eradicate Christianity from his realm and compel remaining Christians to convert to Judaism. This drew the attention of

the king of Ethiopia, who attacked Himyar and established a Christian suzerainty that lasted about 50 years. The Jewish Himyar versus Christian Ethiopia conflict became a proxy war involving the two superpowers of the time: the Byzantine emperor at Constantinople, who backed the Ethiopian negus (even though the emperor, Justinian, was a Chalcedonian Christian and the Ethiopian ruler was a Monophysite), and the Sassanid shah, who sided with the Jewish rulers of Himyar (just as the Sassanids had favored the Jews – and the Monophysites – during their conquest and occupation of Jerusalem).

But this Great Power conflict in the Arabian Peninsula was soon to be superseded – by the emergence of Islam and the Muslim conquest of the Near East, which was to bring an end to the Sassanid empire and whittle down that of the Byzantines, as well as inject a new element and dynamic into Near Eastern religious and social tensions.

## FURTHER READING

There are very few works that treat Ancient Near Eastern social tensions both as broadly and as analytically as has been attempted here. Excellent places to start are Freedman (1992) and Sasson (1995), both of which provide many authoritative articles on social, economic, and legal aspects of various Ancient Near Eastern civilizations. Snell (1997) remains a premier source for the Ancient Near East, as does Bryce (2003) for the Hittites. Leick (2007) and Crawford (2013) provide excellent treatment of Mesopotamia, and Wiesehofer (2001) for Persia. Among the more useful sources for Egypt are James (1984), Brewer and Teeter (1999), Kemp (2007), Lloyd (2010), Meskell (2002), and Wilkinson (2007). Insights derived from ethnographic and more recent historical study are to be found in Barakat (1993) and Eickelman (2002). An ambitious study analyzing social structures in the Bronze Age Near East is Schloen (2001). For the conflicts and tensions within and between monotheistic communities from the Hellenistic era to the Muslim conquest of the Middle East, useful treatments are to be found in Freedman (1992). For the early Nazarene sect, its evolution into Christianity, and the early Christological controversies in the Church, see Vermes (2012). For social and religious tensions between the Byzantine and Sassanid empires, see Bowersock (2012, 2013), Payne (2014, 2015), Canepa (2009), and Walker (2006).

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# Borders and States

*Steven Grosby*

The question to be pursued here is whether or not, or the extent to which, we are justified to speak of states throughout the history of the Ancient Near East. In order to investigate this problem, we will have to clarify what is meant by the term “state” and the related category “society.” We must also ascertain how we are to understand the variation throughout the history of the Ancient Near East between those societies that we designate as “city-state,” “territorial state,” and “empire.” Finally, we want to know in what ways that variation corresponds to a variation in the borders of those societies.

Pursuing these problems will contribute to our understanding of the history of the Ancient Near East. It will, however, do more. By clarifying the applicability of the categories of state, society, and borders to that history, we may also be in a position to appreciate better their applicability, including the complications sometimes obscured in their use, to the societies of our own time. Because a detailed examination of this latter problem is beyond the scope of this volume, only a few comparative observations will be made. Nevertheless, the results of this brief investigation should be kept in mind; for by doing so, the history of the Ancient Near East becomes relevant to understanding better the period in which we live.

For the moment, we proceed without defining those categories. For the time being, it will suffice to note that there is a great deal of evidence that places before us the problem of the existence of state, society, and borders throughout the history of the Ancient Near East. Not uncommon are the following kinds of inscriptions and descriptions.

In the ongoing conflict between Lagash and Umma (c. 2500 BCE), we find reference to a border separating these two Sumerian city-states (Cooper 1986, p. 55):

Eanatum, ruler of Lagash ... demarcated the border with Enkale, ruler of Umma. He extended the canal ... He inscribed monuments at the (boundary-) canal.

Another reference to a border is seen in a letter from Shulgi, King of the Lands of Sumer and Akkad (c. 2050 BCE), to his general, where the border is a wall separating those lands from the encroaching Amorites (Spring 2015, p. 38):

The wall is to be finished in the period of one month ... For now the Tidnim (Amorites) have come down from the mountain.

We learn that the same border-wall was extended by Shulgi's successor, Shu-Sin (2037–2029 BCE), from the Euphrates to beyond the Tigris to the Diyala River, a distance of approximately 269 kilometers (Chavalas 2006, pp. 56, 79): "Shu-Sin King of Ur built the amurru wall, 'Muriq Tidnim' [= holding back the Tidnim]."

These two borders appear to convey geographical precision, if for no other reason than they are intentionally designed and constructed. The first is a border-canal, with designating markers, separating two city-states. The second is a border-wall likely built to demarcate the boundaries of the territory of Sumer and Akkad; but if not, then, at least a defensive barrier for the area of land under its military control.

Perhaps geographically more ambiguous or imprecise is the reference to borders in a letter to Shulgi from one of his officials, Aradmu (Kramer 1963, p. 331):

You have commissioned me to keep in good condition the expedition roads to the land of Subir, to stabilize the borders of your country, to make known the ways of the country.

A territorial ambiguity may exist here if the borders referred to were either based upon natural frontiers or fluctuated over time depending upon the ebb and flow of military fortune. Note that we have introduced criteria that complicate, thereby clarify, the categories we employ to interpret our evidence, namely, a distinction of boundaries between, on the one hand, a precise, stable border separating two territories and, on the other, an imprecise, and sometimes fluctuating frontier distinguishing zones of influences. We shall return to this distinction and its bearing on the categories of state and society.

While inscriptions of this kind are clearly found during the Early and Middle Bronze Age, they are by no means confined to this period. For example, the treaty between Hattusili III, King of Hatti (1267–1237) and Ulmi-Teshshup of Tarhuntassa, the Anatolian area immediately west of the Hittite homeland, designated precise borders between these two societies (Beckman 1996, pp. 104–105).

Protect the land that I [Hattusili III] have given you, Ulmi-Teshshup, and the frontiers which I have established for you. Your frontiers are established as follows: In the direction of the land of Pitassa, your frontier is Mount Hawa ... in the direction of the border district of the land of Pitassa, his frontier is the sinkhole of the city of Arimmatta ... Up behind the city of Kursawanta, his frontier is the Stone Monument of the Dog ...

In this example, we find demarcating references to specific topographical features and towns seemingly indicating geographical precision; and, if so, more appropriate would have been a translation of "borders" than "frontiers" in this inscription.

Turning to the period of the Middle Assyrian Empire, we find this statement from the epic recounting the victory of the Assyrian King Tukulti-Ninurta I (1243–1207 BCE) over the Babylonian King Kashtiliash (see Gardullo 1999, pp. 41–42; see also Grayson 1972, p. 694 for another reference to borders during the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta): “There I decreed that no (state) secret was to go beyond the border.”

Later, during the period of the neo-Assyrian empire, there appear numerous descriptions of borders, for example, during the reigns of Tiglath-Pileser III (744–727 BCE) and Sargon II (721–705 BCE).

I [Tiglath-Pileser III] pursued him [Sarduri of Urartu] up to the causeway of the Euphrates, the border of his lands. (Tadmor 1994, pp. 52–53)

I [Tiglath-Pileser III] set up my royal stele [as a boundary marker] at the Brook of Egypt. (Tadmor 1994, pp. 178–179)

I [Sargon II] captured all their lands and brought them within the borders of Assyria. (Luckenbill 1927, pp. 6, 46)

We conclude this brief, introductory overview of only a few of the many examples of evidence for the boundaries of territories throughout the history of the Ancient Near East with two descriptions from the Bible and one from Herodotus’ *History*.

These are the descendants of Japheth by their lands, with their own language, by their families and their nations ... These are the families of Noah’s descendants, according to their origins, by their nations. (Genesis 10:5, 32)

When you enter the land of Canaan, this is the land that shall fall to you ... according to its boundaries: your southern sector shall extend from the wilderness of Zin alongside Edom. Your southern boundary shall begin from the end of the Dead Sea ... For the western boundary, you shall have the coast of the Great Sea. This shall be your northern boundary, draw a line from the Great Sea to Mount Hor ... For your eastern boundary, you shall draw a line from Hazar-enan to Shepham ... That shall be your land as defined by its boundaries on all sides. (Numbers 34:2–12)

There were foreign rites established among them, but later they turned against them and resolved to follow none but their own gods; and so all the Caunians, putting on their armor – all, that is, of military age – advanced to the boundaries of their country, beating the air with their spears and saying that they were driving out the gods of the foreigners. (Herodotus, *The History*, 1.172–74)

While the evidence referred to above is selective, it nonetheless spans a period from approximately 2500 BCE to 450 BCE, and is drawn from throughout the Ancient Near East: Sumeria, Assyria, the Hittite kingdom, ancient Israel, and western Anatolia. These 12 inscriptions and descriptions are surely sufficient to justify our pursuit of the problems of not only borders throughout the history of the Ancient Near East, but also the bearing of

those borders on the existence of states and societies. The latter problem is explicitly put before us by the above quotations from Genesis 10 and Herodotus' *History*, as they clearly indicate some kind of understanding that the existence of a culture is related to the boundaries of a society. However, even though the evidence conveyed by the above inscriptions and descriptions is abundant, its interpretation is unclear, for there remain difficulties, such as: were the boundaries of those states clearly demarcated borders or imprecise frontiers; and, even if one is entitled to recognize states, what are the complications in doing so, for example, were those states also societies? We now turn to clarifying our use of the categories of state, society, and borders; and, when doing so, determine their applicability to this history and area.

## State and Society

The state is an organization for the control of, or the exercise of power throughout, a relatively extensive territory. The nature of that organization, control, and territory vary. For example, the legal control of a territory may be characterized by a separation between the political or military administration, on the one hand, and a legal administration with, as a consequence, legal officials of one kind or another, on the other. Where such separation existed, judicial decrees were rendered by city assemblies (van de Mieroop 1999; Barjamovic 2004), or a group of elders, or magistrates, as described in Deuteronomy 1:13–16. However, the legal control of a territory may indicate a different relation, where, for example, judicial decisions were rendered by either officials delegated by the king, or military officers, as appears to have been the case for the Assyrian empire. Clearly, there may also be a variation in the extent of the territory under control, ranging from a city-state, including geographically proximate villages or towns, to a geographically expansive empire. In the latter case, the character of the control will vary depending upon the degree of autonomy of the conquered vassal or client state. Putting aside for the moment further discussion of these complicating variations, we turn our attention to what is distinctive about the organization of the state.

As the apparatus of the state exercises control over a relatively extensive territory, its authority extends beyond, or encompasses, that of the family or circumscribed locality, for example, a village or town. There are several expressions of this trans-local authority. One, as referred to above, is legal. We must clarify briefly the implications of the trans-local authority of the law for the existence of a state and a society. The existence of law and a judicial system implies: (a) stable criteria and procedure for determination of property rights, hence a range of legitimate activity for the property-owner; and (b) the administration of power separate from, or at least not entirely under the control of, or at the discretion of, the king, as the king was clearly expected to respect the law. Thus, law recognizes relations predicated upon predictable, reciprocal expectations not merely between members of the family or village, but among trans-familial and trans-local individuals considered to be free – relations that may be designated as “civil.” Law is not merely one means for exercising control, for it also orders its geographical jurisdiction into a territorial pattern of relation.

This legal category of civil relations of free individuals is conveyed by the Sumerian *lú* and the Akkadian *awilum*: one who has the legal capacity to exercise control of, or power

over, one's possessions, in contrast to other categories of legal anthropology, such as the indentured servant, slave, or foreigner (von Dassow 2011; Snell 2001). One gets an idea of this significance conveyed by the term *awīlum*, specifically the legal criteria and procedures involving the *awīlum*'s property, from this excerpt from one of Hammurabi's (1792–1750 BCE) laws:

If a man [*awīlum*] who claims to have lost property [and] then discovers his lost property in another man's possession ... produces the witnesses who can identify his lost property – the judges shall examine their cases ... and the witnesses who can identify the lost property shall state the facts known to them ... the owner of the lost property shall take his lost property, and the buyer [of the lost property] shall take from the [legally untitled] seller's estate the amount of silver that he weighed and delivered. (Roth 1997, pp. 82–83)

There are numerous examples of this kind of law, and the relations that it assumes, among the earlier laws of Ur-Namma (c. 2100 BCE), other laws of Hammurabi, and later Hittite and Assyrian laws. What should be noted with regards to the existence of a state is the responsibility of an agency – a legal apparatus as indicated above by the reference to judges – beyond that of the family or village for determining and maintaining property relations. Consider further, for example, this law of Hammurabi.

... the man who has been robbed shall establish the extent of his lost property before the god; and the city and the governor in whose territory and district the robbery was committed shall replace his lost property to him. (Roth 1997, p. 85)

Here is recognition of an official, the governor, to bear responsibility for the consequence of a crime – the loss of property through robbery – within the official's territory. These kinds of laws and their jurisdiction signify relations between autonomous members of a legal community distinct from both the family and circumscribed locality.

Not surprisingly, it was the responsibility of the king to establish standardized weights and measures for commercial exchanges, as one finds already stated in the laws of Ur-Namma, father of Shulgi (see Roth 1997, p. 16). This standardization also contributed to the stability of a pattern of relation of a social sphere beyond that of the family and local village. The existence of law collections, a judicial apparatus, standardization of weights and measures for commercial exchange, and the king's periodic proclamations of debt relief in the name of justice indicate a "public" sphere in the societies of the Ancient Near East. Let us pursue this matter further.

In the Bible, the legal category *'ezrāḥ ha 'areṣ*, "native of the land," and its abbreviation as *'ezrāḥ*, "native," conveys civil relations of free, Israelite individuals (Milgrom 2000, pp. 1705–1706). Similar to the Akkadian *awīlum*, this category refers to the free Israelite as distinct from both the non-Israelite who resides permanently in the land, the *gēr*, the "resident alien," and the foreigner, *nokrī*. This category of legal anthropology, "native of the land" or "native," appears 19 times in the Hebrew Bible, for example, as in Leviticus 24:22, "you shall have one (civil) law for the alien who resides in your land and for the native born [Israelite]" (Milgrom 2000, pp. 1416–1420, 1704, 2127). Interestingly, both terms – *awīlum* and *'ezrāḥ ha 'areṣ* (or *'ezrāḥ*) – are often translated as "citizen." The

merit of such a translation, and its rich historiographical implications, deserve discussion. Irrespective of how these terms are translated, what emerges from the existence of the law is a community of law with a jurisdiction to whom the law applies. As the legal categories of *awīlum* and *'ezrāḥ ha 'areṣ* convey criteria of birth and residence (“native”) in a geographically designated land, the legal community is also a territorially designated people.

There is much evidence for numerous collections of laws throughout the Ancient Near East and its history (see Westbrook 2003): Laws of Ur-Namma (c. 2100 BCE), Lipit-Ishtar (c. 1930 BCE), Eshnunna (c. 1770 BCE), Hammurabi (c. 1750 BCE), Hittite (c. 1650–1200 BCE), Middle Assyrian (c. 1076 BCE), Neo-Babylonian (c. 700 BCE), and Ancient Israelite (Exodus 21–23, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy 12–26). All of these collections of laws recognize some version of the free individual, often associating that individual with the description of being native, in contrast to foreign, that is, native to the land over which, or throughout which, the law had jurisdiction. As such, implied is a form of kinship: not the gentilic kinship of familial relation, however extended, as in a clan or tribe, as we find among the Arameans (see Limet 2005); but a territorial kinship conveyed through the use of terms to designate a “people” which has, as its referent, that territory, for example, Assyrians, Babylonians, Hittites, Israelites, and as indicated in the quotation above from Genesis 10. These kinds of ethno-geographic designations, ranging from city-states to territorial states, are ubiquitous and persistent throughout the history of the Ancient Near East. Whether or not some of these terms that refer to a relatively extensive, yet bounded territorial kinship should be understood as “nation” and, when there also exists sovereignty over that territory, as “national state” will depend upon how those latter categories are understood. As with the translation of both *awīlum* and *'ezrāḥ ha 'areṣ* as “citizen,” the historiographical implications of the possibility of the existence of nations in the history of the Ancient Near East should be considered (see Grosby 2002, 2017; Smith 2004).

These territorial designations, along with collections of laws, civil relations, and some sense of a public sphere all indicate the existence of a “society.” A society is not merely a geographic framework either for the market and a division of labor, the existence of which we find as early as around 3200 BCE in Uruk from the so-called “Standard List of Professions” (van De Mieroop 2016, p. 34), or for the relation of power of one person over another. It is that, but it is more; for the term refers to a relatively, never absolute, stable pattern of consensus – a coherence of social relations which has as its object the existence of that trans-familial, trans-local relation. The existence and acceptance of these various collections of laws is one expression of that pattern. Another expression, so obvious throughout the history of the Ancient Near East, is religion; and especially so when we seem to have either one god, or one god clearly ascendant among other gods, throughout a territory and its people, as in the case of the Caunians in the above quotation from Herodotus, the ancient Israelites (the Septuagint and Dead Sea Scrolls version of Deuteronomy 32:8, “When the Most High apportioned the nations (*gōyim*), he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of gods”), and, as in the Babylonian Epic of Creation, the *Enuma Elish*, where Babylon is the center of the world and universe because that is the location of the temple of the supreme god, Marduk. Throughout the history of Assyria, Asshur was the supreme deity of *māt Aššur*, the “land of Asshur [Assyria]” (Postgate 1992, p. 251), where the use of Asshur indicates an Assyrian understanding

that the land of Assyria was an extension of, or identical with the god Asshur (Tadmor 1986, p. 205; Machinist 1993, p. 81). This pattern of consensus or conceptual coherence of a society was also recognized by its population when the symbolic representation of its god was present: this is the significance of the return of the statue of the god to its proper location – its temple within the land of the people – as when the statue of Marduk was returned to Babylon from Hatti, Assyria, and Elam, as recounted in the so-called “Marduk Prophecy” (Foster 1995, pp. 215–217; see also Cogan 1974, pp. 22–41), and finally from Assyria again during the reign of Sennacherib (706–681 BCE).

To be sure, the public sphere of the society of the modern state, with its assumed responsibility for welfare through its delivery of numerous services abetted by modern means of communication and transportation, is clearly more wide-ranging than that of the ancient state, briefly described above as consequences of law and religion. But the existence of the latter should keep the historian from wrongly assuming the absence of a public sphere among the states of the Ancient Near East. Be that as it may, given the existence of a more or less stable pattern of social relations as conveyed by law and religion – a cultural unity that is not to be equated with a uniformity – how was this pattern maintained and enforced? This question poses point blank the question of existence of a state; for it will be remembered that the existence of a state assumes an administrative apparatus for the control of, or sovereignty over, a territory. Here, too, we have abundant evidence for the existence of an administrative staff distinct from, but exercising control over, the household and local villages.

The Assyrian evidence clearly reveals an apparatus for the administration of Assyrian territory (Grayson 1991, pp. 200–201). In addition to the king, there were these officials: the major-domo, the vice-chancellor (*ummānu*), the field marshal (*turtānu*), the palace herald (*nagir ekalli*), who is to be understood as chief administrator or officer of the realm, the chief cup-bearer (*rab šāqe*) as the king’s representative, the chief steward (*abarakku*) who carried out royal commissions, and governors (*šaknu* or *bel pihāti*) of provinces. There were also advisers (*sukallu*) to the king, mayors (*ḥazannu*) of cities, obviously scribes, and, needless to say, tax collectors (*ša qurbūti*). The historical heartland of Assyria, the triangular area contained within the cities of Assur on the Tigris, Arba’il, and Nineveh had its own governor (*šakin māt Assur*). Earlier Sumerian evidence from the period of Ur III (2112–2004 BCE), especially during the reign of Shulgi, shows an unified administrative system – the so-called “bala system” – for southern and northern Babylonia, divided by provinces, each of which had its own governor and military commander in charge of regional centers for the collection and redistribution of various goods such as livestock, wool, grain, and timber depending upon the province (Steinkeller 1987, pp. 21–28). Hittite evidence also indicates various administrative officials such as the mayor (*ḥazannu*) of the capital city Hattusa, a chief of the scribes and a chief of the bodyguards for the king, district governors (*bel madgalti*) within the land of Hatti, and mayors (*rābisu*) of local towns (Beckman 2000 [1995]; Bryce 2002, pp. 16–17). And King Solomon of Israel is described as having an administrative staff consisting of a recorder, commander of the army, a major domo, priests, scribes, an officer in charge of labor, and officials over the 12 districts (1 Kings 4:1–19).

It may very well be that some of the names of these administrative staff, for example, the chief cup-bearer or steward, indicate a domestic origin of the officials. However, the

evident specialization and scope of tasks makes it clear that we are dealing with the jurisdiction of an administrative apparatus far beyond that of the royal household, the purpose of which was the exercise of control over an expansive territory. That we are dealing here with states is further supported by established procedures of taxation, whether based upon the extent of land-holdings, or a percentage of agricultural produce from that land, or the number of cattle (as in Egypt), sheep and horses, or custom duties on trade enacted at sea ports, ferry crossings of rivers, and town-gates (Postgate 1974, pp. 200–244). The unavoidable corollaries of taxation are both the census and record-keeping by scribes trained in schools. Evidence for both is abundant, as taxes and the taking of the census are known throughout the Ancient Near East and for all periods, although the basis for the tax varied. Our analysis has, thus, come upon one conclusion of what can be called, following Joseph Schumpeter (1991 [1918]: 100–108), “fiscal sociology”: wherever there are taxes, we find the state; and wherever we find a state, there are taxes. Interestingly, the fiscal sociology of the neo-Assyrian empire indicates a distinction between: (a) a more systematic and predictable taxation throughout what was understood by the Assyrians to have been the “land of Assyria,” and (b) a more episodic, less predictable tribute from societies dominated by Assyria, that is, vassal states that were understood not to be part of the land of Assyria. The former necessarily requires a developed bureaucracy while the latter is a consequence of military fortune. This distinction is dependent upon both recognition of territorial borders and the relation of the meaning of what those borders conveyed to the character of the state. Before turning to this relation, a few concluding remarks on the state in the history of the Ancient Near East are necessary.

We are now in a position to clarify the category of the state as an organization for the control of, or the exercise of power throughout, a relatively extensive territory. The necessary characteristics of that organization are: (a) law; (b) an administration separate from the household; (c) taxation; and (d) a monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of an order throughout that area, as Max Weber (1978 [1921], p. 54) formulated this fourth criterion. It is the orderly administration of a geographical area, through law, religion, and various traditions, including often but not necessarily a common language, which over time transforms that geographical area of land into a “territory.” Phrases like the “land of Assyria” or the “land of Hatti,” so frequent in our evidence, are not merely geographical descriptions; they are also territorial designations that convey the existence of a society. Nevertheless, these characteristics exhibit complications not only for the existence of states in the Ancient Near East, but also for distinguishing them from modern states.

We certainly observe in the numerous collection of laws a degree of rationalization, by which I mean a development of methods of legal reasoning for reaching judgment between contesting parties – a relatively rational judicial procedure, for example, examination of evidence and requirement for witnesses, as can be seen in the above excerpt from one of Hammurabi’s laws. Throughout the history of the Ancient Near East, we observe the existence of property deeds, contracts, local courts, higher courts of appeal, and a developed legal anthropology, for example, the *awīlum*. Furthermore, evidence for compensation in lieu of retributive, corporal punishment is seen in the earliest laws, Mesopotamian and Hittite, as private or local self-help and vengeance are replaced by public law and authority. Nevertheless, while the king was clearly expected to respect and uphold the laws, we do not, for the most part, find either a clearly developed institutional separation between a

judiciary and the political regime, as we have, for example, in English history with the self-governing Inns of Court, or systematic legal codes developed by a judiciary or enacted by a popularly elected assembly. While rational judicial procedures are evident, nevertheless, in contrast to the laws of the modern state, the laws of the Ancient Near East are more traditional or customary. Still, one should, in making historical comparisons, proceed with more caution than is all too often displayed because, to take only one example, the growth of modern administrative procedure and law, and presidential directives or discretion, call into question the extent to which the judiciary of the modern state is, in fact, always clearly distinct from the political regime.

Similarly, historians are accustomed to assert that ancient states exhibited highly uneven control over the territories administered by them, when compared with modern states. There is, of course, merit to this observation, if for no other reason than modern means of communication, transportation, and gathering of information for numerous purposes, including taxation, allow a more thorough control. However, here, too, the historian should proceed with caution, for both the Hittite and Assyrian empires had standing armies with garrisons located throughout their respective territories to maintain peaceful relations. We also know, for example, that beginning with the reign of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) not only the historical homeland of Assyria but much of its conquered area was converted into provinces, as is abundantly clear subsequently from the Annals of Tiglath-Pileser III (Tadmor 1994), with fortified administrative centers, and imperial officials deployed in rural villages throughout the empire (Postgate 2007; Grayson 1991). And, as is well known, the Assyrians forcibly deported the conquered local populations, resettling them in other areas of Assyria. All of these procedures indicate a remarkable degree of bureaucratic control. Nevertheless, we again observe differences in the degree and stability of that control when compared with the ideal of the orderly territorial power of the modern state. For example, when compared with the period of Hammurabi's reign, Babylonia during much of the first half of the first millennium BCE is more accurately understood not as a territorial state but as consisting, as in the period before Hammurabi, of politically fragmented city-states with divided loyalties among themselves and toward their Assyrian overlord. The division, often bellicose, between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah after the death of Solomon is another example of a lack of stability of the ancient state. But here, too, the historian should proceed with caution; for the regionalism, even secession, that exists with the modern state, for example, Scotland cf. Great Britain, Quebec cf. Canada, Catalonia cf. Spain, Kurdistan cf. Iraq and Turkey, and so forth, qualifies that ideal.

The differences between the states of the Ancient Near East and modern states may justify the description of the former as “patrimonial,” where the political power of the king is based upon traditional loyalty to himself and his royal household, in contrast to a more rational authority that is, as such, dependent upon impersonally oriented laws, supported by bureaucratic enforcement (Weber 1978 [1921], pp. 884–859, 1006–1068). Our evidence indicates that the central administrative apparatus of the ancient state, as referred to above by those designated officials, rested upon personal loyalty to the king, although much the same could be said of the cabinets of the president and prime minister of the modern state. Certainly, other expressions of patrimonial authority are found in the modern state, albeit more on the local level, for example, city bosses of political machines,

often with the power of patronage. Even so, it appears clear enough that, in contrast to the modern state, it is difficult to distinguish between, or distinctly separate, the royal household and the administrative apparatus of the ancient state. To refer to only a couple of the many examples that indicate the intertwined relation between the royal household and the administration of the ancient state, Khattushilish, brother of the Hittite King Muwattalish, who reigned over the Hittite empire from 1295 to 1272 BCE, was both governor of a Hittite province and general of the Hittite army. And Shamash-shum-ukin, brother of the Neo-Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, who reigned over the Assyrian empire from 668 to 627 BCE, ruled Babylon as a subject to his brother until he and Babylon later rebelled against him. In contrast to the modern state, the intertwined relation of the royal household with the administration of the ancient state was a source of instability in the transfer of power, for one among many examples, as recounted in I Kings 2, Solomon's execution of his brother, Adonijah.

In further support of the characterization of the ancient state as patrimonial, it appears that debt relief for the population as a whole, as a matter of equity, was at the discretion of the king. Similarly, tax immunities for cities like Assur and Babylon, perhaps often for reasons of political expediency, were also at the king's discretion, rather than based on a policy or a rule consistently applied over time and throughout the population. Thus, although the evidence for systematic taxation throughout the history of the various societies of the Ancient Near East represented a step toward a rational state apparatus, it was clearly an uneven development. But considerations of equity or fairness always pose a problem for the impartial rule of law for any state, ancient or modern – a problem likely recognized in Leviticus 19:15: "You shall not render an unfair judgment; do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich." At issue here is the consistency of the norm or law, as would-be characteristic, at least in principle, of the modern state, in contrast to the royal prerogative of the ancient state. The problem of equity aside, the existence of written collections of laws, including for contracts and property relations, and courts should keep one from concluding that judicial judgments consisted entirely of the king's grace or were only at his representatives' discretion, even though we have only anticipations (for example, Deuteronomy 17:14–20) of a clearly developed and consistent ideal of the rule of law for all, that is, a law to which the king and his representatives are held accountable.

These, then, are some of the qualifications of the state in the Ancient Near East that support our understanding of it as being more traditional or patrimonial when compared with the modern state. Another qualification is that the positions of the upper echelons of the bureaucracy were sometimes inherited. A further qualification is the extent to which the army was the personal military force of the king. However, these qualifications or complications most certainly do not mean that it is incorrect to speak of the existence of states in the Ancient Near East. To be sure, they assuredly have their own characteristics, for example, the distinction between the royal household and the administrative apparatus of the state was blurred; and sovereignty, that is, political rule over a territory, was unitary. We do not find expressions of a constitutional separation of powers, or a markedly divided sovereignty of either distinct, competing law codes with respectively distinct jurisdictions, or federalism. However, rather than the historian recognizing a sharp divide between ancient and modern, the unitary sovereignty of the states of the Ancient Near East may indicate a similarity with modern states when compared with medieval European states.

Thus, the historian should consider the possibility that, while there is merit in observing a historical development of degrees of rationalization of the state from antiquity to the medieval period to today, there may also be merit in the use of the adjective “antique-modern” from the perspective of a shared character of a unitary sovereignty. Be that as it may, we now turn to the bearing of borders on how states were understood.

## Frontiers and Borders

We have already observed, in passing, the relation of different understandings of boundaries to respective differences of fiscal sociology, specifically, the Assyrian distinction between taxation and tribute. Before examining further this distinction and, more generally, the bearing of different conceptions of boundaries on the character of the state, a few geographical distinctions will have to be clarified. One elementary distinction of different boundaries is the one between “frontier” and “border.”

The category “frontier” refers to imprecisely designated limits of a state, thereby demarcating with geographical imprecision the territory of one state from that of another. In this case, the area between two states, rather than having clearly determined boundaries distinguished by border-markers, military forts, walls, or temples, is a diffuse zone of the social patterns of one society overlapping with those of another (Parker 2002). This geographical imprecision and its corollary of social diffusiveness of the boundary area are often consequences of the frontier being designated by natural barriers such as mountain ranges, rivers or deserts. For example, the Pontus mountain range was the frontier between the land of Hatti and Kasha, and recognized as such by the Hittites; the Taurus mountain range separated Assyria from Urartu; and the Euphrates river during the second millennium was the boundary between the Hittite and Assyrian empires. The area of the frontier, peripheral to the organizing center of the state’s historic homeland, was often viewed as a culturally chaotic space. It lacked cultural coherence, as the legal, religious, and political ordering of the frontier, enforced through military presence, was happenstance.

Borders, in contrast to frontiers, exhibit greater geographical precision and stability in demarcating the limits of the state’s territory. Rather than the boundaries being marked only by natural barriers, borders, while they may be natural, were, as we saw in the inscriptions which began this chapter, designated by: boundary-markers, for example, Tiglath-Pileser III’s royal stele at the Brook of Egypt; a detailed combination of topographical features and towns, as in the treaty between Hattusili III and Ulmi-Teshshup; or even by imagining lines drawn between a combination of topographical features and towns, as in the description of the borders of the land of Canaan. Detailed demarcations of boundaries were often designated by this combination, as in the description of the northern and central Syrian “provinces” or “districts” (*pīhat*) of the Assyrian empire, through the territorial formula “from … to,” for example, in Tiglath-Pileser III’s Calah Annal 19 (see also Stele IIB; Tadmor 1994, p. 61, 103):

... the cities of [Usnu], Siannu, [ ... ], Kashpuna, which are on the seacoast, together with the towns [ ... ] up to Mount Saue, which touches Lebanon, Mount Ba’ali-ṣ-apuna up to Anti-Lebanon, the boxwood mountain, all of Mount Saue, the district of Kar-Adad, the city of

Hatarikka, the district of Nuqudina, [Mount Hasu], together with the cities of its environs, the city of Ara ..., both sides of them, the cities of their environs, all of Mount Sarbuia, the cities of Ashhani (and) Yatabi, all of Mount Yaraqu, ... the cities of Ellitarbi, Zitanu, up to the city of Atinni ..., the city of Bumame – 19 districts of Hamath together with the cities of their environs, which are on the seacoast of the west, which were in rebellion were seized for Azriau, I annexed to Assyria. I placed two of my eunuchs over them as governors.

A similar designation of border-towns to locate boundaries is found in the Bible in the territorial formula for “all Israel”, “from Dan (in the north) to Beersheva (in the south),” for example, in David’s command to Joab (2 Samuel 24:2): “Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheva, and take a census of the people, so that I may know how many there are.”

Confirmation of this conception of a more precisely delimited territory is found in the widely used terms for “border”: Akkadian *misru* (Assyrian variant *tahūmu*) and the Hebrew *gebul*. In, for example, the Assyrian “Synchronistic History,” descriptions of bounded territories, as in the following, appear (Grayson 1975, pp. 139–141): “They divided the districts [*pīhat*] from Šasili of Subartu to Karduniaš into two and fixed the boundary line [*miṣru/tahūmu*].” We are not concerned here as to whether or not the Assyrian description of this territorial division in the aftermath of a battle with Babylon may have exaggerated the Assyrian victory, for the conception of a detailed border would have had its own independent existence. The use of the Hebrew *gebul* is ubiquitous in Joshua 13–19, where the borders of the so-called tribal territories of Israel are described in considerable detail. We are also not concerned here with the historical accuracy of the account of the Israelite conquest as recounted in Joshua; for, once again, the very existence of a conception of the detailed borders of a territory is not dependent upon that accuracy.

In the above and many other descriptions of the borders of a territory, there often appear references to topographical features such as mountains, rivers and seas (both the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, often described, respectively, as the “Upper Sea” and the “Lower Sea”); but they do so as markers of a carefully delineated territory and not as the geographically diffuse zone of a frontier. Thus, the idea that in the Ancient Near East there were only poorly organized spatial areas, marked only by the frontiers of natural barriers, is factually wrong.

A second elementary distinction involves the extent of the territory demarcated by these kinds of geographically precise borders: city-state, territorial state, and empire. This classification obviously refers to the variation of the extent of the area under the control of the state; but it also involves much more. Beginning with the Sumerian city-states, we find a self-classification of those who dwell within its territorial jurisdiction as inhabitants of, or members of, that city-state. Such a classification indicates not merely residence but also the cultural unity of a bounded territorial kinship, where the borders of the city-state are the boundary-referents of that relation. This self-classification does not mean that other classifications of the self, in particular, as being a member of a family or an ethnic minority, were not present. It is a cultural unity, not uniformity. The well-known complication to this territorially delimited and constituted kinship of the Sumerian city-states was the recognition among the inhabitants of those different city-states that they were also a part of

a larger cultural unit as expressed through the worship shared among them of a common pantheon, the religious center of which was at Nippur. A similar combination of heterogeneous city-states with a shared culture is found in Ancient Greece, with its cultic center at Delphi, where the distinctive kinship of a city-state coexisted with the broader self-classification as “Hellenes.” We may perhaps observe the same phenomenon among the Arameans during the ninth and eighth centuries BCE as expressed in, for example, the inscriptions of the Sefire Stele, specifically, the appearance of the evidently self-classificatory category “all Aram,” although the evidence is ambiguous; and, in any event, whatever broader cultural unity there may have been, it was undercut by Assyrian conquest (Grosby 2002, pp. 125–137, 150–165). This complication aside, the awareness of a territory, as a referent in the relation of this kind of kinship, is reinforced by, if not dependent upon, the existence of stable, precise borders of the territory of the city-state. The same significance holds for the territorial state.

The category “territorial state” has been widely used in the historiography of the Ancient Near East to designate a geographically larger state, encompassing a number of towns and cities, examples of which are Hammurabi’s Babylonia, later Kassite Babylonia, Hatti, Mittani of northern Syria, and, by the fourteenth century, Assyria. However, all states are territorial. Thus, the category is somewhat misleading. What is implied by the phrase “territorial state” is more than its geographical extent; for the phrases, found in numerous inscriptions, “land of Assur,” “land of Hatti,” and their related “people (or inhabitants or sons) of Assyria” and “people of the land of Hatti,” indicate that, similarly to how the inhabitants of the earlier and geographically smaller Sumerian city-states were known by the designation of their city-state, the free members of the population of these geographically more extensive states were described by reference to their respective territories. Because this was evidently so, the borders and the stability of the borders of those states take on greater significance, as they distinguish not only one territory from another but also one people from another.

The category “territorial state” is further complicated by another category that it overlaps with or encompasses, as it also designates a state’s control of a geographically extensive territory, “empire.” The complication consists of the fact that the territorial extent of an empire is a consequence of an aspiration to universal domination that is checked only by either the military power of another empire or the resources available for expansion. The result of this expansiveness, or the ever-present possibility to expand, is that the empire’s borders, while they may at any particular time be precise, are not stable over time, as they are a consequence of those episodic, limiting factors, for example, the check on the expansion of the Hittite and Egyptian empires at the battle of Qadesh in 1274 BCE, or the momentary limit to the expansion of the Assyrian empire at the battle of Qarqar in 853 BCE when confronted by an Aramean coalition. Thus, there are two differentiating criteria to consider in an analysis of borders and their bearing on the character of both a state and a society: one, their precision; and two, their stability over time, including how that stability is understood by both imperial rulers and subjects.

The relative instability of an empire’s borders has a bearing on how its territory is organized and how its inhabitants are understood. Beyond its territorially distinct homeland, the rest of the empire may be loosely organized, that is, indirectly controlled, as expressed by a degree of autonomy for its conquered areas – an autonomy recognized by the

characterizations of those conquered areas as “vassal” or “client” states. The latter, while military and economically dominated by the imperial center, still have their own rulers, religion, and laws. Those who live within those vassal states are not understood by either themselves or their imperial rulers as belonging to, or members of, the ruling center, for example, as “Assyrians.” In this case, the boundaries of an empire do not convey a sociological unity of the territory or population that they encompass; but rather, beyond its historic homeland, they signify a heterogeneity of territories and populations.

Two observations confirm the analytical approach offered here on the relation of borders to the character of a state and society. The first returns us to an observation made earlier about the fiscal sociology of the period of the neo-Assyrian empire: the distinction between “tribute” from vassal states and “tax” from the land of Assyria. Although Assyrian military domination had, by the ninth century, expanded well beyond the historic homeland of Assyria, for example, during the reign of Ashurnasirpal (883–859 BCE), it was especially during the reign of Tiglath-Pileser III (774–727 BCE) that the understanding of the land of Assyria was transformed to signify consistently not only its historic homeland but also those vassal states that had been incorporated into that land, the borders of which had, as a consequence, expanded to reflect that incorporation. The inhabitants of these newly incorporated areas, now “provinces” of the “land of Assyria,” paid tax. This incorporation was conveyed in the Assyrian inscriptions by this idiom, “I annexed them to [or “counted them as in”] Assyria,” *ana misir māt Aššur turru*, as in, for example, Tiglath-Pileser III’s Calah Annal 19, quoted above, and Annal 9 (Tadmor 1994, pp. 42–43). In contrast, the inhabitants of the vassal states that remained under Assyrian domination but outside the “land of Assyria,” designated as being under the “yoke of Assyria,” paid tribute (Postgate 1992; Machinist 1993).

The second observation involves the bearing of borders on the self-understanding, and hence sociological ordering, of the population of the land of Assyria. Those living within those areas that had been annexed to Assyria were considered to be “inhabitants of [or perhaps “citizens of”] Assyria, *itti niši māt Aššur amnušunuti*, a phrase that appears several times in the inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III. Thus, those previous foreigners became legally and, since native to the land, anthropologically transformed into Assyrians, *Aššūrāyū*, by virtue of living within the borders of the newly expanded “land of Assyria.” Having become Assyrian, in contrast to those who lived in a vassal state, they were subject to regular taxation and military service; but they were also afforded both the predictable expectations conveyed by the law and the security maintained by the Assyrian army. What conceptually made this transformation possible were new borders and a new understanding of what those borders signified.

## Conclusion

All states and societies have boundaries, and yet those boundaries imply much more than merely geographical area. The extent to which those boundaries are borders, precise and stable, or frontiers, imprecisely designated and fluctuating, have consequences for the criteria conveyed by them that, in turn, have a bearing on the character of both a state and a society. Left unexamined here is the bearing of another boundary that influences the

self-understanding of the members of the society. This boundary is time, that is, the location of a past and its relation to the present, for example, the determination of an eponymous ancestor of what we designate as “tribe.”

As with territorial boundaries, the boundary of time can be precise or diffuse, stable or fractured. Moreover, both territorial and temporal boundaries often overlap with one another in various ways in the constitution of a society, examples of which in the history of the Ancient Near East are the ethno-geographic *gāyūm* (tribe) from Mari, the *gōy* (nation) of ancient Israel, and the Aramean *bit PN* (house of PN). The variability of these boundaries depends upon the malleability of tradition, which is in turn influenced by the existence of different institutions and the independence of those institutions from one another. Temporal boundaries aside, it is clear that territorial borders and states existed in the Ancient Near East. That they did presents the historian with the opportunity for complex historiographical comparison.

## FURTHER READING

As states and borders bear on so many subjects, historical overviews like Van De Mieroop (2016) and *The Cambridge Ancient History* are helpful. On the state, Bang and Scheider (2013) is useful. On law codes, see Westbrook (2003) and Roth (1997). For the category patrimonialism, Weber (1978 [1921]) remains necessary, although the category must be used with care. For the concepts of territory, frontier, and border, in addition to the works cited, see Grosby (2002).

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# Divine and Non-Divine Kingship

*Philip Jones*

## Introduction

“Kingship everywhere and at all times has been in some degree a sacred office” (Evans-Pritchard 1962, p. 210). Some kings, of course, are more sacred than others. In ancient Mesopotamia, attributions of divinity to kings were rather more restricted, both in time and space. The more systematic examples of the phenomenon were limited to certain kings in southern Mesopotamia in the millennium or so from the twenty-second to the twelfth centuries BCE. Despite this, divine kingship in Mesopotamia generated an impressive amount of source material. We possess inscriptions in which kings claim divine status, administrative records that register cultic offerings to their divinity, and literary texts that feature divine kings, both legendary and historical.

But what did the ancient Mesopotamians mean by these honors? Our understanding of the word “god” is conditioned by the monotheistic traditions of Western societies. The term carries connotations of omnipotence and uniformity. As a polytheistic society, however, ancient Mesopotamia knew a multiplicity of divine beings that fulfilled a wide variety of different roles (Porter 2000, 2009). To simply say that the king was a “god” tells us little. Moreover, it needs to be explained why in Mesopotamia, unlike ancient Egypt, some kings were considered gods and others were not.

At first glance, the questions of what royal divinity signified and why only some kings were considered divine seem to do little to deepen our understanding of either the religious or political life of ancient Mesopotamia. The concept of divine kingship would appear to be banal in meaning and marginal in both sociological and intellectual context. It is difficult for those of us in the modern West to see royal divinity as anything more than either poetic license or extreme flattery. From our perspective, it is not easy to accept that his subjects could both be rational and, at the same time, have truly believed him to be a god. Such misgivings concerning the concept are only reinforced by its perceived social

contexts. Given the level of literacy in ancient Mesopotamia, the texts illustrating any form of kingship would have been the product of a very small segment of the population. Nor was it a homogenous one. In the third millennium, the very highest administrative officials could be literate (Visicato 2000, pp. 233–239). Most of our Old Babylonian literary tablets were the school exercises of trainee scribes whose ultimate role in society is obscure (Tinney 1998, 2018; Veldhuis 2011). Most of our first millennium literary and “scientific” tablets are the product of a sophisticated and exclusive scholarly elite (Parpola 1983; Rochberg 1993; Robson 2011). The literary nature of much of our evidence renders the concept even more suspicious. Surviving Old Babylonian administrative and commercial letters, contemporary with the bulk of our literary evidence for divine kingship, tend to treat the king as a purely human figure (as noted by Charpin 2013, there are exceptions to this). Moreover, the examples of royal divinity in actual cultic practice are basically limited to a few kings of the dynasties of Akkad and Ur III (Michałowski 2008).

But questions of believability and marginality are red herrings. The experience of kingship on any level could not be monolithic. We can only analyze those experiences recorded by scribes on tablets recovered by archaeology. If we wish to posit what those scribes really believed or how the experience of kingship would have been articulated by other, non-literate, members of society, we can only do it through these extant scribal copies. To ignore them would be to severely hinder our understanding of the civilization as a whole.

In attempting to elucidate this conceptualization of divine kingship, I will focus on rich corpora of reflective texts with contrasting visions of kingship. In Old Babylonian literary texts, kings are regularly treated as gods in their own right. In first millennium Babylonian intellectual texts, they are not. A somewhat intermediary situation is recorded in Middle and Neo-Assyrian texts where the king is sometimes lauded as a god. He is less a divine agent in his own right, however, than an earthly instance of the power of the national god, Ashur.

In considering first the literary portrayals of the cosmic role of kingship and then the possible political contexts, this chapter seeks to illuminate rather than solve these problems. Mesopotamian visions of kingship, no matter however fanciful they may seem to us, reveal native understandings of the processes and problems inherent in the constitution of legitimate authority. At the same time, they deepen our comprehension of the sociology of ancient Mesopotamian politics. They give some indication of the political phenomena that may have stimulated native reflection and the manner in which they did so.

As will be seen, intellectual experiences of power in ancient Mesopotamia are underlain by fears of royal violence. Contrasting visions of kingship highlight different ways of confronting this problem. Old Babylonian characterizations of the divine king imply that the king needs to make a crucial contribution to cosmic order. He must either restrain his innate tendency to unleash violence on his own people or, more positively, conform to a tightly circumscribed mode of correct behavior. An important way of conveying a sense of the behavior required is explicitly characterizing the king in terms of more traditional deities, such as Dumuzi and the Sun-god and implicitly contrasting him with the war-god Ninurta.

In contrast, in much of the first millennium material from Babylonia, there is a more sanguine attitude to the king. The most that can be expected of this all-too-human figure is self-restraint. Beyond that, any cosmic order must exist in spite of the king’s inherently violent nature. To some extent, Assyrian material displays a more antinomic

attitude to royal violence, with the king both creating an ordered world through violence, but also requiring frequent purification to rid him of the pollution with which this infected him.

In terms of the varying social experiences of power, we may note significant correlations – without claiming direct lines of causation – between these modes of imagining kingship and specific aspects of the political experience of kingship in each society. In the South, the Old Babylonian period stands at the beginning of a dual, long-term process of territorial integration and elite differentiation, the first millennium at its end. By the later period, literate urban elites tended to conceptualize their political privileges in opposition to the royal administration rather than through it. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that visions of a kingship crucial to cosmic order were more common in the Old Babylonian period. In the North, however, territory was integrated into the Assyrian state through a bureaucratic administration centered on the cult of the god Ashur and the person of his representative, the king.

## The Intellectual Experiences of Power

Throughout Mesopotamian history, the legitimacy of kings was presented in terms of their closeness to the divine world in a number of ways: divine descent, divine favor, superhuman stature, or marriage to a goddess. All these themes are already alluded to in one of our earliest royal inscriptions, the so-called Stele of the Vultures in honor of Eanatum of Lagash (c. 2450 BCE). His birth and upbringing are described in superhuman terms:

The god Ningirsu implanted the seed for Eanatum in the womb and ... rejoiced over him. The goddess Inana accompanied him, proclaimed him “Worthy in the Eana-temple of Inana of the Ibgal-shrine”, and set him on the special lap of the goddess Ninhursag. Ninhursag offered him her special breast. Ningirsu rejoiced over Eanatum, the seed implanted in the womb by Ningirsu. Ningirsu laid his span upon him, for [a length of] five forearms he set his forearm upon him: [he measured] five forearms, one span [i.e. 2.75 meters]. Ningirsu, with great joy, gave him the kingship of Lagash. (After Cooper 1986, p. 34)

Such themes are characteristic of celebrations of the king throughout Mesopotamian history. However, for about a thousand years, from the late third to the late second millennium, kings themselves were often accorded divine status. This innovation occurs sometime in the middle of the reign of Naram-Suen of Akkad (2254–2218 BCE), and its origin is dramatically described in one of his inscriptions:

Naram-Suen, the mighty, king of Akkad – when the four quarters together revolted against him, through the love which Ishtar showed him, he was victorious in nine battles in one year, and the king whom they had raised [against him], he captured. In view of the fact that he had protected the foundations of his city from danger, [the citizens of] his city requested from Ishtar in Eana, Enlil in Nippur, Dagan in Tuttul, Ninhursag in Kesh, Ea in Eridu, Suen in Ur, Shamash in Sippar, and Nergal in Kutha, that [Naram-Suen] be [made] the god of their city, and they built within Akkad a temple [dedicated] to him. (Frayne 1993, pp. 113–114)

At the heart of this deification was the writing of the king's name with the determinative for "god." This practice was in regular use down to the later Kassite period (Seux 1983, pp. 170–171). Other markers of royal divinity are more restricted in time. Akkad, Ur III, and Old Babylonian kings are described in epithets as gods. Ur III and Old Babylonian kings have hymns written in their honor. Ur III kings received religious offerings in their own lifetime (Klein 1981, pp. 29–36; Kraus 1974, pp. 241–250; Römer 1965, pp. 55–57; Sallaberger 1999, pp. 153–154).

For much of this period, there is little evidence extant of any native reflection on divine kingship. Fortunately, the concept suffuses many of the compositions preserved on Old Babylonian literary tablets. This material allows us to gain a more precise idea of what royal divinity signified to copyists in this period compared with earlier or later manifestations of the phenomenon. Furthermore, we can contrast this with other conceptualizations of kingship in first millennium corpora. Crucial to these distinct visions of kingship was how the balance of responsibility for cosmic order was distributed between the king and the divine world.

### *Divine Kingship in the Old Babylonian Period*

Old Babylonian literary tablets imply that the divinity of the king reflects the vital role he must play to ensure an ordered cosmos in the face of divine unpredictability. The texts, however, register an underlying unease at having to rely on the king's ability to restrain his own destructive tendencies. How, therefore, was divine government portrayed, what were the implications of this for humanity, and in what manner could the king contribute to cosmic order?

In terms of how divine government was portrayed, I will focus on four themes: the nature of the divine regime itself; primeval acts of creation that provide a charter for all subsequent cosmic order; individual divine decrees dealing with specific issues; and the way in which human institutions derive their inspiration from the divine world.

The predominant view of divine government in Old Babylonian literary tablets is perhaps surprising. As legitimate sovereignty in the material world of ancient Mesopotamia was always envisaged as monarchic, it might be expected that sovereignty in the divine world would be too. However, there is no clear head of the divine pantheon: supreme cosmic power is held by both the sky-god, An, and the patron deity of the city of Nippur, Enlil, with little attempt to harmonize this apparent discrepancy. Often enough, cosmic sovereignty is imagined in terms of a number of gods rather than one alone: a diarchy of An and Enlil together; a triumvirate of An, Enlil and Enki, the god of wisdom; a tetrarchy of An, Enlil, Enki and the mother goddess, referred to as either Ninnmah or Ninhursag; or the totality of all the gods meeting in an assembly.

None of these versions of divine government comes with strong connotations of stable cosmic order. An is something of a cipher. Enlil certainly wields force, but tends to do so in a destructive manner such as unleashing either the Flood as in Atrahasis (Foster 1993, pp. 158–201) or barbarian invaders as in Cursing of Agade (Black et al. 1998–, 2.1.5). On other occasions, Enlil can be characterized more in terms of his absence from human life than his presence. Enlil and Ninlil (Black et al. 1998–, 1.2.1) imagines ordered human life in his city of Nippur as possible only when Enlil has

vacated the city. As a team, An and Enlil's word is often characterized as unchangeable, but in contexts that suggests it is both unfathomable and erratic.

In a similar manner, Old Babylonian depictions of divine actions at the dawn of time do little to suggest a settled cosmos. Neither of the putative heads of the pantheon, An or Enlil, are shown as creating ordered space in the manner familiar to us from, for example, Yahweh's actions at the beginning of the Biblical book of Genesis. In *Song of the Hoe* (Black et al. 1998–, 5.5.4), Enlil is depicted as separating heaven from earth. Beyond that, however, his only contribution to social and cultural order is to create that most versatile of implements, the eponymous hoe. This gives humanity the potential to create its own social and cultural order, but by no means guarantees it. The efforts of other gods at primeval organization are more far-reaching, but essentially flawed. Both Enki and his realm the Abzu, the mythological subterranean ocean of fresh water, are closely associated with the qualities of intelligence and rational thinking. They would therefore obviously have a role to play in any conception of cosmic order. Indeed, in *Enki and the World Order* (Black et al. 1998–, 1.1.3), Enki organizes the primeval world and delegates the responsibility for each facet of that organization to a specific deity. However, he subverts his own efforts by assigning the willful goddess Inana the role of negating all that he had achieved. Ninurta, the son of Enlil, imposes order on foreign lands in the poem *Exploits of Ninurta* (Black et al. 1998–, 1.6.2), but achieved no such imposition on the homeland itself. *Atrahasis* (Foster 1993, pp. 158–201) begins with junior deities working the land. Their work, however, is unfinished as they go on strike, and their task is left to be completed by purely human hands.

Generally lacking imagery of either a steady hand on the tiller, or primeval organization, Old Babylonian literary texts commonly present the idea of cosmic order in terms of divine decrees. Their promulgation is usually termed “decreeing a destiny.” On rare occasions, these decrees are visualized as a finite and predetermined set recorded on the “Tablet of Destinies” possessed by one or other of the major gods. More regularly, they are presented as a set of ad-hoc declarations in response to particular events or prompted by petitions (George 1986; Polonsky 2002, pp. 73–168; Sonik 2012).

In Old Babylonian thought, divine inspiration of human institutions is encapsulated in the concept of the *m e*, the divine archetypes that underlie all aspects of civilized life. They can be said to originate with An or Enlil, but more fittingly they are generally associated with Enki and the Abzu, the source of divine wisdom. One of the major means of their transfer from the Abzu to the human realm is Inana. This process is celebrated in some detail in *Inana and Enki* (Black et al. 1998–, 1.3.1), which describes how she brought the *m e* to her spouse Dumuzi and her city Uruk. While Inana's explicit associations with the *m e* are constructive, her reputation for irrational behavior imbues that conveyance with an ominous air. Furthermore, descriptions of the *m e* in human contexts often stress the fragility of their collective integrity (Farber-Flügge 1973, pp. 150–152).

The implications of these divine contributions to cosmic order are not comforting for humanity. The cosmos is characterized as an unpredictable and dangerous place. While offerings to the gods represent humanity's fulfillment of its cosmic role, pleasing the gods in this respect is by no means simple. In *Atrahasis* (Foster 1993, pp. 158–201), Enlil becomes hostile to humanity simply because the din of everyday life prevents him from sleeping. He sends plague, famine and drought in succession to reduce humanity's numbers. Each time,

through the advice of Enki, people are able to target their offerings to the gods best able to alleviate their suffering. When Enlil finally coerces the rest of the gods into unleashing the ultimate divine weapon, the Flood, even Enki is rendered virtually powerless to intercede. He is able to arrange only for the survival of a single human family, that of the eponymous Atrahasis, the Babylonian Noah.

The two modes of divine anger, provoked and unprovoked, are both found in the Cursing of Agade (Black et al. 1998–, 2.1.5). King Naram-Suen attempts to gain a favorable omen to build a temple to Inana in his capital. Enlil, however, reacts with only silent displeasure. This sets in train a course of events that leads ultimately to the invasion of the land by the barbarian Gutians. Naram-Suen eventually resolves to destroy Enlil's temple. In retaliation, Enlil sends down the barbarian hordes to obliterate the city of Agade.

The nature of divine government and its implications require other means of countering the vagaries of the cosmos. There are numerous hymns to deities and temples that attempt to prompt a wide variety of gods and goddesses to exert their influence on their fellow divinities on humanity's behalf. More strikingly, they use the figure of the king to evoke cosmic order. This provides the intellectual context for the king's divinity. The nuances of the king's role are conveyed by a subtle set of comparisons both positive and negative with various traditional deities.

The proactive aspect of his role in preventing the provocation of divine wrath involved a delicate balance. He must ensure that human actions do not displease the gods and that the temples are provisioned without exercising undue force on his own subjects. This dilemma is reflected in comparisons of the king with two gods. Explicitly, the king is associated with the Sun-god (Polonsky 2002, pp. 436–439, 471–529; Charpin 2013). This is perhaps most famously expressed by Hammurabi (1792–1750 BCE) in the prologue to his law code:

At that time, Anu and Enlil, for the enhancement of the well-being of the people, named me by my name, Hammurabi, the pious prince, who venerates the gods, to make justice prevail in the land, to abolish the wicked and the evil, to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak, to rise like the Sun-god over all humankind, to illuminate the land. (Roth 1997, pp. 76–77)

The Sun-god was the divine judge. As such, he provided a role model for how the king should positively contribute to human order. Furthermore, the royal hymns often allude to successful provisioning as a reason for the gods to reward the king with a good fate. It was the Sun-god who was imagined as presiding over the divine assembly as it met to pronounce its satisfaction or otherwise with human actions through the medium of the innards of a sacrificed sheep (Polonsky 2002, pp. 224–239).

Implicitly, however, a comparison of the king with an even more powerful deity looms over Old Babylonian depictions of the king. The warrior god Ninurta is often acclaimed as “king” in mythological texts. Furthermore, while contemporary royal inscriptions rarely allude to royal warfare, Ninurta’s role of terrorizing or oppressing foreign lands is one for which many royal hymns frequently laud the king. However, in the composition Ninurta’s Return to Nibru (Black et al. 1998–), the god’s return from victories abroad causes a cosmic crisis as he toys with challenging his father Enlil for supreme power. The exercise

of force and violence that was so necessary to deal with enemies without would only lead to chaos if turned upon the homeland.

Equally, no qualms existed regarding the king's relationship with foreign lands. His task was to prevent them from harming the homeland by either destroying or subduing them. However, the fragility of the king's position in the face of external threat was conceptualized through his relationship with Inana. To counter this, he incarnated Dumuzi, the divine consort of Inana herself, and married the goddess in the sacred marriage ceremony. Most obviously, the power and capriciousness personified by Inana rendered the position of any spouse, divine or human, precarious (Jones 2003).

### *Kingship in First Millennium Babylonia*

The idea that the cosmos is not predetermined and that order requires a degree of royal intervention is not absent from first millennium tablets. However, texts extant from this period are dominated by a very different attitude towards cosmic order. Our most commonly attested literary text from this period is the Epic of Creation (Foster 1993, pp. 351–402). This commemorates the primeval evolution of the cosmos that culminates in the victory of Marduk, patron deity of Babylon, over the forces of chaos led by Tiamat, the personification of the sea. For this action, the rest of the gods acknowledge the suzerainty of Marduk. This rise of Marduk is widely reflected in other first millennium texts and is paralleled in the north of Mesopotamia by the figure of Assur, the patron god of Assyria. To an extent, this merely reflects the increased political importance of these gods' cities. However, especially in the case of Marduk, these new gods represent not only new rulers of the cosmos, but also a new type of supreme cosmic authority.

According to the Epic of Creation, cosmic order is not a random phenomenon, but rather something determined by Marduk in primeval times. After defeating Tiamat, Marduk creates an ordered cosmos by dividing up her carcass. In such a cosmos, *ad hoc* divine decrees and the *m e* are redundant concepts. Divine decrees are imagined as a completed set of proclamations inscribed on the Tablet of Destinies that is seized by the victorious Marduk. The role of the *m e* is fulfilled by Marduk himself. As the offspring of Ea, born in the Abzu, it is he who represents the divine power in human cultural achievements.

Marduk is not merely a replacement for Enlil at the head of the pantheon. He is a new kind of chief god altogether, one who can impose order on his fellow gods to the benefit of humanity. Moreover, to praise this new kind of leader, motifs prominent in Old Babylonian evocations of order are consciously redeployed to celebrate the new one. There are three motifs in particular – the sun, provisioning and marriage – that are re-used in the poem to characterize Marduk in a manner reminiscent of the divine king in Old Babylonian compositions. Thus, first, just as the Old Babylonian king was likened to Utu, the Sun-god, the first appearance of Marduk in the poem is marked by his grandfather, Anu, the sky-god, acclaiming him in solar terms as:

The son Utu, the son Utu,  
The son, the sun, the sunlight of the gods.  
(Foster 1993, p. 357)

Second, the king's old task of provisioning the gods is attributed to the new divine figure:

When the gods had given kingship over to Marduk

They said to him expressions of goodwill and obedience, "Henceforth, you shall be the provider for our sanctuaries." (Foster 1993: 382)

The third motif, marriage to a fearsome female figure, is redeployed more elliptically. Whereas Inana (Akkadian: Ishtar), the spouse of the king in Old Babylonian thought, is the most prominent goddess in first millennium texts, she is never referred to by name in the Epic of Creation. The only terrifying female figure in the Epic is Tiamat. But Marduk's cosmic ascension is based on defeating her in battle, not marrying her. Nevertheless, his relationship to Tiamat, antagonistic though it is, has conjugal undertones. Marduk acknowledges the legitimating qualities to marrying Tiamat. He merely disagrees with her choice of the obscure figure of Qingu as her spouse, and hints that this was an honor that should have been his:

You named Qingu to be spouse for you

Though he had no right to be, you set him up for chief god. (Foster 1993, p. 375)

The sexual undertones of the relationship between Marduk and Tiamat are fully brought out in a Neo-Assyrian cultic commentary that describes Marduk as the one "who [defeat] ed Tiamat with his penis" (Livingstone 1989, p. 94).

From this perspective, what needed explaining in history was disorder, not order. This could be done in two ways. In Erra and Ishum (Foster 1993, pp. 771–805), cosmic crises are explained as the result of Marduk periodically withdrawing from the world. Without his restraining hand, chaos ensues. The poem itself focuses on the occasion when Marduk leaves the rampaging fire-god Erra in charge in his absence. The poem also reinterprets the Flood in the same vein. Rather than being brought on by the noise of mankind, it is here depicted as the result of a previous absence on Marduk's part.

The other prominent way of conceptualizing disorder involves the king. Replaced by Marduk as the regulator of cosmic order, the king is no longer treated as divine. Outside of royal inscriptions, he is often seen as an explicitly problematic figure; his actions are usually destructive of cosmic order. This theme is present in a number of different aspects of first millennium culture. Thus, at a literary level, historiographical texts can depict the king as a danger to civilized life. For example, the so-called Weidner Chronicle presents early Mesopotamian history in general as a series of royal transgressions against Marduk and his city:

Utuhegal the "fisherman" caught fish as offering-presents on the edge of the sea-coast. Until that fish was offered to the Lord, Prince Marduk, it was not offered to any other god. The Gutians took the cooked fish away from him before it was offered. By his exalted command, Marduk took away sovereignty from the horde of Gutium and gave it to Utuhegal. Utuhegal the "fisherman" laid his evil hand on Marduk's city, and his corpse was carried away by the river. Marduk gave sovereignty over all lands to Shulgi, the son of Ur-Nammu and the latter did not carry out Marduk's rites perfectly; he profaned the purification rituals, and his sin ... Amar-Suena, his son, altered the great bulls and the [sheep] sacrifices of the New Year Festival of Marduk's temple. Goring by an ox was foretold for him, and he died from the "bite" of his shoe. (Al-Rawi 1990, p. 10; De Zorzi 2016)

A late first millennium text sets out in detail the supposed atrocities of an otherwise obscure eighth century king, Nabu-shuma-ishkun, against Babylon:

Year by year Nabu-shuma-ishkun increased the killing, pillaging, murdering and forced labor upon them. In one day he burned alive 16 Kuthians in the Zababa Gate which is in Babylon. He carried off the sons of Babylon to Syria and Elam as gifts. He expelled the sons of Babylon, their wives, their sons, and their slaves and settled them in the countryside the quarter of the sons of Babylon ... he heaped into a mound and a ruin and turned it into royal property. (Cole 1994, pp. 235–236)

At a cultic level, both regular rituals, such as the New Year Akitu festival, and irregular ones, such as the Substitute King ritual, emphasized the dangers to cosmic order posed by the king. Thus, the Akitu Festival (Black 1981; Pongratz-Leisten 1999), the major state religious ceremony of the first millennium Mesopotamian calendar, culminated in an extraordinary scene. The king was brought stripped of his insignia of office before the statue of Marduk. The conceptualization of his fitness for renewed office was not in terms of any positive qualities, but rather in terms of his refraining from exhibiting negative ones, as he recited:

I did not sin, lord of the countries. I was not neglectful of your godship. I did not destroy Babylon; I did not command its overthrow. I did not ... the temple of Esagil, I did not forget its rites. I did not rain blows on the cheek of a subordinate ... I did not humiliate them. I watched out for Babylon; I did not smash its walls. (Sachs 1950, p. 334)

The Substitute King ritual was carried out in response to the most ominous of astronomical phenomena, a solar or lunar eclipse. This represented so extreme a sign of divine displeasure at royal misdeeds that only his death would assuage their anger. To avoid this fate, a substitute would take on the outward trappings of royalty for a few months before being ritually slain (Bottéro 1992, pp. 138–155; Ambos 2013).

### ***Middle and Neo-Assyrian Kingship***

In the north, Assyria boasted a monarchy that went back to the early second millennium. We have comparatively little on the beliefs surrounding these early kings, although the Amorite interloper on the throne of Assyria, Shamshi-Adad I, did flirt with aspects of divinity. The city-state of Assur was engulfed in the large Hurrian kingdom of Hanigalbat in the middle third of the second millennium. It emerged as the focus of a small territorial state encompassing formerly independent centers such as Nineveh and Arbela.

It also emerged with a distinctive vision of the relationship between the king and the gods. Like the Old Babylonian kings, the Middle Assyrian kings were delegated to rule by their city-god. However, their city-god, also called Assur, was equated with the figure of the overall divine sovereign, Enlil, so this theology did not involve a distinctive city-god as intermediary between the sovereign god and the king.

As with Old Babylonian texts, a theme of primordial world-forming was lacking so the king was deemed necessary for the creation of order in this world. His actions were, however, more closely connected with the will of his patron deity than the more hands-off style of the Old Babylonian literary texts. As such, the Assyrian king could incarnate the

figure of Ninurta, the son of Enlil/Assur, in a way that his Old Babylonian predecessors could not. In addition, the king was also associated with other deities in rhetoric and imagery, principally the Sun-god.

The focus of the world-building, however, is very clearly on the king's Ninurta aspect rather than his solar one. His main task was the military expansion of the realm of Assur. In the words of the Middle Assyrian coronation ritual:

May Assur and [M]ullissu, the owners of your crown, co[v]er you with your crown for a hundred years! May your foot be pleasant in the temple and your hands pleasant [t]owards Ashur, your god! May your priest[hood] and that of your sons be pleasant to Assur, your god! Expand your country with your just scepter! May Assur give you [c]ommand and attention, obedience, truth and peace! (After Parpola 2013, no. 7)

Assyrian political involvement in Babylonia in the late Middle Assyrian period and especially the late Neo-Assyrian period had a profound impact on Assyrian intellectual life as well. This was exemplified by the importation of much of Babylonian learning into Assyria during the late second and first half of the first millennium. Some motifs were common to both perspectives. Thus for example, both the Assyrian Coronation ritual and the Babylonian Akitu Festival featured the king being slapped on the cheek. However, there is no hint of a "negative confession" in the Assyrian document.

More fundamentally, the cultural prestige of Babylonia prompted the Neo-Assyrian kings and their advisors to utilize much of the perspective on kingship dominant in first millennium Babylonia. For example, *Enuma Elish* was prominent in Neo-Assyrian libraries. It existed, however, in two recensions. Most Assyrian tablets follow the Babylonian version. In a few manuscripts, however, editors utilized the phonetic similarity of Anshar, the great-grandfather of Marduk, to Assur to equate the two figures and make the former the hero of the epic rather than Marduk (Lambert 2013, pp. 4–6; for the literary incongruities this caused, see Michalowski 1990).

From this perspective, the king is no longer necessary for the creation of earthly order. In following this line of thought, therefore, celebrations of royalty followed diverging paths. On the one hand, they embraced the regimen of periodic or irregular royal purification as proscribed by Babylonian divinatory science, such as the bathing ritual Bit Rimki or the Substitute King ritual. (Ambos 2012, 2014). On the other, the king could be elided with the new figure of human cosmic ordering, the primordial sage Adapa (Pongratz-Leisten 2015, 448–461), both in terms of sponsoring the collection of libraries of Babylonian learning or, as King Assurbanipal does, of claiming competence in the texts themselves:

I have mastered the craft of the sage Adapa, the guarded secret(s) of the whole scribal art. I can observe the signs of the heavens and the earth and discuss them in the meetings of the scholars, I am capable of debating with the learned oil masters the [chapter of the diviner manual entitled] "if the liver is a correspondence of the sky," and I can solve the most complicated mathematical divisions and multiplications that have no solution [provided with the problem]. I have read the most complicated [bilingual] text whose Sumerian is obscure, and whose Akkadian version is difficult to unravel. I have studied stone inscriptions from before the flood of the complicated [text whose opening line is] *kakku sakku*. (Pongratz-Leisten 2015, p. 455, after Michalowski 2005, p. 143)

## The Social Experience of Power

Identifying the particular social experiences of political power that may have inspired these contrasting intellectual projections of kingship is not easy. For any complex society, the set of social concerns that find articulation in cultural products and the way that they do so are unpredictable. For ancient Mesopotamia, this problem is compounded by the gaps in our knowledge of both the social and cultural experiences of the civilization. The distribution of relevant source material, in terms of geographical, chronological and institutional origins, is uneven. The great majority of our texts that directly illustrate royal relations with any of their subjects are the internal records of palace or temple administrative hierarchies. Civic institutions, despite much modern searching, remain relatively invisible to us (Van De Mieroop 1999).

Nevertheless, it is this latter sphere that seems to provide social experiences of political power congruent with the imaginative experiences identified above. I will first of all examine the ways in which the king intervened in the civic life of his subjects. I will then turn to some of the long-term sociological processes; these illuminate the differences between the predominant projections of royal intervention to a cosmic level found on Old Babylonian tablets contrasting with those on first millennium tablets.

### *Royal Intervention in Civic Life*

Throughout Mesopotamian history, the sources regularly highlight the king's role as the head of extensive palace or temple administrative hierarchies. Less explicitly illuminated is his relationship to the political community as a whole. At the core of royal authority, however, was the king's representation of his community's sense of self. As such, beyond any palace or temple organizations that he may have headed, he provided one means of transcending internal jurisdictional and property divisions and mobilizing resources, either in taxes or conscript labor from the whole community. A king's intervention in the civic lives of his subjects would have been mainly of two kinds: judicial and "fiscal." Judicially, the king was the highest court of appeal in his kingdom. Fiscally, as noted above, the king had the right to exact contributions from the citizens, both in kind and in labor. At the same time, a number of those citizens expected such extractions to be remitted. This could be done either retrospectively, through the cancellation of arrears, or prospectively, through the grant of exemption from future exactions. In the case of prospective exemptions, the king could have been credited with either acting on his own volition or merely (re)confirming divine will or immemorial custom.

There were significant differences in these civic experiences of royal power between the Old Babylonian, the Neo-Babylonian, and the Neo-Assyrian periods. Old Babylonian cities looked to their kings to remit their obligations both retrospectively and prospectively. Thus, in terms of retrospective exemptions, we possess a number of references in Old Babylonian sources to the king "establishing justice" (Sumerian: *nijsisa ḫar*; Akkadian: *mīšarum šakānum*). From extant texts of the actual decrees, we can see that this action cancelled private debts, debt bondage, and arrears of taxes owed to tax farmers. The costs of the latter's cancellation were born by the crown rather than the tax

farmer (Charpin 1990). In terms of prospective exemptions, we have a number of royal claims to innovative exempting. The kings of Isin, for example, were especially careful of the feelings of three of the most prestigious cities in their realm: Ur, Isin, and Nippur. Thus, for example, the prologue to the Laws of Lipit-Ishtar boasts of reducing their corvee burdens:

At that time, I liberated the sons and daughters of the city of Nippur, the sons and daughters of the city of Ur, the sons and daughters of the city of Isin, the sons and daughters of the city of the lands of Sumer and Akkad, who were subjugated by the yoke(?), and I restored order. (Roth 1997, p. 25)

In the first millennium, we see a diverging evolution between north and south. Assyrian kings still proclaimed retrospective remissions – now usually termed *andurāru* (Villard 2007) – but Babylonian ones seem not to. Prospective remissions are seen as confirmatory rather than innovative on the king’s part. Already in the preceding Kassite period, we hear of an institution called *kidinnūtu*, meaning “protection”, whereby cities claimed to be under divine protection and thus free from royal impositions. During the Neo-Assyrian period, we know of Nippur, Sippar, Borsippa, and Babylon in the south, and Assur and Harran in the north, enjoying this and other such privileges (Reviv 1988). The implications of *kidinnūtu* are spelled out in Advice to a Prince:

If (the king) called up the whole of Sippar, Nippur and Babylon to impose forced labor on the peoples aforesaid, requiring of them service at the recruiter’s cry, Marduk, sage of the gods, deliberative prince, will turn (the king’s) land over to his foe so that the forces of his land will do forced labor for his foe. Anu, Enlil and Ea, the great gods who dwell in heaven and earth, have confirmed in their assembly the exemption of these (people from such obligations). (Foster 1993, p. 761)

The citizens of Babylon, in a letter to their joint Assyrian suzerains Assurbanipal and his brother Shamash-shum-ukin, loftily claimed that within the limits of their city, even a dog shared in these privileges (Reynolds et al. 2003, no. 158). Assyrian kings often pandered to the desire of Babylonian cities for tax exemptions, but seem to have garnered little credit for their efforts. Whatever a king’s claims, it seems likely that the citizens saw him as simply confirming their traditional privileges. Moreover, these were privileges that were perceived as constantly threatened by a royal potential for intervention that provoked bitter resistance (Brinkman 1984, pp. 22–23; Frame 1992, pp. 35–36).

*Kidinnūtu* itself is not attested beyond the Neo-Assyrian period. Nevertheless, the basic issue of city autonomy seems to have persisted into later periods. Tradition remembered the end of the short-lived Neo-Babylonian dynasty in terms of the estrangement between its final king Nabonidus and the citizens of his own capital, conceptualized as royal transgressions against the Marduk and his temple (Beaulieu 1989, pp. 149–203; Kuhrt 1990). In some contrast to both the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires, the succeeding Achaemenid and Seleucid regimes were far more comfortable, with a decentralized structure in which individual cities and regions could enjoy considerable autonomy (Kuhrt and Sherwin-White 1987).

### Social Evolution

Old Babylonian projections of the king's intervention in civic life to a cosmic level seem to be more positive, if nervous, than Neo-Babylonian ones. This is probably tied to changes in southern Mesopotamian society over the second and first millennia BCE. Parallel long-term developmental processes of territorial integration and elite differentiation provide a context for increasing feelings of estrangement from royal government on the part of the literate urban elites.

Prior to the Old Babylonian period, political developments had generally seen an oscillation between independent city-states and modular hegemonies, such as the Akkad and Ur III "empires". Under these latter regimes, a number of Mesopotamian city-states were subsumed into larger polities. However, there was little in the way of direct rule. Authority was delegated to client princes who, whether local or central in origin, were always liable to rebel or defect. As such, each city-state retained enough sense of its political identity to re-emerge when centralized control lapsed. In the early second millennium, after the fall of the Ur III dynasty, however, we begin to see the emergence of integrated regional states larger than the old city-states. This territorial integration, however, is accompanied by elite differentiation. Thus, within southern Mesopotamia, both Rim-Sin of Larsa and Hammurabi of Babylon resisted leaving significant conquests in the hands of subordinate kings. Although Hammurabi's dynasty only controlled the whole of Babylonia for a short period of time, its decline saw the region split into two subregions rather than fragment back into city-states.

At the same time, a number of Old Babylonian dynasties identified themselves in terms of a specific ethnic group, the Amorites, rather than the urban centers they ruled. The Amorites were a people of pastoral origin who had spread over much of the Near East by the early second millennium, transcending the boundaries of the individual city-states (Kamp and Yoffee 1980; Michalowski 2011, pp. 82–121). Nevertheless, there seems to have been no deep structural division between king and elites. While Old Babylonian kings themselves may have cultivated an air of ethnic distinction from their urban subjects, they were happy enough to employ them in the administration of their realm. Moreover, by the late Old Babylonian period, if not earlier, the kings of Babylon had essentially "privatized" much of their administrative machinery through a form of tax farming (Charpin 1982; Yoffee 1977, pp. 143–151).

Elite involvement in royal administration in first millennium Babylonia was rather different. After the Old Babylonian period, the process of territorial consolidation had continued. Southern Mesopotamia came to be seen, despite many political vicissitudes in the late second and early first millennia, as a single land with Babylon as its natural center. Similarly, in northern Mesopotamia, the former city-state of Assur became the center of the territorial state of Assyria (in Akkadian *māt aššur*, literally "the land of Assur").

In the south, however, this consolidation was accompanied by a degree of social differentiation. Kings of Babylonia often claimed different ethnic status to their subjects: Kassites, Assyrians, Persians, and finally Macedonians. In the later second millennium, both Assyrian and Kassite rulers periodically moved their capitals from traditional urban centers to new foundations. Both Tukulti-Ninurta II of Assyria and Kurigalzu of Babylon founded new capital cities that they named after themselves: Kar-Tukultininurta and

Dur-Kurigalzu respectively. First millennium rulers tended to site their seats of government in established centers, although for various reasons, both Assur and Babylon were seldom *de facto* seats of government in the first millennium. The Assyrian capital was moved to Kalhu under Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE). Sargon II (721–705) mimicked some of his second millennium predecessors and built the entirely new capital of Dur-Sharukin (“Fortress of Sargon”). His son and successor Sennacherib (705–689) abandoned this new site and set up his capital in the old established city of Nineveh. As for the south, Babylonia was effectively under Assyrian domination from the mid-eighth century to the late seventh. The situation was reversed and political power was restored to Babylon with the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Not only was this period short-lived, it also included the bizarre episode of the last Neo-Babylonian king, Nabonidus, residing in the North Arabian oasis of Teima for a decade or so. Subsequently, both Babylonia and Assyria were ruled by foreign dynasties, the Persian Achaemenids and the Greco-Macedonian Seleucids from a variety of cities outside the traditional circle of Mesopotamian capitals: Susa in southwestern Iran, Seleucia-on-the-Tigris between Assyria and Babylonia, and Antioch in Syria.

The urban elite of the old established cities probably maintained some connections with royal administrations. In particular, we possess a number of letters from Assyrian and Babylonian scholars regarding the interpretation of various omens (Parpola and Reade 1993). However, in the main, Babylonian scholars and scribes seem to have found expression for their sense of political identity in the priestly hierarchies of their cities’ temples. Tellingly, the walls that protected Old Babylonian cities generally had names that glorified kings. By the first millennium, such names generally glorified gods (George 1996, pp. 368–369).

## Conclusion

In the history of Mesopotamian ideas, royal divinity is one way of situating the king in relation to the legitimate source of authority in the cosmos, the gods. The less the gods are seen as utilizing their own power constructively on human behalf, the greater the king’s autonomy as a divine figure. In the history of Mesopotamian society, these degrees of royal divinity and non-divinity correlate with the diverging evolution of scribal perceptions concerning the royal contribution to scribal wellbeing from the Old Babylonian period to the Neo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian.

## FURTHER READING

Mesopotamian kingship has featured heavily in a number of recent conference volumes (Hill and Jones 2013; Lanfranchi and Rollinger 2010; Brisch 2008; see also Brisch 2013). For the fourth and third millennia, see Steinkeller (2017). For the Old Babylonian period, see Charpin (2010, 2012, 2015). For Assyrian kingship, see Pongratz-Leisten (2015). For Neo-Babylonian kingship, see Finn (2017).

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PART IV

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**THOUGHT**

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# Transmission of Knowledge

*Benjamin Foster*

A courtesy of Mesopotamian letter writing style demanded that the correspondent of inferior social position communicate information to his superior as if his superior already knew it. So too, a polite disclaimer among experts of equal rank was that what one did not know, the other did, while whatever the one knew the other knew as well. Presumption of superior knowledge in proportion to social status implied a theory that useful knowledge was transmitted vertically, from above to below; for example, from the powerful to the weak, the erudite to the unlettered, the elderly to the young. Evidence for such a Mesopotamian theory of the transmission of knowledge abounds, but consideration of knowledge must begin with writing itself and the specialized knowledge that the literate arts entailed.

The invention of writing in southern Mesopotamia, towards the end of the fourth millennium BCE, shows that human beings were by then contending with the problem of how to communicate over space and time (Glassner 2003). The near-simultaneous appearance with writing of representational and monumental art shows that rulers and elites were, in the same process, learning how to mold and control subjects' belief and action, using imagery, just as communication theorists were refining techniques to represent language in symbols (Michalowski 1990). The creation of a set of codes or symbols at once differentiated those who manipulated and understood them from those who did not. Small wonder, then, that one Mesopotamian theory of knowledge saw it as transmitted from centers of management and authority, redistributed, so to speak, in controlled doses to a passive audience. Yet by the early second millennium, knowledge of writing had spread from administrators to private possession, making possible new patterns of acquisition and dissemination of literate culture, using a reduced number of simplified symbols and expression closer to the spoken vernacular. By the second half of the first millennium, though, this process may have been reversed so that writing beyond basic literacy and scholarship was once more dominated by a small ruling elite and a few extended families (Larsen

1987). Thus the relationship among literacy, knowledge, and authority fluctuated through the three millennia of Mesopotamian written tradition beyond the capacity of a brief essay to describe it authentically, but Mesopotamian written tradition, to which modern knowledge of Mesopotamian intellectual endeavor is largely owed, always placed literacy first as the gateway to knowledge (Radner and Robson 2011; Charpin 2010).

Highest knowledge, according to Mesopotamian literate tradition, was transmitted by the gods. In exceptional cases, gods might choose favored human beings with which to communicate directly, through speech, dreams, or visions. Tradition told of certain sages, such as Adapa or the flood hero Atrahasis (also called Ut-napishtim), who enjoyed sublime wisdom through direct divine favor, and their sublime wisdom might in some cases be claimed by scholars as the basis for their profession (Gammie and Perdue 1990; Michalowski 1980).

Certain rulers or dynasties show a predilection for supernatural communication. Gudea, ruler of Lagash in the late third millennium BCE, tells of a motivating dream from his city god: “Gudea saw the lord, divine Ningirsu, in a vision of the night, He ordered him to build his house” (Edzard 1997, p. 69). Assyrian kings of the late eighth and early seventh centuries BCE often referred to supernatural events as sources of understanding, and a millennium and a half after Gudea the Babylonian ruler Nabonidus (sixth century BCE) also claimed privileged access to the gods through dreams: “At the outset of my perduring reign, the gods Marduk and Sin (= the moon) caused me to have a dream: Marduk, the great lord, and Sin, luminary of heaven and of the world below, stood side by side. Marduk said to me, ‘Nabonidus, king of Babylon, bring bricks on your own steed, build the temple Ehulhul and set up the abode of Sin, the great lord, within it’” (Beaulieu 1989, p. 108; Oppenheim 1966).

Those who do not admire rulers may impugn such revelations, as might critics of Constantine, Luther, or Joseph Smith, but Mesopotamian society accepted divine communication as normative, so no clear instance of expressed cynicism about the veracity of such communications survives (Pongratz-Leisten 1999). On the other hand, prophecy, which seems to be at home outside of Mesopotamia proper, though a well-attested feature of the Amorite culture of the early second millennium BCE, could involve kings taking seriously ecstatic utterances even from the riffraff of society (Nissinen 2003). The revelations so communicated were not large, systematic bodies of doctrine or policy, however, but brief, colorful comments and warnings on royal projects and wellbeing.

From the perspective of Mesopotamian higher learning, divine knowledge was transmitted indirectly through an infinite range of events and phenomena, observed or elicited, in the heavens and on earth, at home and abroad, decodable through divination, Mesopotamia’s premier science after the turn of the second millennium (Maul 2013). The origins and development of the Mesopotamian mantic world view are obscure; the modern reader knows it best through late prodigious Mesopotamian scholarly reference compendia of observations and consequences, as well as formal queries and reports of observations, passages in narratives referring to its principles and practice, and even diviners’ prayers for professional competence in their metier. In theory, the diviner’s sourcebook was the entire visible universe.

Terrestrial phenomena apprehendable to a casual observer, sights, sounds, events in the home, workplace, street, community, or countryside, perhaps a bit of rubbish in the street, birds flying overhead, or ants on the wall, portended something for the observer. “If water

is spilled in the doorway of a man's house and it has the shape of a man with an arm outstretched, (this portends) that the man will himself stretch out his arm (to beg) in the street of his city" (Freedman 1998, p. 233). Cosmic events, such as eclipses, portended good or ill for the nation or its leadership, as did the birth of monstrous animals.

A guild of professionals stood ready to interpret portentous phenomena and to suggest often complicated means of avoiding a negative outcome, presumably for a fee, and the costs of materials used in divination were sometimes high:

With respect to the ritual that goes with the spell "You are a Monstrous Evil," about which the king my lord wrote to me, it is performed to drive away an evil demon or a disease. As soon as something has afflicted someone, the exorcist comes and hangs a mouse and a stalk from a thorn bush above the person's door. The exorcist gets dressed up in red clothing and puts on over it a red cloak. He holds a raven in his right hand, a falcon in his left hand ... (finally) he makes a second exorcist walk around the sufferer's bed with a censer and torch, reciting the spell "Evil Demon, Go Away!," then up to the door, and next conjures the door. He does this every morning and evening until the affliction goes away. With respect to the moon and sun appearing in opposition on the thirteenth instant, there is a ritual to be performed against (the portent of) that ... (Parpola 1993, no. 238)

Experts naturally sought to justify their intellectual interests and skills to the ruling establishment in return for support and patronage and for the opportunity to consult on political, diplomatic, and military undertakings (Oppenheim 1975).

Higher knowledge was therefore a kind of sublime, uncanny power open to the elite, as much as a body of human skills to be acquired and expanded. Hence there was no teacher in the divine pantheon nor school in heaven. Nor did anyone, when bragging of his proficiencies, refer to his teachers. Special knowledge came neither from study or even mentoring but from revelation or unique experience. According to the Epic of Gilgamesh, the alpha and omega of knowledge was understanding what transpired before the flood, which was seen as the beginning of empirical time, and what happens to a person after he dies, obviously the end of it. The epic hero Gilgamesh brings an account of both of these to the human race, one from the narrative of the flood hero, whose abode Gilgamesh reaches in his valor, and the other through a vision of his dying friend Enkidu, reworked from a Sumerian poem in which Enkidu rashly goes to the Netherworld to retrieve Gilgamesh's athletic equipment, consigned there by divine action (George 1999).

For most educated people, however, a body of knowledge was given to them at school, and scarcely came from the gods. This knowledge was both practical and theoretical and had the sanction of long tradition behind it. Their objective was to master a body of lore that set the educated apart from the uneducated. From the early second millennium, various narratives tell about school and its subjects and how they were acquired, with the usual rhetoric about rigors of school life (Civil 1985):

This is the roster of days I spent at school:  
I had three days off a month,  
There were three holidays a month,  
That makes twenty-four days a month  
That I spent at school, oh no, that wasn't so long!

Much is known about the second-millennium school curriculum and how writing, reading, and arithmetic were taught (Tinney 2011). The student began with simple signs and numerals, progressed to short sayings, excerpts, and calculation exercises, then moved on eventually to full-scale literary works and more involved problems. He was supposed to master Sumerian, which was only a learned cultural language by the time the school days narratives were composed, hence of the same status as Latin or Greek in European education of the nineteenth century CE (Vanstiphout 1979). To this end, long lists of signs and traditional equivalences were learned, a surprising amount of no practical value: “I can give 600 (= numerous) lines beginning with the LÚ-sign” a young scholar brags (Civil 1985; Glassner 1999). Accounting, reckoning, and the standard form for every type of contract, learned by heart, filled his days. In addition to daily recitations, there was homework. For would-be historians, epigraphic training required deciphering old tablets picked up in ruins (Visicato and Westenholz 2000, p. 1123) or copying historic inscriptions in temples (Hallo 2006). For advanced scholarship, such as divination and astronomy, there was presumably some form of apprenticeship to a master (McEwan 1981, pp. 17–21); some learned professions were transmitted through successive generations of one family, where the father taught the son his lore and the son copied his father’s scholarly works (Cohen 1988, 1: pp. 24–25).

Education was sometimes carried on in private academies set up in the homes of literate men who sought to increase their income by taking on students (Charpin 1986). The successful student could hope for a post in government or at a large establishment, such as a temple; the less successful could sit near the city gate waiting to draw up contracts for a fee or to make records of court cases. Some scholars became the confidants of kings and were entrusted with the task of writing out royal correspondence and drawing up historical narratives of the king’s deeds (Parpola 1987, p. 257). As one would-be court scribe expressed this, “I can draw up in good form my lord’s commands, I can remind my lord of what he has forgotten” (Durand 1997, 1: pp. 103–110). Thus a person with a good control of traditional and practical knowledge enjoyed high expectations, whereas unemployed and underpaid scholars painted their lot in the gloomiest terms (Parpola 1987, Foster 1993): “I cannot afford a pair of sandals or the cost of a tailor, I have no change of clothes and carry a debt of six minas of silver plus interest ...” (Parpola 1993, no. 294); “I shiver with cold in an out-of-the-way place, I go my way empty-handed, a scholarly squint afflicts me” (Durand 1997, 1: pp. 103–110).

Beyond mastery of the formal content of a discipline, Mesopotamian literate scholarship esteemed skill in bipolar thought: appreciation of pairs and correspondences, matching and contrasting phenomena, balancing multiplicity of interpretations derived from manipulating signs and symbols. The more potential one saw, the richer one’s store of knowledge, in preference to a single response or right answer. Only shadowy outlines of this aspect of Mesopotamian thought are discernable today in the scattered ruins of its scholarly achievement, and little seems compatible with contemporary reasoning strategies (Jeyes 1980; Cavigneaux 1987; Glassner 1995; Pearce 1998; Seminara 2001, pp. 420–424). So too, hermeneutic commentaries on selected masterpieces of literature and scholarship privilege “higher” readings beyond the literal sense (Frahm 2011a).

To the literate, then, knowledge, be its source in revelation, observation, or reasoning, was to be found in written records. Recourse to the past was common parlance (Charpin

2010). So it was that the obligation to leave written records for the future became a literary device, and in a literary autobiography purportedly carved on a stela, a chastened monarch blames a remote predecessor for not warning him of what to expect (Foster 2005, p. 349):

(King Enmerkar) did not write upon a stela ...  
Nor did he publish his name, so I did not bless him.

But was writing enough? Some see a pivotal role for “masters” whose teaching, now lost to us, had a decisive effect on certain bodies of written tradition. Their putative teaching relied on the spoken word and perhaps compilation of authoritative text editions, both referred to by the Babylonian expression “that of the mouth of ...,” or “according to the wording of ...”. The form and content of such teaching could be referred to centuries later (Lambert 1959; Frahm 2011a, p. 87). Explanations of passages, words, and concepts, presumably derived from such teaching, seem to the modern reader esoteric or even freely associative in character, but only a beginning has been made in understanding the fragments that survive (Livingstone 1986, p. 219): “The shoe which they take (in the ceremony) to the temple of the Lady of Babylon – this is a token, the god sends it because they will not release him nor can he come out.” Some purportedly esoteric knowledge was transmitted with injunctions of secrecy, enjoining that only the initiate be shown the material (Westenholz 1998): “Let one who understands disclose this to one who understands, the one who does not understand must not see it!” The motivations for keeping such lore secret are not further explained. Esoteric lore may have been associated with religious knowledge.

Physical preservation of knowledge took the form of accumulations of tablets in homes and institutions, which could be treasured like fine books in modern personal or institutional collections. Scattered information concerning study and preservation of manuscripts, retrieval of documents, and collecting and consulting written materials shows that the written word enjoyed high prestige, just as in Mesopotamian law a written record was an essential component of a contractual relationship or the conclusion of a court case. The very act of writing a tablet could be a religiously meritorious deed (Pearce 1993).

The literate community being small in proportion to the population, scholars were aware that social disorder or natural catastrophes could obliterate important bodies of knowledge. Perhaps this anxiety stimulated, towards the end of the second millennium, the compilation of standardized, critical editions of major texts, which enjoyed special status thereafter (Frahm 2011a: 322), as well as systematically accumulated libraries (Pedersén 1998).

Transmission of knowledge outside of formal education relied on the spoken word: references to public speeches, use of heralds, reading aloud, exchange of messengers, and systematic interrogation abound (Oppenheim 1960). From this process came “understanding,” the basic metaphors for the acquisition of which in Akkadian derived from hearing and tasting. The understanding person had “heard widely,” or “had the taste of” (*tēmu*) something, in his ear and mouth respectively (Glassner 1995). Through these two portals, the Mesopotamians believed, knowledge was absorbed by the human mind. Knowledge was “deep” or “profound.” There was no independent concept of “well read,”

so this idea was probably implied in having “heard widely,” as “reading” was expressed by using a verb to speak aloud.

For many branches of knowledge, such as midwifery or military tactics, no written tradition existed; hence they had no resonance or prestige in surviving Mesopotamian scholarship, despite their importance in everyday life. Crafts, for example, were learned by apprenticeship. Contracts of apprenticeship are best known from the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid periods, in which free workers undertook to educate apprentices, especially slaves, in such tasks as weaving, bleaching, cooking, seal engraving, leather work, even rat-catching, for a fixed period, often several years. The master promised to teach the entire art of his profession, for a fee and the services of the apprentice during the years of apprenticeship, the slave owner providing basic clothing and sustenance (Bongenaar and Jursa 1993).

Sometimes, on the other hand, scribes wrote out what purport to be procedures for manufacturing certain products, such as aromatics or pyrotechnic goods like faience and glass (Oppenheim et al. 1970), not to mention what resemble recipes for *haute cuisine* (Bottéro 1995). Efforts to reproduce these commodities according to the instructions have not been successful because incomplete information was given, so such manuals apparently had at best only mnemonic value. Perhaps some of these were drawn up in the spirit of encyclopedists, so scribes could boast that they knew the technical vocabulary of every profession. Some may have seen knowing the vocabulary as mastery of the essence of the profession, but a Babylonian spoof in which a “learned” man lectures a cleaner in scientific, detailed technical terminology on how to clean his garment, and is told by the cleaner to wash it himself, warns against taking such a view too seriously (Foster 2005, pp. 151–152; Wasserman 2013).

The largest part of the Mesopotamian learning process took place, then, beyond the narrow horizon of literacy, and so must be deduced from chance references. Fathers were supposed to instruct their sons not to loiter in the streets, to avoid conflicts and congregating places of lowlives, such as taverns and brothels, and to offer them other good advice of the same ilk. Mothers’ advice to daughters is inaudible to us, behind the closed doors where proper young ladies were supposed to reside. Special knowledge of women is sometimes alluded to in passing: child-bearing and rearing and the interpretation of dream symbolism, for example (Foster 2005: 878; Asher-Greve 1987; Harris 2000).

A comprehensive Mesopotamian theory of knowledge is developed in the Epic of Gilgamesh (Foster 1987). This implies that the first step in adult knowledge was sexual self-awareness. This was followed by knowledge of another human being on an equal basis, by exploring another mind and spirit, accepting and offering personal sacrifices to the needs and desires of another. Beyond this came knowledge of one’s own self, transcending gratification, roles assigned by society, and unexamined assumptions. The more one defined one’s self, paradoxically, the less distinct from the rest of the human race one became. Finally, according to the poem, the highest form of knowledge was recognition that the only significant knowledge was that transmitted to the future in written form – only this could transcend the self, which was doomed to die and disappear. The obvious bias of this scheme is that it privileges the very Epic as a source of highest knowledge. Even if most people probably did not believe this or had even

heard of it, the poet's thesis stands as a well thought-out Mesopotamian perspective on the transmission of knowledge.

Although some rulers, such as the Sumerian king Shulgi and the Assyrian king Assurbanipal (Foster 2005, p. 831; Frahm 2011b), boasted of their superior knowledge, they were exceptional, as most rulers did not. Shulgi claimed to be, among other achievements, an expert diviner, a superb musician on both string and wind instruments in theory and performance, as well as a composer; an architect, jurist, diplomat, linguist, athlete, scribe, administrator, and author (Klein 1995). These extravagant pretensions can hardly be read as a meaningful survey of useful knowledge, for, as one would expect, they seem for the most part to be courtly accomplishments.

Praise for gods and rulers usually focused on their power and authority, and with these the ability to punish or forgive. Ignorance was occasionally ridiculed, as when scholars chortled over the efforts of the Babylonian king Nabonidus to participate in a technical discussion of omens (Machinist and Tadmor 1993), or when a physician did not know even elementary Sumerian (Foster 2005, pp. 937–938), but, outside of school, learning and intelligence were in general esteemed less highly than skill and strength. Perhaps it was because of this that the later Gilgamesh Epic reinvented Gilgamesh as a man of knowledge rather than a man of strength. In this instance, learned men sought to place knowledge ahead of strength as something permanent, taking revenge on the powerful, whose favor they needed to survive, for they knew that time was on their side.

Yet emphasis on passive reception of knowledge should not obscure that Mesopotamians had as well a doctrine of revelation or breakthrough, when new and important knowledge suddenly flashed into a person's consciousness (Foster 1991). A flowery but light-hearted description of such a moment, when a seemingly wonderful idea forms in the mind, is found in a Sumerian epic poem of the late third millennium BCE. Here the Sumerian king, Enmerkar, king of Uruk, has been presented with a trial in the form of a riddle by his rival, the lord of Aratta: he is to bring him grain in net sacks and no other form of container. Enmerkar makes elaborate preparations for the usual sacrifices made to obtain divine assistance, when, in the midst of it, a brilliant idea comes to his mind, thanks to the goddess of grain, who, not coincidentally, is also the goddess of scholarly attainment, the tablet her "field," the stylus like a stalk of grain standing in it (Vanstiphout 2003, pp. 74–75, lines 318–324, freely rendered):

At that moment, she who is the ready writing field of a tablet,  
The sharp stylus for mustering (wedges) in serried ranks,  
That golden image sprung to life at the right moment,  
Beautiful Inspiration, now full grown, a wholesome murmured magic phrase,  
Divine Nisaba of the grain field that is, mistress of garnered wisdom,  
Opened to him her treasure house of insight!  
He, ushered in to that heavenly temple, listened to her words.

Enmerkar lets old grain sprout, making it easy to carry in the net sacks. "Brilliant idea" was a "golden image" sprouting in the mind; potentiality realized was portrayed as the pregnant moment a stylus was about to plunge into the ready clay. Thus a Mesopotamian poet expressed the joy of adding new knowledge to the accumulated store.

## FURTHER READING

Radner and Robson (2011) is a substantial collection of essays on many aspects of Mesopotamian teaching, learning, scholarship, and knowledge. Van De Mieroop (2016) is an engagingly written, comprehensive study of Babylonian principles and practices of gaining, using, and enlarging knowledge.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# Literature of Ancient Egypt and the Ancient Near East

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*Susan Tower Hollis*

Writing a chapter on Ancient Near Eastern literature that includes materials from Sumer, Mesopotamia, Canaan, Israel, and a bit from the Hittite/Hurrian area as well as Egypt, involves an extraordinary set of challenges. The first of these, aside from the number and differences of cultures and a timespan extending over nearly three millennia ending around 500 BCE, involves working with multiple languages, varied kinds of writing mostly lacking alphabets, and multiple changes within each culture and among the cultures over time. Then there is the question of how to define literature: what is it, especially when we look back not just centuries but millennia ago to cultures and civilizations very different from our own in which few people could read and write? Is “literature” a modern term that does not apply well to cultures from four, three, and two millennia ago? And does the word “literature” mean the same for each culture?

What kinds of literature were written during that timespan, and how did they change and reflect each of the cultures as each of them developed? Finally, given the limited reading and writing during this time period, who was the intended audience, how were the written materials transmitted, and what was the purpose of each kind of literature in each culture? The answers to these questions are elusive at best and totally unanswerable at worst, but looking at what is understood as literature today within each culture can minimally lead to a better understanding of each, and even help understand something of relationships among the cultures. In doing so, however, it is most important to recognize and keep in mind that we do not have anything like all the written documents from these ancient cultures, as becomes very evident in reading references to other materials we do not have in some of those we do have, and so we must accept that we actually have only a portion of what might be considered literature due to accident of find, destruction, and re-use of the materials on which the original was written. Finally, given the limited space, not all possible literature types will come under discussion (Ehrlich 2009a).

The current consensus is that actual writing began some time during the middle of the fourth millennium BCE in both Egypt and Mesopotamia. Its function served equally for storage and communication: storage to extend the knowledge and data of human memory, and communication to extend the range of the human voice (Assmann 1999, 6). In addition, although limited in scope, writing also served for display. While we might think of “display” as pictures – and not incorrectly when considering Egyptian monumental hieroglyphs – rather than writing, in fact, the ability to actually write, read, or simply to possess written documents enhanced an individual’s prestige (Baines 2007, pp. 43–44), notably exemplified in an Egyptian Middle Kingdom document titled variously “Dua Khety” or “Satire on Trades” (Simpson 2003, pp. 431–447), in which a father, taking his son to scribal school, seeks to impress on the son how prestigious being a scribe is within the Egyptian world. Such was the case in the other cultures as well, as shown in a discussion of literacy in ancient Sumer where knowledge of writing was restricted and various levels of literacy existed (Black et al. 2004, pp. xl–xli).

The why of what was written down, the motivation for using this prestigious method of communication, is a challenging question. Keeping track of what was brought to a temple or palace in tithes or taxes surely is not at issue, but the purpose of writing narratives and other kinds of non-administrative or business materials proves more questionable.

Is such by definition – and whose definition – “literature”? And in fact, what is “literature”? It is writing, of course, but its definitions vary widely, and when it is further defined as “belles lettres,” as has appeared in some discussions of ancient literature, that is, writing for aesthetic rather than didactic purposes (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 5th ed.), viewing ancient materials becomes very problematic, if only because we simply do not know much about how the ancients saw written documents aside from their prestige value.

Thus rather than seeking to answer the question, for the purpose of this discussion, I suggest we look at these materials as traditional, reflecting a collective voice far more than individual authors. Such a definition naturally eliminates personal letters, generally a late addition to the written corpus in any case, but can be used to include hymns of various kinds, occasionally prayers, lamentations, wisdom literature, instructional literature, narratives of any kind, rituals, royal documents of various sorts, and even to some degree (auto) biographies, though not all these can be discussed here and none can be discussed in great depth. Here we will include limited discussion of narratives including myths, epics, tales, and legends; wisdom literature including lamentations; instructional literature; hymns; and love songs, with a short note on the ancient Egyptian Harpers’ Songs. However, these titles do not reflect ancient typology, as the ancients themselves rarely provided titles for their writing, much less generic classification, something we do today for our convenience. In fact, it is rare to have a name attached to an ancient document, and in many cases, where a name is attached, it is that of a scribe or copyist.

Among the narrative forms, that is, stories having beginnings, middles, and ends, are myths, commonly defined as narratives in which deities serve as the major protagonists and antagonists. Epics involve long narratives, commonly with several distinct parts, that have primarily human beings as the protagonist and antagonist, though deities may play a part, while tales appear as shorter narratives with humans as their actors. Legends usually involve human figures important to that particular culture like warriors or kings. Wisdom literature and lamentations present philosophical ideas, morals, and concepts for thinking

about life, while instructional literature provides directives on acceptable behavior in various parts of life. Hymns can be considered as literature, along with prayers, due to their usually poetic verbiage, while love songs provide delightful views of young lovers in dialogue or monologue that reflect young romance in every culture. The odd addition of ancient Egyptian Harpers' Songs simply shows that the idyllic picture of what happens after death has its challenges, even in this culture. Significantly, any writing's cultural and material context may well determine how it might be classified.

From these minimal definitions comes the question of the purpose of such materials aside from the noted prestige factor, particularly since the apparent audience is presumed to be literate, and quite limited in each of these cultures. And so the written language did not reflect the culture's spoken language; hence the sense that the written texts were directed to the elite, the high culture, and the court. In addition, hints from various sources suggest backstories and history for much of what was written, and also may suggest a tradition not only of lost writing but also of oral transmission. Thus a good portion if not more of what we can consider literature might well originate in traditional material transmitted orally (Baines 2007, pp. 166–168).

This kind of approach can help us understand both the purpose and even the importance of this material. I refer to the known functions of these kinds of materials in traditional cultures as understood in folklore: verbal and narrative, festive, ritual, material. Importantly, the initial function involves gaining and keeping attention, not uncommonly termed entertainment, for even though the texts may be written down, the vast majority of people in traditional cultures did not read, and so performance, that is, oral presentation, dominated.

A second function involves education, passing on and reemphasizing the practices, beliefs, and values of the particular group, for community, and not the individual, served as the center in these ancient cultures. Third is the understanding that the material shared serves to validate the culture and its institutions, transmitting knowledge about beginnings and the changes that follow. Finally, the fourth function serves to emphasize and maintain conformity of behavior and thinking (Bascom 1954, pp. 342–349). To my knowledge, this approach is virtually unmentioned in the scholarship of ancient Egypt and the ancient Near East.

Significantly, there is a certain fluidity of definition among the genres and literary types, even within a given culture. Notably this fluidity occurs in the discussion of myth, which might seem to be a fairly straightforward kind of narrative comprising divine figures and activities. But I sincerely question whether such limitations are always useful. For example, many assert that ancient Egypt had no myths, since narrative myths are lacking from its writings prior to the late second millennium BCE. But looking at its Pyramid Texts, texts dating to the last quarter of the third millennium BCE, the earliest known religious texts known from any culture, we suggest otherwise. Despite their occurrence within a mortuary context, their content reveals the ancient Egyptian creation narratives, notably the Heliopolitan narrative, albeit not as a traditional story but rather as references to such a story. Their content thus calls into question the restriction of myth to narrative stories, a concept derived initially from the myths from the Classical world. For example, one text from the pyramid of King Pepy I relates the situation before creation in which he states:

My mother became pregnant with me who am in the undersky,  
And I was given birth by my father Atum

before the sky existed,  
before earth existed,  
before men existed,  
before the gods were born,  
before death existed.

(Allen 2015, p. 182)

There is a story embedded in this poetry, though compressed. Another example from the same pyramid details the creation of the first generation of deities by Atum, the primordial creator:

Atum is he who came into being ithyphallic in Heliopolis.  
He took his phallus in his fist that he might create orgasm by means of it,  
And so the twins, Shu (god of air and light) and Tefnut (moisture) were born.

(Allen 2015, p. 168)

And from the pyramid of King Pepy II:

Atum Beetle! You became high, as the hill;  
You rose as the Benben (capstone) in the Benben Compound in Heliopolis.  
You sneezed Shu and spat Tefnut.

(Allen 2015, p. 265)

Clearly there is a story also. In fact, all the deities in the Heliopolitan Ennead (group of nine) appear in these early texts, although the details only show up in writing in the later Middle Kingdom Coffin Texts beginning in the very late third millennium and early second millennium BCE. Indeed, in closer to story form, Spell 77 tells of the birth of Geb, the earth god, and Nut, the sky goddess, from Shu, god of air and light, and Tefnut, the goddess of moisture. Also Coffin Text Spell 78 (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.7 [11]) describes the position of Shu separating his offspring, sky and earth, a visual presentation seen on various mythical papyri dating to the early first millennium BCE. In this case, both the words and the iconography tell the story.

Importantly, however, this understanding of creation is but one of the four major creation narratives from ancient Egypt; the others include the Ogdoad, a group of eight so-called Heh-gods, four males and four females, from Hermopolis in middle Egypt, referred to very briefly at the beginnings of Spell 76 and Spell 80; the Memphite Theology in which the handicraft god Ptah takes the lead role; and finally the cosmogony of Amun which appears in a hymn of praise to the god (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.6 [10], 1.8 [11–14], 1.15 [21–23], 1.25 [37–40]).

Ultimately, while initially lacking a full written narrative, these texts clearly demonstrate that ancient Egypt had a mythology. Certainly the physical context, walls of the pyramids, the outsides and insides of coffins, as well as papyri buried in coffins as in the New Kingdom, did not lend itself to narrative. And the concern was with the purpose of the texts: the achievement of a successful transition to the next world. The embedded mythic ideas were included to emphasize that purpose rather than as an end in themselves.

There are mythic narratives known from New Kingdom Egypt and later. For example, “The Book of the Heavenly Cow” is “possibly the oldest extended mythical narrative from

ancient Egypt" (Simpson 2003, p. 289), but its roots appear as early as the Middle Kingdom. The full text includes both the creation of the world and the destruction of humanity, although only the section about the "Destruction of Humanity" (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.24 [36–37]) is frequently translated because of its parallel to the destruction of humanity that occurs in the ancient narratives of a universal flood. The Egyptians have a destruction narrative but lack a flood narrative, maybe because the annual Nile flood was beneficial. Notable in the Egyptian myth is the danger of sun exposure, the danger of the sun eye that formed part of the ancient Egyptians' understanding of their physical environment.

The Egyptian literary corpus includes several other narratives that may be termed myths, though they most often appear catalogued as stories. Among them is the New Kingdom narratives titled "The Contendings of Horus and Seth" (Simpson 2003, pp. 91–103), a tale about the contests between these two deities over which one gets the throne, the brother or the son, and "The Blinding of Truth by Falsehood" (Simpson 2003, pp. 104–107), in which the major players clearly reflect those of "Contendings." Another narrative, once described as myth, also from the New Kingdom, is "The Tale of Two Brothers" (Simpson 2003, pp. 80–90), in which the named actors are both deities; this story is best known outside of Egyptology for the similarity of its opening episode to the biblical narrative of the attempted seduction of Joseph by Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39. A third, "Astarte and the Insatiable Sea" (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.23 [35–36]), apparently inspired by the Ugaritic corpus from northern Syria, carries a strongly mythic overtone in its battles between the deity the Sea and a sky god. While each of these narratives exists in only one copy, their references to other ancient Egyptian writings suggest they were known more widely than in the copies we have, and it is quite possible that other similar narratives existed, but have not yet been found.

The description of these mythic narratives as short stories led to T. Eric Peet's statement in his 1929 Schweich Lectures: "Egypt ... is the home of the short story... [producing] the first short stories to be told for their own sake ... [as] pure pastime" (Peet 1931, p. 27). Some actually come close to what modern interpreters commonly refer to as folktales (Jason and Kempinski 1981; Anderson 2000). One is the New Kingdom tale titled variously the "Doomed Prince" or the "Prince and His Fates" (Simpson 2003, pp. 75–79), a narrative that parallels folktale types with its "Once upon a time there was a king" lacking a son who successfully requested one from the gods. At his birth, the fates decreed his death by a crocodile, a snake, or a dog, leading the father to place him in a tower for his protection. The boy left Egypt for the Levant where he married and flourished, even confronting his fates, but the missing ending leaves the tale's audience in the dark as to whether he overcame all or not. In content the tale clearly presents a rite of passage.

Another fantastic narrative, dating to the Middle Kingdom, is "The Shipwrecked Sailor" (Simpson 2003, pp. 45–53). A traveler attempts to console his colleague after an apparently unsuccessful business journey by telling his own narrative of an encounter with a spectacular serpent who helped him after a shipwreck.

Also dated to the Middle Kingdom despite its Fourth Dynasty setting is the story "King Cheops and the Magicians" or "Three Tales of Wonder" (Simpson 2003, pp. 13–24), a collection of three complete tales of a cycle that likely included five linked only by an overarching frame. Like the Arabian Nights, in this one, Khufu/Cheops, the second king of the Fourth Dynasty, requests entertainment from his sons, each of whom tells his father a

story, one more fantastic than another, the final one telling of the birth of the first three kings of the following dynasty. This storytelling served as a forum for the king to decide on an appropriate successor.

Another Middle Kingdom narrative tells of Sinuhe's adventures (Simpson 2003, pp. 54–66) after leaving Egypt and ending up in the Levant, where he lives a very successful life until he wishes to return to Egypt for his final days. On first glance, the story looks like a tomb autobiography related as a narrative of success in a foreign land. Interestingly, one episode even resonates with the biblical David and Goliath story. Additional tales also served to entertain, but at the same time they each fulfilled at least one other of the functions in addition to entertainment: education, maintenance of cultural values and conformity, and validation of the culture. Although Sinuhe appears in a number of copies, for the most part, available narratives occur in single copies; we do not know why.

In ancient Sumer, we find a culture with several “proper” myths with beginnings, middles, and ends. Interestingly, however, Sumerian creation narratives emphasize the creation of humanity over that of the gods. For example, in “Enki and Ninmah” (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.159 [516–518]), the deities were born and were set to doing work in the world, baking bread, digging canals, and more, eventually rebelling, leading Enki to plan the creation of humans to take on the gods’ burdens. His mother Nammu, assisted by Ninmah, the birth goddess, then created humans. At a later banquet after much drinking, Ninmah challenged Enki by creating a disabled human. In response, Enki decreed a fate that built on the disability, ultimately giving each disabled individual a true place in society. Another creation story, “The Eridu Genesis” (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.158 [513–515]), includes a variant of the flood narrative as well as presenting the creation of humanity. Yet a third Sumerian myth tells of a universal flood in a fragmentary copy (Black et al. 2004, pp. 42–44) in which one human, Ziusudra, survives, appearing later in several Akkadian variants. The myth entitled “The Song of the Hoe” (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.157 [511–513]), also describes the creation of humanity, but adds a discussion of the building of a temple and the role of the hoe in life.

A number of Sumerian myths focus on the goddess Inanna. In “Inanna and Enki” (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.161 [522–526]), Inanna seeks to increase the prestige of her city of Uruk by taking control of the cultural norms of Sumer, giving her significant powers. The damaged document does not tell how it all ended.

In the myth of “The Descent of Inanna” the goddess, already queen of heaven and earth, descends to the underworld ostensibly to visit her sister Ereshkigal. In doing so she risks her life and in the end can return to the upper world only by bargaining another’s life for hers, that of Dumuzi, her spouse, and ultimately of his sister Gestinanna. The result is establishing the seasons by the brother and sister alternating six months each annually in the underworld (Black et al. 2004, pp. 65–76).

The Sumerian figure of Gilgamesh, sometimes written Bilgamesh, a legendary king of Uruk, who may well have been an historical figure of the mid-second millennium BCE, appears as the central figure in a number of legendary tales: Gilgamesh and Huwawa; Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven; Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld, and the Death of Gilgamesh, as well as Gilgamesh and Akka (George 1999, pp. 149–166, 166–175, 129–143).

Because the protagonists are sometimes offspring of a deity, like Gilgamesh, and yet still mortal, these narratives call into question how to distinguish between the legends of the

past and actual historical actions. Several involve Enmerkar, the priest-king of Uruk and his fights with a rival city; “Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta” (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.1170 [547–550]) and “Enmerkar and En-Suhgir-ana” (Black et al. 2004, pp. 3–11), depict contests to determine the superior city, with Uruk winning. Several other legends involve Lugalbanda, Gilgamesh’s father, in adventures, including one with the Anzud bird which helps the hero (Black et al. 2004, 11–31).

The Akkadian corpus, written in cuneiform like the Sumerian but in a distinctly different language, includes a number of narratives that have clear antecedents in Sumerian narratives (Foster 2009, p. 144), but its creation myths do not. The creation narrative titled *Enuma Elish* (Foster 2005, pp. 436–486) from its opening words, “When above,” dating to the late second millennium BCE, describes the birth of the generations of the gods and includes a battle among the gods that eventually leads to the creation of the earth and human beings while exalting the god Marduk of Babylon, somewhat like Hesiod’s *Theogony*. A fragment of a similar text referred to as the “Theogony of Dunnu” (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.112 [402–404]) presents generations of patricides and matricides and incestuous marriages among the gods, but it lacks any ending.

One myth with a clear Sumerian background is the “Descent of Ishtar” (Foster 2005, pp. 498–505), an attenuated variant of the “Descent of Inanna.” Significantly shorter than the Sumerian, the Akkadian includes all the pertinent parts, notably the need for the goddess to divest herself of all her belongings as she moves into the netherworld and the need for a substitute in order to return to the upper world.

Several narratives in the Akkadian corpus about a universal flood draw on the material in the Sumerian flood narratives. Both “Atrahasis” (Foster 2005, pp. 227–280) and Tablet XI of “The Epic of Gilgamesh” (George 1999) reflect the Sumerian flood narratives as caused by the gods, in which all humans save one and his family are destroyed. While commonly compared with the biblical narrative in Genesis 6–8, the destruction of humans by flood appears in narratives from many other cultures from many parts of the world.

A number of other Akkadian epic narratives include both deities and humans. “Adapa and the South Wind” (Foster 2005, pp. 525–532) tells how the sage Adapa broke the wing of the South Wind and had to appear before the council of the gods to explain his action. He was counseled not to eat or drink while there, advice which he followed, only to learn later that had he actually eaten and drunk of the divine food, he would have gained immortality. This narrative is but one of many worldwide in which humans lost the chance to become immortal.

Another popular epic of this time period, the latter part of the second millennium BCE, involves Etana (Foster 2005, pp. 533–554), the king of Kish and perhaps a historical figure, and concerns the principle of father to son descent, seen already in the Egyptian tale of “The Contendings of Horus and Seth.” Etana tells how Ishtar chose him, and he subsequently carried out royal duties including building a temple, but he was unable to sire an heir. Typical of an epic, within this one is another story, one about a tree that grew beside the temple and housed an eagle and a serpent who swore friendship in which they assisted each other with their young. However, the eagle eventually ate the serpent’s young, thus violating the friendship, escaping divine punishment only by helping Etana find a plant to assist the king in gaining an heir.

Yet a third epic, that of Anzu (Sumerian Anzud) (Foster 2005, pp. 555–578) involves a lion-headed eagle who envies the chief god Enlil’s kingship and seeks to gain the royal

powers for himself, including the Tablet of Destinies. Eventually, Anzu steals the tablet, but the gods decide to retrieve the tablet and destroy its thief.

Probably the Akkadian “Epic of Gilgamesh” (George 1999) is the best-known narrative from ancient Mesopotamia. It incorporates a number of previously known stories, notably variants of the ancient Sumerian flood story in Tablet XI, “Gilgamesh and Huwawa” (George 1999, pp. 149–166) in Tablets III–V, and “Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven” (George 1999, pp. 166–175) in Tablet VI, with faint vestiges of “Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Underworld” (George 1999, pp. 175–195) in Tablet XII. This story is not considered to have been part of the early variants of the epic, though reflections of Gilgamesh’s mourning of his companion appear in Tablets VII and VIII (Frayne 2001).

The Huwawa narrative describes the expedition that Gilgamesh and Enkidu, created by the gods to balance the energies of the king, made to the cedar forest in the northwest to battle Huwawa or Humbaba, whom they eventually killed, and Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven relates Ishtar’s attempt to seduce him and his decisive refusal. As a result, Ishtar attempted to have the Bull of Heaven kill him, but instead he killed the bull.

Other stories within the epic appear very differently (the Sumerian Enkidu was a servant, not an equal to Gilgamesh) or not at all, as in the Barmaid episode of Tablet X. Ultimately the theme of the narrative tells of Gilgamesh’s futile search for immortality following the death of his beloved Enkidu; he learns how the one survivor of the universal flood and his family had attained immortality, but that was a unique event (Moran 2001; Jacobsen 2001).

Among the heroic legends of Mesopotamia, those of Sargon stand out, particularly the one telling of his birth (Foster 2005, pp. 912–913). According to the legend, Sargon, born of a high priestess, was placed in a reed basket and set in a river from which he was rescued and brought up by a farmer, a motif seen later in the biblical narrative of Moses (Exodus 2:1–10). In time he became a great and long-ruling king. Interestingly these legends present a pattern very much like traditional narratives from other cultures in which the protagonist is challenged, often being exiled or otherwise excluded from the center of rule or action and encountering situations he or she must overcome to return and assume leadership (Hollis 2015).

Commonly overlooked in popular discussions of creation narratives are materials from ancient Canaan, a culture even less known to the general public than ancient Sumer, whose materials serve to help understand both the cultural background for the development of the Israelite religion and aspects of the texts against Canaan and its deities in the Hebrew Bible (Coogan and Smith 2012, pp. 13–18). Of those narratives from ancient Canaan, the most familiar is the Ba’al Cycle (Coogan 2013, #5). This myth, written in the Ugaritic language, describes how the god Ba’al rose to the kingship of the gods, by conquering the sea, recalling Tiamat’s defeat by Marduk in the Akkadian Creation narrative. Ba’al, a storm and fertility god, was punished by being sent to the underworld following his defeat of the sea due to the resulting cosmic collapse, affecting the land’s fertility. The goddess Anat comes to his rescue, and Ba’al is restored to life, bringing fertility back to the land. The story not only recalls fertility myths of other culture but also the myths from the ancient Eastern Mediterranean in which kingship of the gods transferred from the older generation to a younger generation.

Another myth from the Canaanite corpus, “The Lovely Gods” (Coogan and Smith 2012, pp. 155–166), describes the creation of the universe through the birth of deities. This narrative includes a series of ritual activities followed by a long mythic narrative in which El, the chief god, sires a series of divine children (Pitard 2009, pp. 286–287).

The Canaanites also had several epic narratives. One, the story of Aqhat (Coogan 2013, #16), tells of the birth of a son to a childless king and the gift to the son Aqhat of a divine bow made by the craftsman god. The goddess Anat desired this bow, attempting to gain it from the young man by promising him gifts of gold, a theme of other seduction narratives. Aqhat steadily refuses Anat's overtures and is killed by her helper, but this leads to infertility in the land, a situation overcome only by the apparent seduction of the helper by Aqhat's sister, who killed him after getting him drunk.

Another epic concerns King Kirta (Coogan 2013, #15), and is part of a cycle that emphasizes the centrality of kingship in ancient Canaan and the expectations of its king: maintaining a stable social order and political strength in relation to neighbors; developing a clear line of succession by engendering offspring and being sure the right one becomes king; and carrying out religious functions by serving as the high priest, the mediator between the divine world and the earthly world. The epic describes how Kirta has just lost his entire family and can no longer guarantee a smooth succession. A dream from the god El tells him how to get another wife, and he does successfully, but in the process he makes a vow to the goddess Asherah that on success, he would honor her especially. But he neglects to do that, and so he is punished with a mortal illness. The god El intervenes, and Kirta recovers, but one of his sons seeks to take the throne out of turn, which Kirta resists, cursing him – and the text breaks off.

Another even lesser known culture from the Ancient Near East is the Hittite-Hurrian-Anatolian area, today's Turkey including Kurdistan, northern Syria, and northern Iraq. Its very complicated history resulted in a literature in various scripts and languages. Almost all the texts we have derive from elite sources (Beckman 2009, pp. 220–225) and show Mesopotamian influence, as in the Hittite "Epic of Gilgamesh," a shorter and simplified variant of the Akkadian narrative (Beckman 2001, pp. 157–165). In fact, a good portion of the available literature in Hittite is based on materials from neighboring cultures. Perhaps the best known of the myths is a series of so-called Disappearing Gods narratives, represented in particular by the "Disappearance of Telipinu" (Hoffner 1998, #2). These myths address issues of fertility, a theme already seen as important in Ancient Near Eastern cultures.

A larger cycle of mythic stories appears in the Kumarbi Cycle, best known through the "Song of Kumarbi" (Coogan 2013, #8), apparently the opening song of the cycle. It involves a competition for kingship of the gods, a theme already seen in other cultures. In this case, the challenge lies between Kumarbi, an underworld deity, and Tessub, a sky god. Particularly interesting is Kumarbi's attempt to gain the kingship by engendering an offspring through sexual union with a very large boulder (Beckman 2009, pp. 231–234).

In the Hittite narrative "The Queen of Kanesh and the Tale of Zalpa" (Coogan 2013, #17), we have a fantastic tale about the rivalry between the two cities which may have a moral lesson rather than conveying any history, though the rivalry may have been real. The Queen of Kanesh (later Hattusa) bore 30 sons in one year; she made baskets in which she placed the infants, which were then put in a river that took them to Zalpa. Several years later, she gave birth to 30 daughters whom she raised herself. In time, the boys successfully sought their mother, but she did not recognize them and arranged to give her daughters to them in marriage. Although the youngest boy protested the proposal – and the text breaks off – it seems the marriages took place but the two towns, Kanesh or Hattusa and Zalpa, engaged in conflict in which Hattusa eventually prevailed.

Among the literary traditions of the Ancient Near East is that of the Hebrew or Israelite world, a corpus that comes relatively late on the scene in the first millennium BCE. It includes all the types of narrative already noted: myth, epic, tale, and legend. Genesis includes mythic narratives about creation in what has been termed “The Eden Narrative” (Wallace 1985; Mettinger 2007), while epic appears in the patriarchal narratives about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Also the long narrative of Joseph beginning with his birth in Genesis 34 forms yet another tale, one which has been termed a novella (Redford 1970, pp. 66–68) and is reflected in Thomas Mann’s magisterial work *Joseph and His Brothers*. This story is the turning point of the biblical materials from mythic story to a kind of history, for within it lie the foundations for the Exodus that forms the early Israelite tradition. In addition, the tales of Ruth, Esther, Job, and Noah appear within the Biblical canon and the apocryphal book of Judith outside it.

Legends appearing in this corpus include David, Joshua, Saul, and Solomon, telling of the exploits and actions of men, although there are also stories of a few women such as Deborah the Judge and Jael. As before, we need to remember that the use of genre identifications of myth, epic, tale, and legend are actually “analytical construct(s) that later interpreters have imposed on the text in order to classify sections of it according to categories understandable to the later reader” (Ehrlich 2009b, 348). For example, classifying the story of Joseph as a novella is anachronistic since such a category did not exist at the time.

Wisdom literature, including philosophical discussions about life and morality, appears in most of these ancient cultures. Such materials may show up in collections of proverbs as well as in discussions of the presence of evil in a world where deities were understood to be good. For example, collections of proverbs from ancient Sumer (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.174 [563–568]) address behavior in daily life. In one collection of such proverbs found at Nippur occurs the following:

To serve beer with unwashed hands,  
 to spit without trampling on it,  
 to sneeze without covering it up with dust,  
 to kiss with the tongue at midday without providing shade,  
 are abominations to Utu (the sun god).

This proverb clearly addresses behavior and relationships. Clearly fitting under the wisdom category from Sumer is “Man and His God” (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.179 [573–575]), a text in which the narrator has experienced all kinds of suffering, noting his transgressions but nevertheless remaining faithful to his god and praising him, and so at the end the suffering is relieved. Also within the Sumerian wisdom texts occur laments bemoaning the destruction of cities and states. Among the examples is the “Lamentation Over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur” (Black et al. 2004, pp. 127–141); it has reports of losses and pleas to the deities, both to prevent similar actions in the future and to allow the reconstruction of buildings such as the temple. The loss of specific property and servants appears in the following:

My ox no more crouches in its stable  
 Gone is its oxherd

My sheep no more crouches in its sheepfold  
 Gone is its herdsman...  
 My fields, like fields devastated (?) by the hoe,  
 Have verily grown tangled (?) weed,  
 My orchards and gardens, full of honey and wine,  
 Have verily grown mountain thorn.

(Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.166 [537])

Like the Sumerian, the Akkadian corpus includes laments, notably for Dumuzi or Tammuz in “A Neo-Babylonian Lament for Tammuz” (Foster 2005, pp. 950–953), where we mourn the husband of Inanna-Ishtar who was chosen to substitute for her because he did not mourn her absence when she was held in the underworld. Another of these laments, “The Husband in Whom I Delighted,” attributed to the women of Uruk, grieves the losses of husbands, brothers, sons, and other male relatives, perhaps from war.

Importantly, however, the Mesopotamian wisdom literature also includes material that is truly philosophical, notably its texts dealing with the existence of evil. The long poem entitled “The Righteous Sufferer” (Foster 2005, pp. 392–409) resonates with similar material from Sumer as well as with neighboring cultures. The narrator, a rich man, suffers from a number of untoward events, not understanding why, and he pleads for ease from his god, which he finally thankfully receives. In the end, the text discusses excellent character and behavior of its subject but contrasts that with the inscrutability of divine actions. These poems are about men, and the few women-authored texts are subject to further study.

“The Babylonian Theodicy” (Foster 2005, pp. 914–922) is a debate between friends about divine justice in which wealth is a reward for just behavior, while poverty derives from crime. Clearly, “even injustice is of divine origin” and performing rites for the gods makes no difference. But the poem is a technical achievement, with the beginning syllables of each stanza forming an acrostic (Foster 2005, p. 914). And in “A Dialogue between a Man and His God” (Foster 2005, pp. 148–150), an earlier poem, a suffering man confesses his errors and shortcomings and successfully pleads for forgiveness and restoration by his god.

Other materials in Akkadian can be amusing while at the same time presenting wisdom concepts. One is “At the Cleaners” (Foster 2005, pp. 151–152). In this narrative the speaker instructs his cleaner in great detail exactly how to do his laundry; in response, the cleaner suggests:

Let me show you a place to launder,  
 the big job you have on your hands you can set to yourself.

Other similar texts that lead to smiles – and recognition of the innate wisdom embedded within them – include the satire “The Dialogue of Pessimism” (Foster 2005, pp. 923–926) and the folktale “The Poor Man of Nippur,” a revenge tale full of untranslatable wordplays (Foster 2005, pp. 931–936).

Ancient Egyptian literature contains similar kinds of materials. Like the Mesopotamian “Dialogue between a Man and His God” mentioned above are several penitential prayers, including two votive stelas “of Neferabu with Hymn to (the goddess) Mertseger” and one

“to Ptah” (Simpson 2003, pp. 286–288). Again in a personal vein but with wider philosophical ramifications, “The Dispute of a Man with his *Ba*,” or “The Man who was Weary of Life” (Simpson 2003, pp. 178–187) presents a protagonist who is ill and in a liminal state, one that may be psychological as a result of a series of losses, and he is mulling over life and death. In the end, the man’s *ba* or soul counsels him to reject the West, meaning death, while assuring him that the *ba* will meet him in the West when it is time (Escolano-Poveda 2017).

Among laments is the “Lamentations of Khakheperre-sonb” (Simpson 2003, pp. 211–213) where the speaker discusses calamities that occurred in the land and the resulting inversions of the social order. This type of writing is thought to reflect the chaos of Egypt’s so-called Intermediate Periods when central rule had weakened and regional rule had taken over. Things are just not right. Similar is the “Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage” or “Admonitions of Ipuwer” (Simpson 2003, pp. 188–210) which laments social and economic chaos, the topsy-turvy life, asking where the god is through all this chaos, and suggesting that humans should repent of their neglect of religious obligations. It culminates with a description of an ideal ruler who will sort things out. A similar sense of chaos is present in “The Teaching of Merikare” (Simpson 2003, pp. 431–437) a text of advice from a king to his successor. It is unusual in its acknowledgement of the king’s past errors while providing guidance for good rule.

With a different concern is the poem of “The Eloquent Peasant” (Simpson 2003, pp. 25–44); a peasant taking his goods to market is robbed of his goods by an official. Despite the peasant’s request for the return of his goods, the thief refuses. The peasant then goes to the chief steward of the land with his pleas for *Ma’at*, that is, justice and rightness, which he makes so eloquently that his pleas are reported to the king. Because of the king’s delight in the peasant’s eloquence, the king delays resolution of the dispute just to hear his nine eloquent speeches. Then the king restores his goods and more is given.

The Egyptians also worried about the problem of evil as explicitly in the Coffin Text Spell 1130. In this text, the Lord-of-All describes the four good deeds he has done to keep community strife at bay by establishing order. The texts present the concept in the god’s own words in the first person:

I have made the four winds, so that every person might breathe in his area.

That is one of the deeds.

I have made the great inundation, so that the poor might have control like the rich.

That is one of the deeds.

I have made every person like his fellow.

I did not decree that they do disorder (Egyptian *isft*, evil);  
it is their hearts that break what I said.

That is one of the deeds.

I have made their hearts not forget the West, for the sake of making offerings to the  
nome gods.

(Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.17 [26–27])

The text asks how evil and wrongdoing came into the world, and the Lord-of-All asserts he created all humans with equal benefits, and argues that disorder results from social inequality, that is, human failings.

A later text, Chapter 125 from the Book of the Dead, known as “The Negative Confession” (Simpson 2003, pp. 267–277), describes the deceased standing to be judged by the Lord of the Underworld and his tribunal as he proclaims his right behavior during his lifetime. The text also provides directions for its ritual use and an accompanying vignette illustrating the weighing of the heart.

The Hittite corpus also includes some wisdom literature, notably in a text commonly titled “The Song of Release” (Hoffner 1998, p. 66). Described as “a most peculiar composition,” a “Hurrian text provided with a Hittite translation, it consists of three loosely related sections” (Beckman 2009, p. 251). The second section has seven short episodes in which the protagonist is always a different individual or natural phenomenon, for example a mountain giving “birth” to a deer or a coppersmith who makes a copper cup; the created being or object turns on its progenitor or creator to curse that being. The outcome shows the creations to be humans who are unappreciative of their actual existence. In this ending lies the wisdom. The Hittites also had proverbs, for example:

The sin of the father devolves upon his son.

Since humanity is depraved, rumors constantly circulate.

(Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.80 [215])

One of the best known of the wisdom texts in the Hebrew Bible is the book of Job, which addresses the issue of why bad things happen to good people. And as in the other Semitic cultures discussed, the Hebrews had proverbs: guides to living more practically instructional than philosophical (Ehrlich 2009b, pp. 325–326).

The boundaries between instructional and wisdom texts are permeable, but in general their context of a father instructing a son, an elder instructing his (always male) successor, a king instructing his son or an official, involves passing on a sense of responsibilities of an office, right actions in behavior, and cultural expectations, and the context sets them apart. Essentially, instructional materials provide guidance for human behavior, sometimes couched in proverbial sayings, sometimes embedded in texts specifically noted as instructional texts, even occasionally being identified as such by the ancients like those from ancient Egyptian termed *sb3yt*, teachings. From the Sumerian, one example of such an instructional text is “The Instructions of Šuruppak or Shuruppak” (Black et al. 2004, pp. 284–292), a classic example of the genre known as Mirrors for Princes, in which a young royal man receives advice from an older male, for example: “you should not play around with a married young woman; the slander could be serious,” or “You should not pass judgment when you drink beer” (Black et al. 2004, pp. 285, 287) – clearly solid everyday advice.

From Akkadian comes a collection of proverbial sayings entitled “Counsels of Wisdom” as well as some materials found at Emar and Ugarit in today’s northern Syria including “The Instructions of Shupe-Ameli.” Each of these presents truths and advice as well as describing appropriate behavior and discretion. Passages similar to those from the Sumerian advise:

Hold your tongue, watch what you say,  
A man’s pride: the great value on your lips.

and

He who goes with a friend succeeds,  
He who goes with a troop goes in safety.

(Foster 2005, pp. 412–21)

Ancient Egypt has many instructional texts. An excellent example is “The Maxims of Ptahhotep” (Simpson 2003, pp. 129–151); the elderly Old Kingdom Vizier Ptahhotep asks leave from the king to appoint “a staff of old age,” that is, an assistant, in this case his son, and to instruct him on appropriate conduct and behavior. He outlines the moral aspects of *Ma’at*, doing what is right. The values in this text pervade subsequent Egyptian instructions.

A little later, King Khety set down a set of instructions for his son and successor, Merikare, as noted above, reflecting the challenges of rule in times of instability. In it we find guidelines for dealing with upheaval, how and when to punish or not punish, and observing *Ma’at* by supporting the people. From still later, a fun set of guidelines is embedded in the story noted earlier of “The Satire on Trades: The Instruction of Dua-Khety” (Simpson 2003, pp. 431–437) which tells of a father taking his reluctant son to scribal school, a boy perhaps of seven or eight. To encourage him, his father speaks derogatorily of many other possible trades, concluding he and his mother are very supportive of him becoming a scribe but also how to comport himself in that role.

Perhaps the best known set of ancient Egyptian instructions is “The Instruction of Amenemope” from the Third Intermediate Period, Dynasty 21 (Simpson 2003, pp. 223–243), a composition of 30 chapters presenting the ideal man and exhortations to right behavior, reflecting concepts and guides that date back to the very early forms of the instructional genre. Its fame derives from the presence of parts of it almost as direct quotations in the biblical book of Proverbs (Shupak 1993).

There are many other instructions; one which tends to be generally overlooked is the instructions of a king to his vizier Rekhmire on the latter’s installation into office. The text appears in the entry hall of Rekhmire’s tomb along with an autobiographical text by Rekhmire (Lichtheim 1976, pp. 21–24).

The Hittites also had some instructions; “Instructions to Priests and Temple Officials” informs them about their required comportment, garb, and eating. Another example, “Instructions to Commanders of Border Garrisons,” details not only military concerns but also the administration of the city where the commanders were stationed (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 217–5).

The Biblical book of Proverbs is of particular interest because it represents a genre known throughout the ancient eastern Mediterranean world, but it has been crafted by men with Israelite worldviews. As noted, some of its material closely resembles parts of the Egyptian text, “The Instruction of Amenemope” (Simpson 2003, pp. 146–163).

Hymns comprise another genre, and similar are prayers because each genre illustrates relationships between humans and gods. Differentiating between hymns and prayers can prove challenging, but in general hymns represent the collective voice while prayers tend to be more individual. For the most part, hymns are addressed to deities, but they can be addressed to kings. An interesting hymn in which one deity praises another appears in a Sumerian text titled “The Blessings of Nisaba by Enki” (Black et al. 2004, pp. 292–294). Nisaba is actually the patron deity of scribes and accountants and the goddess of grain,

without whom an offering of bread and beer from the harvests could not be had. The goddess Inanna was honored by numerous hymns, one of which, entitled “a song of warrior quality” (Black et al. 2004, p. 262), focuses on the sacred marriage of the goddess with the king Iddin-Dagan of the dynasty of Isin. For this annual rite, the king took on the role of a god to marry Inanna, played presumably by the queen.

Ishtar, like Inanna, had many hymns. For example, “Ishtar, Queen of Heaven” (Foster 2018, pp. 592–598) brings together many texts adoring the goddess, celebrating her, her residence, cult, and qualities. Another hymn to her, “To Ishtar,” opens with the phrase “Sing of the goddess, most awe-inspiring goddess” and focuses on her attractions, while yet another, “Prayer of Lamentation to Ishtar,” also called the “Great Prayer to Ishtar,” presents a petitioner’s request for restoration of his goods and life after a time of affliction, as he also accepts that he has sinned (Foster 2005, pp. 592–598, 85–88, 599–605).

Marduk, the god of Babylon who prevailed in the Akkadian creation narrative, is the subject of many hymns, several of which address various aspects of his being, one as protector of the king, another as “Lord of the Universe,” while a third as “Prince of the Gods.” Yet another set of hymns honors the sun god, Shamash, the god of justice *par excellence*. The one entitled “The Shamash Hymn” (Foster 2005, pp. 686–689, 690–691, 627–635) lauds him and, like “Ishtar, Queen of Heaven,” brings together many of his attributes as god over the whole world.

Over its long history, Egypt also developed many hymns both to gods and kings. Beginning with the Middle Kingdom, the classical period of Egyptian literature, we find the fascinating “Hymn to Hapy,” that is, the Nile (Lichtheim 1973, pp. 204–210). Although Hapy, a rather androgynous-looking being, was hymned, he had no cult, no temples, and no priesthood. However, he did have many festivals as a result of the river’s centrality for ancient Egyptian life; without the regular annual flood, no civilization could have developed in this part of Africa. Ultimately the regular flood led to the country’s position as the breadbasket of the ancient eastern Mediterranean and the desire of first the Greeks and then the Romans to control it. This long hymn lauds the river for its life and plenty, and likely dates from the Middle Kingdom.

Perhaps the best known of ancient Egyptian hymns, however, is the Eighteenth Dynasty “Hymn to the Aten,” found in the tomb of Ay, a courtier from the time of Akhenaten, the so-called “Heretic King” (Simpson 2003, pp. 278–283). The hymn itself gives us a beautiful statement of the doctrine of one god, describing his perfection, his forms, his actions, and his role as god over all peoples recognizing the diversity of speech, skin color, and character. In this hymn, there are references to other deities, using them to describe Aten, but Aten is the only god worshipped, and he is served by a single priest, the king Akhenaten. The hymn’s renown derives from several close textual parallels in thoughts, concepts, and descriptions to the Biblical Psalm 104.

A more mainstream hymn is “The Great Cairo Hymn of Praise to Amun-Re” (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.26 [37–40]) from the early Eighteenth Dynasty, earlier than the Aton hymn. This hymn includes such statements such as “You are the sole one, who made [all] that exists,” “you, who did this entirely...,” “who separated the races (lit. colors), one from another,” and “Jubilation to you – by all the foreign lands,” clearly foreshadowing the concepts of the sole creator expressed in the Aten hymn. We can see the development of the worship of the sun in its disk form. This worship did not appear suddenly, but had a long history.

An excellent example of such a hymn is in “Sinuhe” where the hero writes to King Senwosret I, “you have subdued all that the sun [disk] encircles” (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.38 [81]). Another hymn states: “to him [Senwosret I] belongs that which the sun encircles daily,” an idea firmly established by the time of the Eighteenth Dynasty (Redford 1976, p. 49; 1980).

Hymnic material in the Hittite tradition typically occurs in the introductions of prayers to the god, to get the deity in a receptive mood to receive the requests in the prayer (Beckman 2009, pp. 245–249). And as seen already, Hittite literature was greatly indebted to the cross-cultural influences from Mesopotamia, and such is the case with its hymns, for example in the hymn addressed to the sun god, the patron of justice, in the “Prayer of Kantuzzili” (Pritchard 1969, pp. 400–401). Kantuzzili’s praise of the sun comes in the first half of the prayer and describes the role and power of the sun, only then devolving into a plea for relief from suffering.

The Hebrew Bible is rife with hymns that praise the Israelite deity; many appear in Psalms, and many of them follow a format or typology that reflects the cultures of the ancient eastern Mediterranean. Notable among these is Psalm 18, clearly related to a hymn of praise in II Samuel 22, which can be compared with the hymnic nature of the so-called “Israel Stela” or “The Poetical Stela of Merneptah” (Simpson 2003, pp. 356–360). This stela is best known for its reference to the people of Israel in its last short poetic section. The whole, however, presents a structure seen in the Davidic psalms and elsewhere in Ancient Near Eastern hymns. Such hymns describe the king as the son of a god, assisted by this god in his struggle against his people’s enemy; it reviles the enemy with a description of overwhelming the foe which has lost the support of its god, resulting in the king’s victory, and the hymn is an expression of praise and thanks (Hollis 2011).

A group of songs from ancient Egypt, “The Harpers’ Songs,” shows a range of ideas about what comes in the afterlife. The earliest evidence of them date to the Old Kingdom, seen in illustrations rather than texts, and the earliest texts begin with the Middle Kingdom. These earlier texts involve funerary prayers and ceremonial hymns speaking of an idealized afterlife, but a few of the New Kingdom Harpers’ Songs present a skeptical view of such a mortuary world and even of immortality. For example, from the tomb of Intef (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.30 [48–49]) comes the following:

What are their places?  
Their walls are crumbled,  
Their places are gone,  
As though they had never been!

And from the tomb of Neferhotep (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 2.13 [65–66]; Hollis 2009, pp. 132–134; Lichtheim 1945):

Their (those already dead) houses are crumbled,  
Their places do not exist.  
They are like that which had never occurred since the time of the god  
(i.e., are non-existent).

Neferhotep's tomb also includes one very traditional approach to the afterlife inscribed on the wall of the hall, while the skeptical song appears on the wall of the passage, less visible to the tomb visitor (Lichtheim 1945, pp. 192).

We find several of these ancient cultures also left behind a body of what we term "love songs," related to the very human relationships between male and female, which not infrequently include sexual innuendoes and fantasies often with vivid descriptions of a lover's attributes. From the Sumerian comes a number of texts about the relationship of Inanna and Dumuzi. One of the most notable of these is "Inana and Dumuzid" (Black et al. 2004, pp. 252–254), a marriage song which describes the items a man brings to Inanna from which she chooses some to adorn herself. Then Dumuzi meets Inanna at her temple door where she sings a song to her father, requesting that the man and his helper be admitted. In another, "A hymn to Inana and Dumizid" (Black et al. 2004, pp. 206–209), Inanna and her brother, the sun-god Utu, discuss her lover Dumuzi. Three others, each with humans but always with the Inanna–Dumuzi background, present a lover's praise of his beloved followed by his beloved's response. In one, "The Woman's Oath" (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.169A [540–541]), the lover describes his beloved, and his beloved requests his oath that she is his only one, asserting on oath that she herself is pure. A second, "Bridegroom, Spend the Night in Our House Till Dawn" (Hallo and Younger 2002, pp. 541–542), expresses a woman's yearning for her beloved, while a third, "Love by the Light of the Moon" (Hallo and Younger 2002, pp. 542–543), describes wooing (Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.169b [541–542], 1.169C [542–543]; Coogan 2013, pp. 159–161).

The love songs from Akkadian also include many which involve Inanna, now as Ishtar, and Dumuzi. However, Nanay as the goddess of love takes precedence. A song, "The Faithful Lover," is about a woman in love with a faithless lover whom she wins back with the assistance of Nanay and Ishtar. Other love songs speak in metaphors of gardens and shepherding, reflecting the divine relation of Inanna/Ishtar and Dumuzi/Tammuz. Dumuzi was depicted as a shepherd, for example, "Come in, Shepherd." A love song between Nabu and Tashmetu, both gods of the city of Borsippa, recounts talk between lovers at their marriage rite and presents vivid descriptions of their interactions in their marriage room (Foster 2005, 155–159, 165–169, 944–946; Hallo and Younger 2003a, 1.128 [445–446]).

A number of love songs come from New Kingdom Egypt's Nineteenth and early Twentieth Dynasties and are clearly secular, lacking any divine names. While some are on papyri, others come from fragments of vases along with a miscellaneous group from fragments of potsherds. These songs show adolescents still living with their parents, and some have the type of dialogue between lovers seen in the Sumerian and Akkadian, though occasionally only one lover speaks in an introspective poem, expressing feelings through descriptive visualization (Hallo and Younger 2003a 1.49–52 [125–130]; Lichtheim 1945, pp. 181–193; Pritchard 1969, pp. 467–469; Coogan 2013, pp. 162–168, 169–171).

Finally, within the Hebrew/Israelite corpus appears Song of Songs/Song of Solomon, another dialogic poem that is strictly secular. It too is very descriptive and includes visual and sensory images. Most likely the closest are the Egyptian love songs. However, given the long tradition of Israel in Egypt and the Egyptian reflection in Biblical wisdom, a similar influence might well have occurred.

Beyond the literature discussed here from ancient Sumer, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Hatti, Canaan, and the Israelite, which I have only been able to discuss briefly, there are a number of other types of written materials which might be discussed under the title of literature, for example, ritual texts, devotional poetry, prophetic texts, some letters, royal stelae, (auto) biographies, and much more. The various resources that provide translations of these materials are limited, and the three major text collections referenced in this discussion focus on texts with some relation to the Hebrew Bible and occasionally the New Testament, and frequently present only portions of longer texts. There is, in short, much more to be known.

## FURTHER READING

Ehrlich (2009a) surveys the entire subject, and Hollis (2011) attempts a comparative approach. Among recent translations of the materials discussed are Pritchard (1969), Lichtheim (1973, 1976), Hoffner (1998), George (1999), Hallo and Younger (2003a, b), Foster (2001, 2005), Simpson (2003), Dalley (2009), Coogan and Smith (2012), and Coogan (2013).

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# Ancient Near Eastern Philosophy

*Marc van de Mieroop*

It is often asserted that before the Greeks and outside the western tradition that the Greeks inspired, there existed no systems of thought that can be called philosophy. This belief is rooted in early twentieth century cultural prejudices that distinguished “primitive man” from inhabitants of the Western world and presented the course of human history as a gradual progression toward higher intellectual and other accomplishments, which culminated in modern Western Europe and the USA.

In the study of the ancient Near East such ideas were most unequivocally expressed in a best-selling 1949 book that appeared in a series intended for a broad audience, Pelican books, under the title *Before Philosophy*. It was the re-edition of *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* from 1946, which the couple Henri and Henrietta Antonia Frankfort had published to explain what they called pre-philosophical mythopoeic thought in the Ancient Near East. The earlier version had separate sections on Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Hebrews; the re-edition left out the last culture. All authors – and the editors most explicitly – promoted the views that Ancient Near Eastern peoples personalized the elements of their environments and that they could only conceive of them through the lens of mythology. The ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians interpreted a natural phenomenon like the thunderstorm as a divine being that they could address as if it were a person, rather than as the outcome of a physical reaction between bodies of air with different temperatures. They expressed these ideas in myths that explained how elements of the cosmos worked as the results of the gods’ actions; thus their thought was “mythopoeic.” Because these cultures flourished before the Greeks started to elaborate philosophical approaches, their reasoning was pre-philosophical and emotional rather than philosophical and rational.

*Before Philosophy* was not alone in its contention that peoples of the Ancient Near East had no philosophy. Another leading scholar of the Ancient Near East in the twentieth century, Samuel Noah Kramer, made the same assertion in the very popular book, first

published in 1956 and still-reprinted today, *History Begins at Sumer*: “The Sumerians failed to develop a systematic philosophy in the accepted sense of the word” (1981, p. 75). The author rejected the idea of mythopoetic thought as “nonsense,” not because he considered the idea as underestimating the intellectual accomplishments of the Sumerians – on the contrary, Kramer thought it gives them credit for insightfulness they did not have.

Later in the twentieth century the idea that history was continuous progress and that only Western contributions to it were of value became contested and deconstructed. At the start of the twenty-first century there is a greater willingness to acknowledge that alternative systems of thought can be systematic and rational, and therefore philosophical, even if they do not conform to the patterns and methods formulated by the Greek philosophers (e.g., Smith 2016). There is also a stronger awareness that pre-Greek cultures need not be evaluated only for their contributions to Greek civilization. We can identify a strong desire to acquire wisdom in the Ancient Near Eastern world that utilized methods of analysis very distinct from the ones the Greeks developed. Calling the Near Eastern analyses “philosophical” does not diminish the Greek accomplishments, which were indeed of seminal importance for the intellectual history of the West and the entire world. Alternative systems could and did exist, and in the case of the Ancient Near Eastern dominated recorded intellectual activity for millennia. In the following discussion I will speak only of Mesopotamia, where such practices are most abundantly documented in a vast literature that is still preserved to us.

The contributors to *Before Philosophy* made a great mistake when they only looked at Mesopotamian literary texts – primarily myths – to study that culture’s intellectual history. They ignored fully the massive corpus of cuneiform scholarship that was well known at the time but had been judged unscientific because it did not adhere to the scholarly standards of twentieth century Europe and the USA. Mesopotamian scholarship was primarily expressed in lists that enumerated cases with only minor variants. There existed no formulations of principles in abstract terms. To give an example from mathematics, a science in which the Mesopotamians excelled: they were well aware that in any right-angled triangle the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides. Yet they never formulated the Pythagorean theorem; instead they constructed tables that listed the numbers for triangles with different acute angles (Friberg 1987–1990, pp. 551–552; Robson 2008, pp. 110–115). The lists they produced were almost always built up from entries formulated on the same pattern: if X, then Y. For example, we have this omen: “If a man grinds his teeth (while sleeping) – then he will experience troubles” (Guinan 1997, p. 425). Hundreds of entries with that pattern could be collected in a single scholarly work. Lists were a permanent feature of cuneiform scholarly writing from the moment the script was invented ca. 3200 BCE to its last attestations in the first century AD. They appeared wherever cuneiform was used; in the second half of the second millennium scholars who had many different cultural backgrounds and spoke a wide variety of languages wrote them out in all areas of the Near East from northern Anatolia to Egypt and from the Syrian coast to western Iran. Thousands of such lists are preserved on large and small tablets, on prisms and cylinders. Any collection of cuneiform writings that was not purely for practical purposes contained scholarship in list form.

There exists no ancient Mesopotamian system that classifies lists according to their contents – they were all part of what was in the first millennium called the “art of the scribe,” *tupšarrūtu* in Akkadian. There are clearly distinct subject matters, however, and modern

scholarship has devoted much attention to the social environments in which texts relating to a specific subject were produced. Whether or not these distinctions would have been relevant to an ancient Mesopotamian is not clear to us. A very large number of lists belong to a corpus we call lexical (Veldhuis 2014). This is the oldest type of scholarly writing produced in Mesopotamia – it was created at the time of the invention of the cuneiform script around 3200 BCE. In essence these are lists of words, at first only in the Sumerian language, but later on with additional columns that in the most elaborate versions provide a phonetic rendering of the Sumerian word, the ancient name of the word sign, an Akkadian translation, and translations in other languages: Hittite, Hurrian, Ugaritic, west Semitic, or Egyptian. Among the latest cuneiform tablets ever written are some with Greek transcriptions of the Sumerian terms (not translations, but a rendering of the words in Greek alphabetic letters).

Although those items of information were listed side-by-side in parallel columns, Miguel Civil has argued convincingly that they have to be read as an “if X, then Y” clause. The example he cites is: “if the Sumerian word sign TAK<sub>4</sub> TAK<sub>4</sub>, is read tak-tak – then it is called ‘double tak’ and means in Akkadian *ezēbu*, ‘to abandon,’ and in Hittite *arḥa dalumār*, ‘forsaking’” (translation after Civil 1995, pp. 2308–2309).

The sequences in these lists were organized in many different ways taking into account the Sumerian word sign’s meaning, its sound, its graphic form, or the context in which it appears in certain other types of writing, such as poetry. Because thematic groupings were very common, earlier scholars thought the lists provided taxonomies, such as all the names of domesticated animals or of woods and wooden objects. And since they included mistakes according to modern norms –for example, grouping lions and dogs together – they were judged unscientific (e.g., in von Soden 1936).

That was based on a wrong perception of these texts. They did not study physical reality but the written word; they were works of philology (Oppenheim 1981, p. 636, Veldhuis 1997, pp. 137–138). These lists were essential in teaching students how to write, and a large percentage of the manuscripts preserved are exercises in which they copied out excerpts. But they are also known from large tablets, prisms, and cylinders that contain hundreds of entries. They are very important for our understanding of how the Mesopotamians reasoned, and the information they provided was crucial for their ability to perform a hermeneutic analysis.

The second category of lists, also often found in educational settings, dealt with mathematics. These also listed sequences, in this case of numbers, for example, of sexagesimal numbers and their reciprocals (that is, 60 divided by that number). One can read those entries as conditionally phrased as well: if the number is 2, then its reciprocal is 30. These too were a permanent feature of Mesopotamian writing, with examples from the late fourth millennium to the late first millennium BCE (Robson 2008).

Probably the largest corpus of lists in the Mesopotamian textual record was devoted to the ominous signs that diviners interpreted. It has been estimated that more than half of the tablets in Assurbanipal’s famous libraries at Nineveh were devoted to divination, and of those the omen lists were the most common (Fincke 2003–2004). All of them rigorously adhered to the “if X, then Y” pattern. They told diviners how to interpret the signs the gods sent, and those were present in every aspect of the environment.

The series were organized on the basis of what the diviner observed. The most extensive ones guided extispicy, the inspection of sacrificial animals, especially their entrails but also aspects of their behavior and other features; astrology, based on celestial signs of planets, stars, and the weather; teratology, the study of malformed newborns, such as two-headed lambs; and the interpretation of omens in everyday phenomena, such as black cats crossing the road. A profusion of the lists existed in multiple editions and abstracts from the early second millennium onward into the last centuries of cuneiform use (Koch 2015). The manuscripts we have were not created in schools – diviners owned them and they were collected in palace and temple libraries. They show Mesopotamian rational practices at their fullest extent.

Closely related to omen texts were medical ones that surveyed the human body for diagnostic symptoms of illness – this was done by exorcists. Since they include observations such as what could happen to the exorcist on the way to the patient's house, we consider them to be in the domain of magic. Most numerous were therapeutic texts that prescribe procedures and drugs the physician could use after a diagnosis. For example:

[If a] man has intestinal colic, he constantly scratches himself, he retains wind in his anus, food and fluids are regurgitated (and) he suffers from constipation of the rectum – its “redness” is raised and troubles him [without] giving him relief – then you desiccate a lion skin and mix it with lion fat, you dry (it) a second time, crush and mix it in cedar oil, make a pessary and insert it into his anus. (Geller 2010, p. 1)

These are very complex texts and the result of high-level scholarly research. Most of the manuscripts derive from Assurbanipal's libraries and the private collections of exorcists from the city of Assur in the first millennium. In later centuries students copied these out during the advanced levels of their education (Gesche 2000, pp. 214–215).

A final important yet much smaller corpus of lists is that of the so-called law codes. Most famously, Hammurabi announced on public monuments that he set up when he established justice in the land what punishments would be imposed if a certain crime was committed. The “if X, then Y” formulation is well-known – although the law codes did not apply it as systematically as the omen lists did. Hammurabi's is the longest example of a limited set of such codes first attested in the late third millennium in Sumerian and most common in the early second millennium when some were written in Akkadian (Roth 1997). The modern designation “law code” is misleading in that these do not provide guidance for judges giving verdicts – they are scientific works elaborating the consequences of particular hypothetical actions (Bottéro 1992, pp. 156–184).

Because they are so extensive and systematic, these lists provide us the best clues to how the ancient Mesopotamians reasoned and how they pursued the acquisition of wisdom. They show reasoning in practice, which we can better understand because there is also a body of commentary texts that explain the steps that were taken. The ideas and the principles behind the work naturally inspired the authors of other types of writing as well, and we can find traces of them in literary works. But the latter can only be interpreted properly when we understand the philosophical practices as demonstrated in the lists. During the more than 3000-year long history of ancient Mesopotamia there were, of course, changes over time that affected the amount of attention paid to different endeavors and the contents and extent of scholarly works. But the basic principles remained the same.

Although the ancient Mesopotamians certainly did not do so, it is useful to distinguish three main areas of philosophy in the following discussion: physics, logic, and ethics. In ancient Greece, Plato was anachronistically credited with dividing the field into these parts. Naturally they were interdependent; the first two areas are well documented in Mesopotamian sources, the third much less so.

## Physics

The ancient Mesopotamians did not see nature as a distinct category, and they did not formulate any concepts similar to Aristotle's *phusis* or Augustine's *natura*, both "nature." Consequently, they did not consider anything to be supernatural or unnatural; all phenomena of nature were signs of the gods and had to be understood within that context. There was an enormous scholarly engagement with all aspects of the environment, which involved observation, the registration of data, and their elaboration in lists on the basis of clear schemes. Because the gods were seen as inspiring the phenomena, this scholarship is most visible in the divinatory texts, which aim to interpret ominous signs. And the divinatory texts in theory would investigate anything, although in practice diviners focused on specific questions in their analyses. In extispicy, for example, the study of the liver was considered much more important than that of other organs. There was also change over time in what type of divination was most respected; while extispicy was most common in the second millennium, celestial divination became dominant in the first millennium, which did not mean that other forms were abandoned.

It is for their study of the heavenly bodies that the Mesopotamians are most admired, and their achievements were of great importance to later astronomical sciences from south Asia to the western Mediterranean. Observation of the movements of stars and planets must have started in prehistoric times, and from the moment administrative records appear in Mesopotamia there exist standard measures of time, such as the month. In the early second millennium when divinatory lists were first composed, those dealing with celestial phenomena were primarily interested in periodicity. The periods they describe were "ideal" ones, however, based on the nearest round number, and did not conform to reality. For example, a year was 360 days and made up of 12 months of 30 days each. The two equinoxes were on the 15th day of months VI and XII and the longest night was twice the length of the shortest. All intermediate lengths were calculated as mathematical progressions. The approach was quantitative and did not depend on a physical framework.

These ideal schemes allowed diviners to interpret deviations as ominous signs and they were not predictive of planetary motions. According to the literary *Creation Myth* the schemes were the result of the god Marduk's organization of the heavens: "He marked the year, described (its) boundaries, he set up twelve months of three stars each" (V 4; Foster 2005, p. 463).

Most likely in the seventh century and because of the sponsorship by the Assyrian court, there was a paradigm shift in the first millennium (Brown 2000). Long-term observation had enabled recognition of cyclical patterns such as eclipses that occur every 223 months. This made possible mathematical calculations to predict such events in the future with great accuracy. Probably in the mid-eighth century a genre of writing originated that we

call Astronomical Diaries. Manuscripts of it are attested from 652 to 61 BCE, and they document the longest-lasting single scientific project in world history. The diaries described astronomical phenomena on a daily basis, including the positions of the moon and planets, eclipses, solstices, and equinoxes, weather conditions, and some non-celestial facts, such as the level of the Euphrates river, and the prices of six commodities including barley, dates, and wool.

While the Astronomical Diaries were not intended for the production of new omens, they show that empirical observation was a central concern for Mesopotamian scientists. Empiricism was not the basis of their interpretative practices, however. From the earliest divinatory series onward we see that they used patterns of elaboration, which was easy to do in lists and made full sense in that setting. For example, if a text considered the meaning of a solar eclipse at midday, it followed this up with an analysis of what it meant at day-break, sunset, and at midnight.

The texts did not make a distinction between what we consider to be realistic and absurd, and we cannot assume that they started from an observed phenomenon and then multiplied options by changing variables. All the omens were events formulated in the writer's mind, who wanted to push the possibilities to include anything conceivable within the logic of the list. There was also no search for an explanation of why a celestial phenomenon occurred even when it could be predicted. A lunar eclipse was not thought to be the outcome of the relative positions of the Earth, sun, and moon, but it was a sign from the gods.

The study of the heavens was the science in which Mesopotamians were acknowledged leaders in antiquity, but it was not the only part of physics they pursued. They used the same approach in the study and analysis of all aspects of their environment. Through extispicy they were extremely familiar with the anatomy of sheep, for example, and they knew well what was normal and what was not. They analyzed discolorations of the liver in the same way as celestial phenomena, and they elaborated patterns of color schemes always using the same sequence: white, black, red, speckled, and yellow.

They looked at plants, stones, and animals grouping them into categories that were not only based on physical resemblance, but also on the similarity of their names or because the cuneiform signs used to write those looked alike. In all cases they created new options by adding specifications that did or did not make sense in reality. For example, they listed white, black, red, speckled, and yellow breeds of a variety of animals, including sheep, goats, cows, dogs, pigs, ants, and scorpions. All these cases are logical when considered in the contexts of lists, even if they sound absurd in reality. It is clear that they are the outcome of scholarship done in writing, not in the field.

Despite their use of entirely different approaches from those in ancient Greek and in modern physics, the ancient Mesopotamian did pursue a systematic and scientific study of their environment. As Francesca Rochberg aptly expressed it: “[they] developed the models (schematic, quantitative, predictive), reasoning styles (empirical, deductive, analogical), and methods (quantitative, analytic, hermeneutic) by means of which to find structures of order in their experiential and conceptual world” (Rochberg 2016, p. 284). While they may not have known what causes natural phenomena, such as eclipses, they understood very well the framework in which these occurred and used that understanding to develop an overall structure of comprehension.

## Logic

Probably the highest goal of philosophy is the discovery of truth, and it requires a system of reasoning that adheres to established rules and engages with specific data – although competing systems can exist within the same tradition. To the ancient Mesopotamians the basis for investigation was the written word, that is, the way in which words, concepts, and phrases were written out in the cuneiform script. To them, an omen, the object of research in the field of physics just discussed, was a written message from the gods. They called celestial phenomena “heavenly writing,” in Akkadian; they implored the gods to write a message in the liver of the sacrificial animal. Omens were to be read as were all other texts, and they had a much deeper meaning than what a simple, superficial reading would suggest.

A cuneiform text did not just have one meaning because the signs used to write it down were polyvalent. The script’s signs recorded entire words and syllables and each of them had more than one reading, while the same syllable could be written out with multiple signs – this polyvalence is what aggravates today’s new students of cuneiform the most. For everyday practical writing the scribes adhered to the standards of their time and place. For example, in Babylonia of the early second millennium they would always write “my lord” as *be<sub>2</sub>-li<sub>3</sub>-ia* and never use homophonous signs to render the syllables (the numbers <sub>2</sub> and <sub>3</sub> are modern scholarly conventions). But in literary and scholarly texts they did play around with the polyvalence of signs. On the one hand, they selected particular signs to emphasize the meaning of a text. For example, in a ritual text that involved the use of well water they could write the statement “you cleanse him,” *tullašu* in Akkadian, with the *tul<sub>2</sub>* sign, because that was the Sumerian word for “well” (Maul 1999). On the other hand, they explored the deeper meaning of an important text by applying different readings to the cuneiform signs that recorded it. The most famous example of this practice is the analysis of the 50 names of Marduk at the end of the Babylonian Creation Myth. The passage connected the god to all aspects of civilization through an analytical reading of his names. For example, under his name Asari he was “giver of agriculture, founder of the grid (of fields), creator of cereals and flax, producer of (all) greenery.” This connection existed because each of the three signs that made up the name, *a+sa+ri*, could be given multiple readings and meanings, all of which were explored to discover attributes of the god (Bottéro 1992, pp. 87–102).

The exploration of the readings and meanings of cuneiform signs happened in the lexical lists, the genre of Mesopotamian scholarship that existed as long as the script did. These expanded over time and added new options through associations with additional concepts and languages. The system became so complex that a type of scholarship developed that explained how interpretations came about. For example, the name Asari of Marduk quoted before was explained in a commentary text, which stated that *sar* was connected to cereals, flax, greenery, and production. The last meaning was only clear if one knew that the sign could also be read *ma<sub>4</sub>*, which was the Sumerian word for “to grow.” The final sign in the name, *ri*, could indicate “to give,” because it sounded like *ru*. The commentators explored every name of the god in similar ways.

There survive some 860 commentaries from the eighth to the second centuries BCE that contain explanations of a wide variety of Mesopotamian writings (Frahm 2011). They comment on works of literature, ritual texts, all forms of omens, legal, and lexical texts.

While the analyses tend to focus on individual words and short phrases, they use a wide variety of techniques. They provide synonyms, explain the cuneiform signs used to write something down, comment on and play around with pronunciations, provide etymologies that are based on the parsing of words into syllables and are often fanciful, and assign number values to cuneiform signs and words. They can also explain entire omens or lines from religious and other texts.

These are works of hermeneutics in the traditional sense of the word, that is, an interpretation of the multilayered meaning of texts. They show explicitly what all philosophers of ancient Mesopotamia did; they searched for truth through reading. This inquiry always had the ontological quality that hermeneutics was to acquire later in Western philosophy in the modern age only – the key understanding of the human condition of being in the world. In stark contrast to Plato's philosophy, writing for the ancient Mesopotamian was not an added layer of confusion that separated the scholar from the ideal form. On the contrary, it was the key to accessing truth (Van De Mieroop 2016).

## Ethics

The last area, moral philosophy, is the most difficult to study, and not surprisingly few modern authors have addressed the subject explicitly. Indicative of this reluctance is the fact that the exhaustive German encyclopedia of ancient Mesopotamia, the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, states under the entry “Morals” that a further discussion of the topic was cancelled, although it had been promised earlier in the entry “Fatalism” (compare Weidner and von Soden 1957–1971, p. 27 to Edzard 1995, p. 377). The idea that the ancient Mesopotamians were fatalists cannot be supported, but the apparent absence of judgment after death confuses scholars who were often raised with ideas of rewards and punishments in the hereafter. The ancient Mesopotamians saw death as something unavoidable – Gilgamesh's search for physical immortality in the epic named after him ended in failure – and depicted a dismal afterlife whose misery could only be lessened if one's children made generous offerings. In the story of Enkidu's descent into the netherworld, attached at the end of the first millennium Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, the man with the most sons is the happiest in the afterlife (George 1999, pp. 194–195). The living took care of the dead because they were afraid ghosts would haunt them (Katz 2014–2016). There is no indication that a righteous life will be rewarded in death.

The few studies on Mesopotamian morals that exist often connect ethics to piety (e.g., Buccellati 1995) – although one wonders whether the gods' behavior can be considered ethical (Röllig 1976). The authors look primarily at narrative works for clues on morals in ancient Mesopotamia (Lambert 1958).

If the lists that I use here are scholarly constructs that are more interested in elaborating schemes than studying reality, can we trust the information on human behavior in them as representative of accepted moral norms? There exists a short series of omens based on the behavior of men that was edited many years ago as “a guide to good behavior in omen format” (Kraus 1936; cf. Koch 2015, pp. 287–288). They mostly seem to predict a positive outcome if someone shows humility and caution, for example:

If a man says “I am a hero” – then he will be shamed  
If a man says “I am skilled” – then he will be degraded  
If a man says “I am powerless” – then he will become powerful  
If a man says “I am a weakling” – then he will become rich.

(Kraus 1936, p. 97)

The pattern of elaboration in lists mentioned before is very clear here, however, so it is perhaps best not to see the cases mentioned as moral guidelines.

The law codes, which are relatively few in number and primarily from the early second millennium, also are not moral codes like the Decalogue in the Hebrew Bible, even if we can conclude from them that acts such as murder, assault, and theft were considered criminal. In the prologue and epilogue that frame his famous laws, King Hammurabi states that they illustrate proper behavior and he connects that concept to truth (van de Mieroop 2015, pp. 173–177). He asserts that it was his wisdom that allowed him to set these rules. And it seems from literary works and other texts that observing the norm, not rocking the boat so to speak, was considered ethical (Kraus 1973, pp. 143–144). This was very much a bourgeois attitude that did not want to upset social conditions (van der Toorn 1985, pp. 111–113).

## Conclusions

The ancient Mesopotamian worldview was certainly theocentric and the powers of the gods over humans were considered to be absolute. Consequently, there was a sense of frustration that divine actions could be incomprehensible. A long poem of the second half of the second millennium, called *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi* in Akkadian, that is, “I want to praise the lord of wisdom,” is a monologue by a gentleman who lost his good health and fortune despite the fact that he was righteous (Foster 2005, pp. 392–409). He begs the god Marduk forgiveness for whatever sins he may have committed, and is angry because of his lack of knowledge – he addresses Marduk as “lord of wisdom.”

It was the desire to know what the gods had in store for them that drove the ancient Mesopotamians to philosophy. They wanted to read the signs that were present throughout the universe, and they established rules of interpretation that were rooted in their reading of texts. The basic principle in their analyses was that any type of similarity provided a logical link. The resemblances they saw related to every aspect of a subject, its shape and its name, both as uttered in speech and as put down in writing. The links they established did not need to be direct, and synonyms, homonyms, cognate terms, and translations could easily intervene. For example, by creating a chain of similarities, it was possible to equate the Sumerian word for “sun,” *utu*, with the Akkadian word for “donkey,” *imērum*: *utu* sounds like *udu*, the Sumerian word for “sheep,” which translates as *immerum* in Akkadian, and the latter sounds like *imērum* (Crisostomo 2014, p. 109). Each step made sense because the two terms in it resembled each other, and the final outcome, however bizarre in reality, was thus logically possible. Instead of formulating the rules that guided these intellectual steps, the Mesopotamians listed cases in which they were applied, progressing systematically through what can seem endless minor variants that, like a pointillist

painting, end up providing a clear picture. Each statement had meaning only within the overall context.

Greek philosophy, especially starting with Aristotle, is celebrated for its classifications and categorizations which create hierarchies and lines of descent, and this system is still the basis of Western science to this day. Taxonomies are a crucial tool in our understanding of reality. The Mesopotamians did not create such structures, which are based on difference. Instead, they looked at resemblances, which they did not place in a hierarchical structure. An indirect connection between two terms was as important as a direct one. In that sense their approach to understanding reality is close to what we encounter today in postmodern philosophy, which also avoids hierarchies and taxonomies and seeks to identify other types of relationships.

Also the algorithms of internet searches, on which we now depend so much for our knowledge, establish links that flout scientific taxonomies. The Mesopotamian way of establishing connections is thus not as absurd as it may seem at first glance. Moreover, as is the case in postmodern philosophy as well, the Mesopotamians gave special significance to the written text, which they considered to be much richer in meaning than the words they recorded. This is in direct opposition to the Platonic idea that saw the written word as one step further from the truth, but it is not irrational. The Mesopotamians' approach to philosophy was certainly different from that of the ancient Greeks; nevertheless, it was philosophy.

## FURTHER READING

There has been a boom in the study of the primary materials used in this chapter, and there are several recent overviews of various genres of scholarly writings. In the English language, see Veldhuis (2014) for lexical texts; Robson (2008) for mathematics; Rochberg (2004) and Koch (2015) for divinatory texts; Geller (2010) for medicine; and Frahm (2011) for commentaries (see also <http://ccp.yale.edu/>). Rochberg (2016) is an in-depth study of physics in a system that does not recognize nature as a separate category. Further elaboration of many of the ideas expressed here can be found in Van De Mieroop (2015), which discusses the texts used in this chapter and analyzes the system of logic behind them.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# Mesopotamian Cosmology

*Francesca Rochberg*

“Wise men,” said Socrates, “say that heaven and earth and gods and men are bound together by communion and friendship, orderliness, temperance, and justice and it is for that reason they call this Whole a Cosmos” (Plato 1984, p. 297 *Gorgias* 508a). This neat description resembles, in some of its aspects (orderliness, justice), ancient Mesopotamian thought about the world, but no Sumerian or Akkadian term was equivalent to the Greek word *cosmos*. Not only was there no word for it, but cosmology, either as an inquiry into the nature of the world, or as a part of astronomical thought about the origins and structure of the universe, was not the focus of any systematic inquiry in ancient Mesopotamia. The absence of a systematic treatment of topics we regard as essential to the conception of the world, however, does not mean that such conceptualization did not exist. The notion of orderliness and justice arguably connects the Mesopotamian with Socrates’ definition of *cosmos*.

Cosmic order and justice in ancient Mesopotamia, however, were altogether different from the Greek tradition. The principle difference may be found in the fact that Greek philosophical culture focused on the idea of nature (*physis*), first in the sense of primordial matter and second the processes inherent to material things which account for their growth and behavior (the nature of things) (Naddaf 2005). The Mesopotamian orientation to the world of observation and experience was not in relation to such a concept, and must be conceived of without appeal to it (Rochberg 2016). The idea of cosmic concord, which was a central point in Greek cosmologies looking to explain the material constituents, geometrical structure, and the law of measure, was never considered in ancient Mesopotamia as a characteristic of the *cosmos* itself apart from the gods who were active in it.

Essential parts of a Mesopotamian cosmology can be reconstructed from Sumerian and Akkadian mythology, hymns, celestial divination, and astronomical texts, and can show Mesopotamian views of the creation, structure, and workings of parts of the universe. Here we pose questions to the mostly literary sources in which cosmological subjects

appear. Although the questions below were not explicitly formulated by the ancient scribes in texts, what may be viewed as answers were expressed in a variety of textual genres. The purpose of this pastiche method of proceeding is to afford a view into parts of a Mesopotamian cosmology not accessible in any one source alone or at any single period or place in Mesopotamian history. I have adopted as the format of presentation what Edward Grant described as “the most widely and regularly used format for medieval cosmology and for natural philosophy in general,” that is, “the *questio*, or question format” (Grant 1996, p. 23).

## What is “the World”?

A notion of “world,” in the sense of the whole of creation, is expressed as the union of the two principal parts, heaven and earth, and taken as a pair in Sumerian as a n . k i “heaven, earth” and in Akkadian as *šamū u ersetu* “heaven and earth (or underworld).” The basic meaning of terms meaning “all” points to the notion of the “entire (inhabited) world,” and by extension “all” or “the universe.” Other words such as “all (that exists),” and “totality” (*kiššatu, kibrātu, kibrāt erbetti*) similarly could refer to all places or people (or gods), and so in some contexts connoted “the universe.” The totality of the world comprised regions beyond the reach of human perception, such as the interior freshwater abyss “which cannot be seen” (Horowitz 1998, p. 317), but which nonetheless were imagined in relation to the world of human beings.

The world as a whole was referred to in the descriptions of temples that filled the entirety of the cosmos from top to bottom. This motif was repeated often in temple hymns and royal inscriptions that concerned the building of ziggurats and temples, whose tops were so high as to “rival heaven” and whose foundations so deep as to reach into the underworld. The metaphor was traceable to the early third millennium BCE in an archaic hymn: “Great, true temple, reaching the sky, temple, great crown, reaching the sky, temple, rainbow, reaching the sky, temple, whose platform(?) is suspended from the midst of the sky, whose foundation fills the Abzu [the abyss]” (Biggs 1971, p. 201). It was also a way of expressing great magnitude, as in the description of a mountain encountered by Sargon II (721–705 BCE) on campaign, “whose summit above leans against the heavens, and whose base, below, is firmly rooted in the nether world.” The motif was also applied to mythological mountains in the Gilgamesh Epic (George 1999a, 71 IX 38-41) that reached up to the base of heaven and down to the netherworld, as well as in the Erra Epic, to the sacred tree, whose crown touched heaven and whose roots penetrated the netherworld (Foster 1993, p. 779).

## How did the World Originate?

An essential element in Mesopotamian mythology about the origin of the world was that the world came to be as a result of the separation of heaven and earth. This most basic cosmogonic event accounted for these two fundamental parts of the universe. The motif was preserved in the introduction to the Sumerian myth Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the

Netherworld in which the region “heaven” was separated from earth and “carried off” by the god An (“sky”) and “earth” became the possession of Enlil (“Lord Wind”) (Shaffer 1963, pp. 48–49, 99). The cosmic deities in this myth were, according to divine genealogy, offspring of the goddess Nammu, who represented an eternal watery state. The primeval mother gave birth to the undifferentiated above and below, which then became the two principal elements of all further cosmic evolution. She existed before the differentiated cosmic regions, as seen in her epithet “mother who gave birth to heaven and earth.”

A tablet from the Early Dynastic period around 2400 BCE introduced heaven and earth before any gods and before sunlight or moonlight (Sjöberg 2002, pp. 229–239). There An “heaven” and Ki “earth” were personified, and heaven was “a youthful man” (Sjöberg 2002, p. 231). The cosmic realms of heaven and earth were also personified as father and mother, as in a composition which accounted for the birth of Azag, the demonic opponent of the warrior god Ninurta, by the union of An and Ki (Jacobsen 1976, p. 95 n. 85). A chief attribute of the divine sky was its generative powers, and the rains from the sky were said to be semen engendering the vegetation on earth (Cagni 1969, p. 61). But in the theology of the religious capital, Nippur, An was not the creator god. This role was taken by Enlil.

In a list of gods, scribes described the descent of the gods. The sky god An descended from Uraš and Ninuraš “Earth and Lady Earth” (Lambert 1975, pp. 51–54). In what seems to echo the descent of the sky god An, the earth god Enlil was derived from Enki (and Ninki) “Lord (and Lady) Earth,” not to be confused with Enki Nudimmud, the god of sweet waters. The original unified whole of heaven and earth was separated by the god Enlil, who then introduced into the sky the god Nanna, the moon. The moon god produced children, the sun god Utu and the goddess Inana. With the construction of the genealogies, a generational hierarchy took shape within the pantheon, and An, Enlil, and Enki became a trinity of great gods.

Another strain of cosmogony presented heaven and earth as the divine offspring of ancestor divinities, rather than the result of a cosmogonic separation. The Akkadian creation poem saw the origins of the gods in the commingled waters of the male *Apsū* and the female Tiamat, who in time engendered gods within themselves. From these original divine essences came the ancestry of Marduk; from Anšar “the totality of sky” and Kišar “the totality of earth” came An, the sky god, who produced Ea Nudimmud, Marduk’s father. The creation poem was a nationalistic Babylonian cosmogony, composed sometime before the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I (1124–1104 BCE) and constructed to explain the elevation of the Babylonian national god Marduk to supremacy among the gods and to attribute order in the universe to his rule (Hunger and Pingree 1999, p. 62). The principal revision over the older Sumerian cosmogonic tradition was in the identity of the creator, no longer Enlil but Marduk, grandson of Anu and son of Ea.

In the account of Marduk’s rise to kingship, creation took place following his battle to defend the gods from attack by their evil mother Tiamat. The way had been prepared by Marduk’s father Ea, Enki in Sumerian, who slew *Apsū* and established his own dwelling on the “corpse,” the realm of sweet waters. Marduk fought Tiamat and her host of monsters and demons, a theme taken over from the mythology of the god Ninurta and his cosmic battle against chaos (Lambert 1985, pp. 55–60). Elements of Sumerian cosmogony persisted, but the supreme rule of Enlil and the divine ordinances of the old

mythology were replaced by Marduk's universal kingship and his legitimate possession of the "tablet of destinies."

Marduk fashioned and arranged the physical world. Although the birth of the sky god had taken place generations before, Marduk took the carcass of the slain sea-mother Tiamat and split her body and set up half of her "as a cover," thereby creating the region of heaven. He made use of other parts of her watery body to create the natural world of wind, rainfall, mists, and the rivers Tigris and Euphrates from her eyes. Her tail became "the Great Bond" tying the two halves of the world together (Foster 1993, p. 380 V 59).

## What is the Relation between the Gods and the Phenomenal World?

The very question of the relation between gods and the world can easily imply an anachronistic notion of the separation between a physical realm and some other realm of being, a notion that is, by its very term, derived from the Greek conception of nature (*physis*). Certainly the Assyro-Babylonian scribes directed their attention to phenomena, many of which we would classify as natural phenomena, but their vocabulary does not rely on such a distinction and indeed the phenomena comprising divinatory signs were not limited to that category of things. The scaffolding of cuneiform scribal-scholarly thinking about the world, therefore, must not be conflated with "nature" or "the physical world."

Mythological texts and hymns preserved ideas of divine agency. As forces over the basic parts of the world, the three great gods Anu, Enlil, and Ea inhabited specific regions of the cosmos. Thus, in the myth of Atra-hasis the divine trinity cast lots, divided the universe, and came to be identified with heaven, earth, and the subterranean waters of *Apsû* (Lambert et al. 1969, p. 43; Jacobsen 1976, p. 121). Celestial gods, such as the moon god Nanna, the sun god Utu, and Inana, the planet Venus, were viewed as manifest in the heavenly bodies and as the personified powers in these phenomena. The oldest attested Near Eastern storm god, Enlil, brought both the spring winds holding the good rains that made plants flourish as well as the destructive storm cloud with its flood waters. The clouds that produced rains and allowed the crops to grow came through Enlil's agency, but he was also immanent in the storm itself, as a text says, "The mighty one, Enlil ... he is the storm" and "his word, a storm cloud lying on the horizon, its heart inscrutable" (Jacobsen 1976, pp. 101–102). His hymns showed his benevolent nature as a fertility god, but lamentation texts revealed him as the destroyer of farmlands, animals, and people (Green 2003, pp. 34–41). Enlil's influence, both positive and negative, was therefore seen as working through the forces of the atmosphere that embodied the god but were also transcended by him.

The other gods too were not viewed simply as the personifications of their cosmological regions, but as transcending the limits of the phenomenal world experienced by human beings. In the hymn to the sun god, Šamaš saw into the heavens as one would into a bowl, but the vision of the god was greater than the limits of both the heavens and the entire earth (Lambert 1960, p. 134). The scale of the world was dwarfed by the greatness of the deity when a hymn referred to the god Ninurta as wearing "the heavens on his head like

a tiara, he is shod with the netherworld as with [san]dals,” and in a wisdom composition we hear of “Marduk! The skies cannot sustain the weight of his hand” (Foster 1993, p. 497, 310). Marduk’s transcendence of the phenomenal experiential world was also expressed in a prayer recited during the Babylonian New Year’s festival: “the expanse of heaven is (but) your insides.” If this was the nature of the deity, then natural phenomena, such as storms, the sky, or the moon, were an embodiment of a divine power, and could be a manifestation of an anthropomorphic deity, but were not personified as living beings themselves. The gods were, strictly speaking, not “in” nature, though we might conceive of it in that way. They were manifestly involved, however, in the world of phenomena, as agents of protection and destruction alike. As agents of change in the world, they were simultaneously in, of, and beyond the world of human experience.

## Is there Order and Justice in the Universe?

As forces and agents affecting the totality of phenomena and human experience, the gods brought order to the cosmos through authority and law. The cosmos was not seen as a self-governing body, but as ruled by divine law. By virtue of his exalted position, Anu, the supreme divine sovereign, was author of both order and chaos. He engendered the forces of disorder and chaos in the form of seven semi-divine entities, or “demons,” but in some contexts appeared as protector. The dual role of Anu as creator as well as controller of chaos was paralleled by Enlil, who was at once the bringer of good to humanity as well as the agent of its destruction.

Ninurta was a defender of world order (Vogelsang 1988; Annus 2002). Ninurta’s mythic foes represented agents of cosmic disorder. Asag, the child of An and Ki, appeared in magical texts as a demon responsible for disease and death. The winged lion-dragon of iconography may be identified with the Asakku, or Anzû, described in the myth as a lion-bird monster (Black and Green 199, pp. 107, 121). The association of Ninurta with kingship was seen in the story of his battle with Anzû, who flew off with the tablet of destinies, Enlil’s emblem of divine executive power. Ninurta’s defeat of chaos resulted in his elevation to the kingship, even over his father, Enlil. In view of the image of the human king not only as divinely legitimated but also as an earthly reflection of divine kingship, Ninurta’s role as cosmic hero was an essential ingredient in royal ideology (Annus 2002).

The “tablet of destinies” was another representation of the idea of universal order. In the creation poem Tiamat elevated Qingu to supreme status in the divine assembly and gave him the tablet of destinies to ensure the power of his word. Marduk then vanquished Tiamat and her horde and wrested the tablet from the illegitimate possession of Qingu, symbolizing the triumph of order over chaos. Marduk became supreme sovereign over the gods and the universe, which he proceeded to organize. Marduk presented the tablet to Anu, as a restoration of the emblem of supreme divine executive rank to its original place (Foster 1993, p. 380 V 70).

The idea that order in the world as a whole came about through divine command is well supported in hymns, mythology, and in the principle of divination. In addition to Anu, Enlil, Ninurta, and Marduk, other gods established order by means of their decrees. The sun god was addressed as the power that kept the entire universe in check, both above and

below: “In the lower regions you take charge of the netherworld gods, the demons, the Anunna-gods, in the upper regions you administer all the inhabited world” (Foster 1993, p. 537). Ištar too was portrayed as bringing order to the cosmos by issuing decrees. She was praised as one who “ordains destiny foremost with Enlil” and “sets out regulations for the great gods, as Anu does.” Also she decreed destinies and “render[ed] final judgement and decision, the command for heaven and netherworld” (Foster 1993, pp. 505–506, 509–511). Like Marduk she “holds the lead rope of heaven,” the symbol of ultimate control; “She alone is to grasp the bridle of heaven and underworld!” (George 1992, p. 257).

The idea of order and justice that characterized the Mesopotamian conception of the world as a whole was tied to divine will. The power to decree all things included evil and misfortune. Given the sometimes incomprehensible mind of the gods, Mesopotamian culture developed divination to gain foreknowledge of what the deities determined would occur, magic to entreat the gods, and incantations to appease them.

## By Means of What Force or Agency Do Things Occur in the World?

Divine design, decree, and judgment were conceived as the means by which order and disorder were brought to the world. Because institutions of political power were projected upon the divine realm, the image of the gods as rulers and judges took form. The designations of the gods as determiners of the “nature of things,” the “destinies of life,” the ones who drew the “cosmic designs” and the “designs of life,” evoked the conception of gods as kings who ordered existence. On the divine plane the act that brought forth existence and order was conceived of as “determining destiny.” In the temple hymn for the city of Isin, sanctity and authority was conveyed in calling the temple the “place where An and Enlil determine destiny” (Sjöberg and Bergmann 1969, p. 39).

Divination showed that agency was placed in the hands of the gods who both made phenomena appear and determined the meaning of signs for events that would happen on Earth. The use of the word “decision” or “verdict” to denote the consequence (we would say “prediction”) of an omen points to an interpretation of omens as collections of divine “judgments” (Rochberg 2003, p. 178). Prophecy texts shared this terminology, like “its decision concerns Elam: Elam will lie waste, its shrines will be destroyed, the regular offerings of the major gods will cease...” (Biggs 1967, p. 124). Šamaš and the storm god Adad, as gods of divination, sat as kings “on thrones of gold, dining from a tray of lapis” to render judgment in the form of the signs seen on the liver of the sacrificed lamb (Foster 1993, p. 149).

Already clear in Sumerian mythology, divine decrees functioned as determiners of what was. The same ideology continued in Babylonian and Assyrian religion, as can be seen in the creation poem where Marduk was made king of all the gods, his status being demonstrated by his ability to decree the things that existed – to create and destroy at will by command: “They set up among them a certain constellation, to Marduk their firstborn said they these words, ‘Your destiny O Lord, shall be foremost of the gods. Command destruction or creation, they shall take place. At your word the constellation shall be destroyed, Command again, the constellation shall be intact’” (Foster 1993, p. 372 IV 19–24).

The gods of the destinies were the seven Anunnaki (Lambert et al. 1969, p. 146). Following the establishment of Marduk's new shrine in Babylon in which he sat upon the “dais of destinies,” “the seven gods of destinies were confirmed forever for rendering judgment” (Foster 1993, p. 386 VI 81). The list of the shrines enumerated the seven seats for Anu, Enlil, Ea, Šamaš, Ninurta, Nabû, and Adad(?) (George 1999b, p. 74). Ninurta, together with An and Enlil, decreed destinies for humankind in the *Apsū* (Annus 2002, p. 25).

## What is the Place of Humankind in Relation to the Whole?

In a world view where divine power was conceived in terms of rulers, human beings fell into place within the cosmic framework as the ruled, a subject population to support and revere the gods. The motif of the creation of man to toil for the gods went back to the Old Babylonian myth of the hero Atra-hasis, the favorite of Enki/Ea, who survived the great flood sent by Enlil to wipe out all humankind. In this composition Enki and the “Mistress of the gods” formed man from clay mixed with the flesh and blood of a god slaughtered “that god and man may be thoroughly mixed in the clay” (Lambert et al. 1969, p. 59 I 212–123). The gods not only mixed divine flesh and blood with the clay; the Igigi gods spat on it and Ea trod upon it. The actual creation was carried out in the house of destiny by the birth goddess Mami. In another Sumerian tradition, Enlil created humankind in the place where heaven was separated from earth, “where flesh came forth,” and he accomplished this by use of the hoe (Black et al. 1998–2006: t.5.5.4, lines 1–7). Marduk not only eased the burden of the gods by the creation of mankind, but he “redeemed” the gods, his enemies, with man’s creation and was dubbed “destroyer of the gods of Tiamat, who made men out of their substance” (Foster 1993, p. 397 VII 88–90).

The condition of man as forever subject to the determinations of gods was articulated in the myth of Adapa, the wise but all-too-human sage, who was made wise by the god Ea himself. In a moment of anger, Adapa disabled the south wind, which had capsized his boat, and in consequence was summoned to heaven to explain why the wind no longer blew. After achieving his ascent to heaven and thereby transcending the mundane world, he nonetheless failed to transcend his nature. Adapa’s story was about a god-fearing man who failed to make the right decision, in his case to accept the bread and water of eternal life offered to him by Anu. Neither his purity nor his wisdom helped him and he remained mortal (Foster 1993, pp. 429–434).

## What is the Relation of Earth to Heaven?

A vertical arrangement of cosmic regions or levels comes across in references to the extent of the entire world, placing heaven above earth and earth above the *Apsū* and the netherworld. The basic triple structure of heaven, earth, and netherworld was further divided into the Upper, Middle, and Lower Heavens, and the Upper, Middle, and Lower Earths. Below the heavens, the lower half of the world was comprised first of Upper Earth, where the “souls”

of mankind were settled (Horowitz 1998, pp. 3–4). Middle Earth was the residence of Ea, and to the depths of Lower Earth were consigned the 600 Anunnaki gods. These 600 gods were associated with the land of the dead, where the god Nergal ruled. Above the realm of mankind were the three heavens, populated by gods and stars. In accordance with the symmetry of this world picture, the point where the earth of human beings met the heaven of the observable stars became a metaphysical center, the borderline between divine and human.

The whole was bound together as one coherent structure by the mythical “bonds” that held the level of the heavens to the lowest level of the netherworld. A number of ropes served the purpose. The god who held such a cosmic rope exercised control over the universe like the handler who controlled an animal on the other end of a lead-rope. Such an image was found in the divine epithet “who holds the lead-rope of heaven and netherworld” and was implied in the epithet “who holds the totality of the heavens and lands” or “who holds the totality of heaven and netherworld,” both of which were used for Marduk (Tallqvist 1974, pp. 242–243). Another image was of a boat’s mooring-rope. The name of the temple of Marduk in Babylon was explained in a commentary as the “house of the great mooring rope of heaven.”

Akkadian “earth” in a cosmological sense denoted both earth and the netherworld. The term “earth” as “netherworld” can be found in the XIIth Tablet of Gilgamesh (Shaffer 1963). A few sources confirmed the identification of the place where netherworld deities resided as “earth,” while others clearly meant the physical earth upon which we stand (Horowitz 1998, pp. 273–274, Lambert et al., p. 91:48). The use of one term to refer both to the Earth and the place of the dead was seen as well in the poetic term “great Earth.”

The question of whether there was a cosmic mountain has been debated, as well as what relation it may have had to another primordial cosmic locality, the “sacred mound.” The cosmic “sacred (shining) mound,” was the location both of the birth of the gods and the divine assembly. It was the place to which Ninurta repaired following his triumphant presentation of the vanquished gods to Enlil, and where he was called “king of the sacred mound.” The sacred mound in heaven, also thought of as “mountain of heaven and earth,” with its foundation upon the cosmic *Apsû*, had its earthly parallel in the sacred centers of the world, Nippur, Babylon, or Assur (Wiggermann 1992, pp. 285, 295). In a Neo-Assyrian text that enumerated the cosmic levels, Marduk’s “high throne-dais” was located in the Middle Heaven. It was the place where the gods decreed the destinies and became the name of the earthly throne-dais of Enlil in Nippur, as well as later that of Marduk in Babylon, the god Assur in the city of Assur, and Anu in Uruk. On the celebration of the New Year, Marduk sat on the Dais of Destinies as “king of the gods in heaven and earth” to decree the destinies. The celebration of the New Year in the seventh month was reflected in the month name, “month of the sacred mound.” This site therefore held a central place in the cosmos and was paralleled in the earthly center of the temple where the deities decreed destiny.

## What is the Structure of the Heavenly Regions?

The tradition of three superimposed heavenly realms was known in first millennium texts. The highest heaven belonged to Anu and was populated with 300 Igigi or great gods (Livingstone 1989, pp. 99–102). Middle Heaven belonged to the Igigi, and Marduk had

his throne there. Stars and constellations were drawn upon the surface of the Lower Heaven. While invocations to seven heavens and seven earths occurred in Sumerian incantations, the image of a plurality of heavens found there occurred only in incantations. The seven heavens and earths were invoked alongside other groups of seven entities for magic. Being magical rather than cosmological, the seven heavens and earths were not necessarily related to the three heavens and earths found in other texts.

The cosmological picture as presented in the passages concerning the three heavens also entailed poetic speculation about the heavens as made of different stones. These stones varied in color, the heaven of Anu being reddish, speckled with white and black, the middle heaven being blue stone like lapis lazuli, and the lower heaven being translucent jasper, either blue or grey (Horowitz 1998, pp. 9–15). This image was hardly an attempt at empirical description, but presumably the projection of mythological or other associations between stones and gods. Equally poetic was the additional statement that the stars were drawn, or inscribed as “writing,” upon the stone surface of the heavens (Livingstone 1989, p. 100). This metaphor stressed the meaning of the stars as signs “written” by the gods for human beings to observe and from which to forecast the future. The same image of drawing the stars appeared in the series of astronomy tablets.

The heavens contained the waters of Tiamat, which were guarded and held in by a tightly stretched skin, no doubt a reflection in mythological form of the empirical relation between the sky and precipitation (Foster 1993, pp. 376–377 IV 137–140). In literary texts the celestial realm of the planetary deities was sometimes denoted by the term “base of heaven,” but taken to mean “firmament,” as in “they installed Sin, Šamaš, and Ištar to keep the firmament in order” (Horowitz 1998, p. 239) and “through her (Inana as the evening star) the firmament is made beautiful in the evening” (Sjöberg and Bergmann 1969, pp. 36, 115; Horowitz 1998, pp. 240–241). Astronomical terminology did not include this “firmament,” but used the word “sky” to refer to the place where celestial phenomena were observable. Because of the difference in character between mythology and astronomy, points of contact in their conceptual landscapes are noteworthy. The beginning of Tablet V of the creation poem, which dealt with the regularity of the appearance of heavenly bodies as the work of Marduk, described features of the heavens also referred to in astronomical texts. Marduk arranged the stars into constellations, the “images” of the gods themselves. By means of the fixed stars he organized the year into 12 months, marked by the risings of three stars in each month in their specified “paths” (Foster 1993, p. 378 V 4). He created the zenith, the moon, and the month from the lunar phases.

Celestial divination and astronomical texts required a terminology to specify the positions and times for the occurrences of celestial phenomena. Without the conception of the celestial sphere and its coordinates, a variety of systems denoted celestial positions. The terminology of the “paths” of Anu, Enlil, and Ea was used in early astronomical texts. The Anu path was that which had its gate in the center of the “cattle pen,” or eastern horizon; to the south of it lay the path of Ea and to the north the path of Enlil. The stars may have been associated with the gods Anu, Ea, and Enlil even earlier, but were assigned to these paths according to where on the horizon their risings were observed, or in modern astronomical terms, according to their circles of declination, the distance north or south of the celestial equator (Hunger and Pingree 1989, p. 139). Another system was implied in the device called a “string,” which established a relation between

stars of similar right ascensions that crossed the meridian at the same time (Hunger and Pingree 1999, p. 90–97).

The other “path” of importance was that of the moon, whose track was marked by 18 constellations, recognized at least by around 750 BCE. These constellations were not of equal size, and cannot be used as a standard of reference for the calculation of “distance” along “the path.” Later, to mark the passage of the sun with respect to the fixed stars through the months of the year, these constellations were reduced to 12 and formed the basis for the zodiac. As the planets were observed to hug the path of the sun, or the ecliptic, a larger group of ecliptic stars was identified for the purpose of observing the movement of the planets (Sachs and Hunger 1988, pp. 17–19). Although the 12 constellations of the zodiac gave their names to the zodiacal signs, once the signs were defined by longitude rather than constellation, they became a mathematical reference system of 12 parts of  $30^{\circ}$ , counted from a defined starting point. In this way, no geometrical dimension was attributed to the heavens in mathematical astronomical texts, whose predictive schemes were strictly arithmetical and linear, and consequently shed no light on the question of the spatial structure of the heavens.

## What are the Cosmic Waters?

The cosmic realm called *Apsū*, whose watery depths lay beneath the Earth, appeared in Sumerian and Akkadian mythology. It was the creation, abode, and kingdom of Enki, and was so closely associated with him that Enki’s son, Marduk, was known as “first-born son of the *Apsū*.” Because of Enki’s association with wisdom, magic, and incantations, the *Apsū* was thought of as the fount of wisdom and source of the secret knowledge of incantations. The temple of Enki in the oldest Sumerian city of Eridu was called the E-Abzu, “House of the Abyss.” Later, the temple of Marduk in Babylon was explained as the replica of *Apsū* (George 1992, p. 59). As the counterpart to Enki’s cosmic abode, Marduk’s was also the home of all the gods (George 1999b, pp. 68–70). Enki’s shrine in Eridu too was known as the “holy mound” (George 1993, p. 77; George 1999b). The association of the *Apsū* with the “holy mound” showed the cosmic importance of Ea’s domain as a place for the divine assembly and where destiny was decreed.

## What is the Realm of the Dead?

When the entire extent of the world was taken into account, the furthest realm in the direction downward was “the netherworld.” In mythological texts the netherworld existed parallel to the land where human beings existed, but as a land of no return, the land beneath the land where demons could be sent or where gods could descend (Horowitz 1998, pp. 272–273). Also belonging to the depiction of the netherworld in literary texts was the idea of this land being dark and distant, inhabited by ghosts, demons, or gods who ruled over the dead or who brought death. In the only text where cosmic regions were placed relative to one another within an overall scheme, the location of the netherworld was specified as being below the *Apsū*, and so became the lowest of all regions (Livingstone

1989, p. 83). According to another composition the netherworld was the negation of all that was known in the world “above,” on earth and in heaven; therefore it was devoid of light, its river carried no water, and its fields produced no grain (Horowitz 1998, p. 351).

## Does the World have a Center?

The notion of an axis of the world focused on cities: first Nippur, then Babylon and Assur. Although the centrality of various cities and temples with respect to heaven and earth attests to a Mesopotamian idea of a cosmic center, it was never employed within a system to account for the motions of the celestial bodies within the cosmos and therefore cannot be understood as implying the Earth was the center of the universe. Nippur’s epithet “bond of heaven and earth/netherworld” reflects the idea of the cosmic regions coming together at the central point of the holy place, the “house of the universe.” In his shrine at Nippur, Enlil was the “lord who determines destinies,” and the shrine was the place “where destinies are decreed.” In an Early Dynastic hymn, Nippur was the “city which is grown together with Heaven, embracing Heaven” (Alster 1976, p. 121). Another epithet of this city touched on the cosmic significance of the place as the “navel of the world,” “the city that produced itself,” interpreted as an etymology for Nippur’s name (George 1992, pp. 146, 441). The idea of the holy city of Nippur influenced later Mesopotamian religious and cosmological thought. In Assur the ziggurat of Assur was seen as the link between heaven and earth in the name “temple, mountain of the entire world” (George 1993, p. 69). At Isin the same idea was attributed to the temple of Ninisina, called “the axis (between) heaven and earth” (Sjöberg 2002, p. 245 n. 30). Enlil was said to have suspended the axis of the world as the first act of creation (Black et al. 1998–2006: t.5.5.4:7).

## What is the Nature of the Planetary Bodies?

All celestial bodies, stars, constellations, and planets were called stars (*MUL* = kakkabu). The planets were further distinguished by a term meaning a kind of sheep, with the idea that their movements were not fixed in relation to one another as were the fixed stars since they “keep changing their positions” (Hunger and Pingree 1989, p. 71). The following brief outline highlights only indications about the divine nature of the planets in Mesopotamian cosmological thought (Brown 2000, pp. 54–80).

A word “moon” deriving from the Sumerian divine name could be used to refer to crescent-shaped objects, but when referring to the moon itself, the divine name for the “moon god” was synonymous with “moon.” Divination texts favored the symbolic writing 30, referring to the schematic or ideal length of the lunar cycle, but even this name for the moon was frequently written with the divine determinative, showing the lack of a distinction between moon and moon god.

Similarly, the word “sun” was indistinguishable from the name of the sun god Šamaš. In a Sumerian hymn to the temple of the god, the rising and setting of the sun were referred to in anthropomorphic terms: “when he the lord reposes, the people repose (with him). When he arises, the people arise (with him)” (Sjöberg and Bergmann 1969, p. 45).

Sumerian hymns reveal that already by the third millennium the planet Venus was seen as the astral form of the goddess Inana or Ištar. She was hailed as “the great lady of the horizon and zenith of the heavens” and she was addressed as “the radiant star, Venus, the great light which fills the holy heavens” (Black et al. 1998–2006: t.4.07.2:112, t.2.5.3.1:89). From the third millennium BCE she was already recognized as both the morning and the evening star, as seen in a seal inscription referring to the festival of Inana (Brown 2000, p. 67). She was associated with Šamaš at sunrise and Ninurta at sunset. In omens Inana could be either male or female: “If Venus rises in the East, she is female, favorable; if she is seen in the West she is male, unfavorable” (Reiner and Pingree 1998, p. 241).

Jupiter was identified with the god Marduk in its name “Marduk Star.” The manifestations of that god in the various appearances of Jupiter took on other names, as when on the eastern horizon he became “Brilliant Youth,” and when in the middle of the sky “the Ford.” In all these guises, Marduk/Jupiter was “the bearer of signs to the inhabited world” (Livingstone 1989, p. 6–10).

One of the names of Mercury was “the jumping one,” which could have been descriptive of the planet’s fast motion and perhaps the fact that it was not often or easily visible. Mercury was associated with the gods Ninurta and Nabû symbolizing the crown prince or son of Marduk (Hunger and Pingree 1989, p. 71, Gössmann 1950, p. 113). The association of Mercury with the two gods may relate to the appearances of the planet as a morning and evening star. The planet was also sometimes referred to as an arrow of the heroic warrior god Ninurta (Annus 2002, pp. 134–135).

Mars was associated with Nergal, god of pestilence. The planet’s name was interpreted as “the one who reveals deaths,” and indeed in the omens the planet portended plague and other evils. But Nergal’s manifestation as a heavenly body was nonetheless glorified in prayer: “Nergal star who rises again and again on the horizon, whose glow (stands) high” (Ebeling 1953, p. 117).

The luminous aspect of the heavenly divine manifestations was their most obvious quality. In Sumerian liturgy the radiance of Venus was frequently mentioned. In one composition the moon god was referred to as “the astral holy bull-calf” who “shines in the heavens like the morning star,” and “spreads bright light in the night” (Black et al. 1998–2006: t.1.8.2.1: 202–204). In the creation poem Marduk’s ninth name was “bright one,” “the shining god who illuminates our ways,” and his 49th name was “Ford” = Jupiter, “the star which in the skies is brilliant” (Foster 1993, p. 390 VI 156, 399 VII 126). In omen texts, descriptions of the appearance of the planets included whether they were bright or dim, or of various colors. Brightness or dimness was interpreted in accordance with the quality of the planet, either beneficial or sinister; accordingly it was favorable if a beneficial body was bright, but unfavorable if a sinister body was bright.

Observation of the heavens for the purpose of celestial divination, the solution of calendrical problems, and eventually, the prediction of planetary appearances, led to the recognition of their periodic behavior. The study of the relations between planetary periods became the central focus of astronomical work from about 600 BCE. In Babylonian astronomy the interest in heavenly phenomena was focused upon visibilities. Motion, therefore, was approached as the distance traveled between appearances in the cycle, as between first visibilities. The distance referred to is what astronomers now call the synodic arc, described as the number of degrees of longitude traveled by the planet in one synodic

cycle, between successive appearances of a given synodic phenomenon (e.g., first visibility, or last visibility).

## Is there a Cosmological Significance to the Order of the Planets?

The standard order of the planets as given in Babylonian astronomical and other texts (omens, astrology, treaties) did not reflect any conception of a spatial arrangement of the celestial bodies in the cosmos or in relation to Earth. Late Babylonian astronomical texts enumerated the five planets in the sequence Jupiter, Venus, Mercury, Saturn, and Mars (Rochberg-Halton 1988). This arrangement was at odds with the typically Greek geocentric map of the heavens, which organized the five planetary orbits around the Earth in the order Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, placing the planetary spheres above those of the moon and sun. In the Babylonian sources, however, the order in which the planets were enumerated in texts had nothing to do with geocentric order, but rather with their attributes as gods. Accordingly, Jupiter and Venus were beneficial, but Saturn and Mars were sinister. Mercury held an ambiguous position between the two beneficial and the two sinister stars and was sometimes good and sometimes bad. Old Babylonian references to the planet Mars as a destroyer of the herds suggested an early origin of this doctrine (Rochberg-Halton 1988, p. 235 n. 2). And in the Neo-Assyrian period Jupiter was a herald of propitious omens for Esarhaddon (Borger 1956, p. 17).

## Was there a Conception of Circles or Spheres? And Did the Celestial Bodies Move in Them?

The celestial sphere and the spherical earth that were assumed by Western cosmology do not seem to have roots in ancient Mesopotamia. The idea of the cosmos as a sphere was articulated on the basis of metaphysical arguments, first in Plato's *Timaeus* around 400 BCE, that the created world was "a perfect whole and of perfect parts" (Plato 1989, p. 1164, 32 d-33 a). And within that spherical worldview, Greek astronomy from the fourth century BCE to the second century CE constructed geometrical spherical models to describe the motions of the planets. The spherical nature of the Earth was also determined by Aristotle as a consequence of the physics of matter, earth being the heaviest element thus converging in the center of the celestial sphere. In the Ptolemaic cosmology, the spheres of the planets were also arranged in a physical system, occupying the space between the Earth, very small in relation to the whole and fixed at the center, and the sphere of fixed stars that bounded the whole. The distances from one sphere to the next were organized in such a way as to form a system of snugly inter-nested spheres from Earth to the fixed stars, which lay at a distance of approximately 20 000 Earth radii from the Earth itself. It is important to stress the absolute difference between this conception and any notion of cosmic order in cuneiform texts, where distance and physics were not operative considerations.

Instead of the celestial sphere, for the identification of stars and planets the horizon became a reference point in early Babylonian astronomy. Observers named three paths corresponding to roughly defined intervals along the eastern horizon where fixed stars were observed to rise. The interest of Babylonian celestial science in the planetary appearances, as opposed to planetary motion around the celestial sphere, underscores the irrelevancy of the notion of spheres in Babylonian astronomy. The sun was seen as traveling in the zodiac, but this does not necessarily imply that the sun traveled within a sphere (Neugebauer 1955, p. 194). The discovery of the planetary periods and their relations was not dependent upon a spherical image, nor on spherical trigonometry to calculate them. The period of a planet, as conceived in Babylonian mathematical astronomy, was defined as the number of synodic arcs the planet had to complete before it returned to a certain position in the sky, reckoned by degrees of the zodiac.

The image of a spherical world, however, may be discerned in metaphorical passages in literary contexts. Reference to the bowl-shape of the heavens and Earth appeared in a hymn (Lambert 1960, p. 134). Another prayer referred to the heaven of Anu as “the incense burner” of the gods, an object at least circular in shape, but differentiated in other texts from bowls (Ebeling 1953, p. 15). But these passages were not intended as empirical descriptions of the shape of the world.

Outside of the astronomical literature, the heavens were sometimes referred to in the phrase “circle of heaven,” and “circle” is a word used for geometric circles and hoops. In these passages the use of “circle” could be read as metaphoric, reflecting a sense of the totality rather than the shape of the celestial region as a whole. Circular diagrams appeared in a number of early Babylonian astronomical texts, presenting a circular image within which the constellations were placed (Horowitz 1998, p. 206). The early Babylonian reckoning of the length of day given in the texts was underpinned by the concept of the circle of the day measured as 12 “double hours” of  $30^\circ$  each (=  $360^\circ$ ). The Path of Enlil was a circle described by 26 stars (Horowitz 1998, p. 186). Given such evidence, perhaps the reading of “circle of heaven” or “totality of heaven” need not be mutually exclusive.

Finally, despite the apparent lack of a conception of the celestial sphere in Babylonian astronomy, the periodic return of the planets to their synodic appearances with respect to certain points of longitude seems to presuppose the  $360^\circ$  circle of the ecliptic, the path of the sun. Whether it was conceived of as such, or as a repeating linear sequence of 360 points, however, is difficult to show. Because the aim of Babylonian mathematical astronomy was to predict the appearances of the planets in their synodic moments, the computational schemes devised to achieve this cannot be taken to reflect any particular conception of the shape or dimensions of the cosmos, nor the nature of the motions of the bodies between their synodic appearances.

## FURTHER READING

Horowitz (1998) is the most comprehensive treatment of the cosmological geography of ancient Mesopotamia and sets out all the primary sources for the study of the subject. A good overall reference work on astral sciences, with a description of some of the basic texts of early Babylonian astronomy relevant to cosmology, is Hunger and Pingree (1999).

Further to the culture of astral science in the cuneiform world is Rochberg (2004, 2016). Lambert (1975) is a still-useful summary of Mesopotamian cosmology from mythological and theological sources. For more recent detailed studies of such mythological texts, see Wiggermann (1992) and Sjöberg (2002). For the cosmological background of Babylonian religion, see George (1992).

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# Ancient Mesopotamian Religion

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Religion in ancient Mesopotamia is an exceedingly complex topic that cannot be adequately addressed in this short contribution. The following is meant as a highly abbreviated overview over some of the most salient points relating to the religious history of ancient Mesopotamia. Mesopotamia is here understood to include the areas as outlined by Seymour (2011) and Snell (2011, p. 5).

Two main approaches have been distinguished within the study of ancient Mesopotamian religions (Veldhuis 2004: 13–17). The first one, which has been placed within the methodological approach of phenomenology (Veldhuis 2004: 14), is mainly associated with the writings of Thorkild Jacobsen (1976), but also with Jean Bottéro (2001). The second approach, less optimistic than Jacobsen’s and Bottéro’s reconstructions, is strongly affiliated with A. Leo Oppenheim’s chapter in his monumental *Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, which was introduced with the provocative header “Why a ‘Mesopotamian Religion’ should not be written” (Oppenheim 1977, p. 172). Oppenheim did not advocate abandoning the study of religion in ancient Mesopotamia, but underlined that Mesopotamian textual sources for religious beliefs and practices originated in the elite spheres of society, and therefore only offer a rather one-sided view (Oppenheim 1977, pp. 172–183). The second point that led Oppenheim to warn his readers that “this section is predominantly negative in tone and outlook” (Oppenheim 1977, p. 171) was related to what he called “the problem of comprehension across the barriers of conceptual conditioning” (p. 172). Veldhuis, in critiquing both approaches, already pointed to the importance of “social contexts of religious representations” (Veldhuis 2004, p. 16), a point that is important for studies of religions in ancient societies. One of the earliest accounts of Mesopotamian religion, to my knowledge, dates to 1827 and was written by Friedrich Münter, bishop of Zealand and professor of theology at the University of Copenhagen (Münter 1827).

But it was Jacobsen's and Bottéro's monographic treatments of Mesopotamian religions that dominated twentieth-century scholarship and are known beyond the boundaries of the field of Assyriology. Jacobsen's theoretical framework for understanding religion was heavily influenced by Rudolf Otto's notion of the numinous (Jacobsen 1976, p. 3–21; see also Veldhuis 2004, p. 14). Jacobsen based his study almost exclusively on mythological narratives from ancient Mesopotamia, projecting many of the ideas expressed in these tales, which are dated to the early second millennium, back into the fourth millennium, for which we have only rudimentary information on religious beliefs. It is interesting to note that Jacobsen completely ignored Oppenheim's *Ancient Mesopotamia* – the first edition from 1964 should have been available to Jacobsen.

Bottéro (2001) included the important category of religious practices in his monographic overview, a category that had been completely absent from Jacobsen's study. Yet, Bottéro's approach to Mesopotamian religion showed a different kind of bias:

We must also consider a completely different aspect of religions in order to classify, characterize, and understand them: *their origins*. For most religions, especially the most ancient and, as we say, “primitive,” it is impossible to know anything of their beginnings: they are lost in the deep night of prehistory or in the impenetrable fog of “parahistory,” of which we have no accounts or documents to orient ourselves. Every religion of this type is ultimately only a reflection of the culture out of which it developed. And every culture, all of which have a particular scale of values, a concept of social life, a type of social organization, a concern for others, a collection of tastes and aversions, of preferences and fears, necessarily includes a determinative attitude toward the divine: a religious dimension, a religion, born within that culture and developed through imperceptible stages. This is what we call *a prehistoric or traditional religion*, or, if we wish, a *popular or primitive religion*.

(Bottéro 2001, pp. 4–5)

There are two important points in this lengthy quote that are worth discussion: the first is related to the cultural embeddedness of religion, the context, within which we can observe religious beliefs and practices. This point has been underappreciated in modern scholarship on ancient Mesopotamian religions. The second issue is related to a modern understanding of ancient religions in general. Bottéro's attempt at characterizing Mesopotamian religion as “primitive,” “prehistoric,” or “traditional” is based on the misunderstanding that religious beliefs and practices *can* be classified and placed on an evolutionary ladder, which presumably sees the contemporary religions of the Book and monotheism as the most developed form of religion. As I have argued elsewhere (Brisch 2013a, pp. 37–38), ancient religions should not be judged by modern scholars who are far removed from ancient realities, and evolutionary approaches to religions often have a tendency to obscure an analysis of religion in a historical perspective.

In the ancient Mesopotamian languages there existed no word for “religion”; yet, this point is only marginally relevant: to quote Talal Asad, “... there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes” (Asad 1993, p. 29). Our sources show that Mesopotamian religion, bearing in mind the usual disclaimer that the term “Mesopotamian religion” is a construct in itself, was polytheistic, though some have claimed that tendencies to henotheism developed in the first millennium (e.g., Bottéro 2001, pp. 41–43).

More recent monographic treatments can be found in Hruša (2015), a descriptive account of Mesopotamian religion with a rich bibliography, and in Snell (2011), a comparative overview of Ancient Near Eastern religions, including Egypt and Israel.

Thorkild Jacobsen distinguished three consecutive phases in the evolution of Mesopotamian religion: the earliest phase, in the fourth millennium, centered on the “worship of powers in natural and other phenomena essential for economic survival” (Jacobsen 1976, p. 21); the second phase, roughly encompassing the third millennium, added the concept of the ruler; and the final phase, concurrent with the second millennium, shows that the “fortunes of the individual” increased in importance. In this last phase the concept of the personal god appears. Jacobsen saw the second millennium BCE as “the high point of Mesopotamian religious achievement. The millennium that followed contributed no major new insights, rather, it brought in many ways decline and brutalization” (Jacobsen 1976, p. 223). While some of Jacobsen’s most general observations may still hold true, at least keeping in mind the textual data are rather biased, his reconstruction of fourth millennium religion is largely based on later sources and speculation, and his dismissal of religion in the first millennium relied, perhaps, too much on mythological narratives. Similarly, there are only limited sources from the third millennium for a reconstruction of religion, and retrojecting later religious texts into earlier periods has to be considered problematic.

## The Sources

The sources that are primarily used for the reconstruction of religious beliefs are textual, though archaeological and iconographic evidence shows important facets that texts cannot reveal or that supports textual evidence (Seymour 2011). The textual sources consist of mythological tales, often found in the form of literature, but also hymns and prayers; scholarly literature, as, for example, incantations and other ritual texts, divination literature, and lexical lists (for example, in the form of god lists); and historical texts, such as royal inscriptions, royal annals, and so on. Another important source for the reconstruction of worship and beliefs is legal and administrative documents, including letters, which may contain personal names that invoke deities, year names that report religious acts (e.g., the appointing of priestesses or the making of statues or other objects of worship), or accounts related to the movement of goods needed to conduct the proper rituals. The latter are often the most useful in reconstructing the religious calendar and all the festivities that needed to be held throughout the year. In other words, almost all textual sources from ancient Mesopotamia may contain valuable information for the reconstruction of religious beliefs and practices. Many of the literary sources can be consulted online as part of the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature at the University of Oxford (Black et al. 1998–2006; see also Black 2004), while many of the Akkadian literary sources are conveniently translated in Foster (2005; see also Dalley 1991). The scholarly literature is still in the process of being edited, with many important compositions still unpublished or unedited (but see the recent overviews by Maul 2013 and Koch 2015 on divination). Legal and administrative sources are best consulted

through the studies that use these as the basis for reconstructing religious beliefs of particular time periods (e.g., Richter 2004; Selz 1995).

Some of these textual sources may be more biased than others, for example, if religious acts are portrayed as being used for political purposes, and so ideally a proper reconstruction of religions will take not only one but many types of source into consideration, preferably, if possible, only for one period, because religious beliefs and practices underwent constant changes throughout the three millennia of Mesopotamian textual and archaeological attestations.

## The Pantheon

Although there was no word for “religion,” there were words for god and divinity as well as semantic classifiers that designated divinity. The Sumerian word for god or goddess was *dingir*, which originally consisted of a cuneiform sign in the form of a star. The same sign could also serve as a semantic classifier for divinities, though some Semitic divine names originally did not make use of this. The Akkadian term for “god” was *ilum* and for “goddess” *iltum*, though later on *ištaru*, derived from the name of the goddess of love and war Ištar, is also attested as a generic term for “goddess” (for other Akkadian words that designate “god,” see Lambert 1957–1971, p. 543.).

The exact number of Mesopotamian deities is not known (Bottéro 2001, p. 45). Deimel (1914, p. 30) counted more than 3000 names in his *Pantheon Babylonicum*, while Tallqvist (1938, p. vi) counted around 2400 names, and Bottéro (2001, p. 45) stated that there were almost 2000 names of divinities in the second millennium. However, one should bear in mind that some of these divine names are only mentioned in a single text, and that the number of the highest deities in the pantheon (i.e., those who were invoked more frequently) is more limited. Basic information, including bibliographical references, about the approximately 50 most important deities in the Mesopotamian pantheon can be found on my teaching website “Ancient Mesopotamian Gods and Goddesses” on Oracc (<http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/amgg>).

The Mesopotamian pantheon was imagined as a family structure, which mirrored the shifting hierarchies among the gods. If a god or goddess was of equal standing to another deity within the hierarchy, they were referred to as sister or brother of a god. If there was an asymmetrical relationship, the deity that was higher in hierarchy received the title father or mother, though these honorifics could also indicate the antiquity of a deity. In some cases, a deity could be demoted from “brother” or “sister” to “son” or “daughter,” which became a reflection of the loss in importance. Mythological texts often offer explanations for these shifts in the hierarchies of the gods (Michałowski 1998; also see below).

The divinities in the Mesopotamian pantheon were often merged, a process that Assyriologists describe as syncretism. The most frequent attestations of such syncretism are the identification and merging of Sumerian and Semitic deities. For example, the sun god’s Sumerian name was *Utu*, whose Akkadian equivalent was Šamaš, and their names were used interchangeably, that is, the Sumerian name was used logographically to spell Šamaš’s name. In addition to these types of syncretisms, others can be observed. For example, the healing goddess Gula (Böck 2013) was, sometime in the second millennium,

merged with other goddesses (Baba, Nintinugga, and Ninisinna), as visible in the Great Gula Hymn (Foster 2005, pp. 583–591), and therewith became one of several healing goddesses. Perhaps, at least in some of these cases, the merging or syncretism was designed to ensure that a god's worship could continue, albeit in changed form, rather than be discontinued entirely.

Generally speaking, especially in early Mesopotamia, most of the Mesopotamian cities had a patron deity (see, for example, the collection of temple hymns, Sjöberg and Bergmann 1969 = Black 1998–2006, 4.80.1.). In some cases, one and the same deity could inhabit several cities, and, in rare cases, even take on a separate existence in different cities. An example for this is the goddess Ištar, whose Sumerian name was *Inanna*, and whose main place of worship was the southern Mesopotamian city of Uruk. However, already in earlier periods there was a different manifestation of Ištar in the northern Mesopotamian city of Nineveh, who was worshipped well beyond the boundaries of Nineveh (Beckman 1998). In one instance the king of Mittani even sent the goddess to Egypt to help out the Egyptian pharaoh, though the purpose of the visit is not entirely clear (Beckman 1998, p. 3).

Some deities are deified natural or astral phenomena, such as the sun and moon gods, but already in the earliest periods some deities could also be apotheoses of societal phenomena, such as Nissaba, who was the goddess of both grain and cuneiform writing, or the goddess Inanna, who was originally the goddess of love and the deified Venus star.

Most of the gods had distinct functions and domains. Probably the oldest god in the pantheon was the god *An* (Sumerian), *Anu* (Akkadian). In Sumerian he is spelled only with the cuneiform sign for *dingir*, but here the name is read *An*. He is often referred to as the “father of the gods” or the “king of the gods” and his domain was the heavens. Enlil was the head of the pantheon, at least in earlier Mesopotamian history, perhaps following An’s dethronement. There have been several suggestions on how to etymologize Enlil’s name, but it is clear that the suggestion that Enlil was the deified realm of “air” was a secondary development and part of a new cosmology (Stone 2013). Sometime in the second millennium, Enlil was replaced by Marduk (Sommerfeld 1982; Tenney 2016), who then became the head of the pantheon for most of the first millennium, and was finally replaced by Nabû, the god of writing. Marduk was originally the patron deity of the city of Babylon but sometime in the early second millennium he was made into the god *Enki/Ea*’s son, who was the god of wisdom and incantations, and thus Marduk also became responsible for incantations. The highest-ranking female goddess in the pantheon was Inanna/Ištar, who is often characterized as flamboyant and capricious in the mythology (see below). In early Mesopotamia she was referred to as the “daughter of An,” indicating her antiquity and high standing, though later on she was demoted. She was the goddess of love and war, and already in the third millennium her war-aspect became important for kings, who needed divine support in warfare and armed conflicts (Westenholz 1999: 49). There were several mother goddesses in ancient Mesopotamia, the most frequently mentioned being Ninmah, Nintu, and Bēlet-ilī, but other goddesses could also be invoked as mothers (Brisch 2013a).

Some of the most important deities were identified with numbers (Foster 2007: 174). The highest ranking number 60, within the sexagesimal system, was assigned to the god An/Anu, the number 50 was given to Enlil as the new head of the pantheon, and later to

Marduk, who was awarded the 50 names of “Enlil-ship” in the Babylonian myth *Enūma eliš* after he was crowned the king of the gods. *Enki/Ea* received the number 40, the moon god Nanna/Sîn the number 30, the sun god Utu/Šamaš 20, Ištar 15, and the weather god Adad 6 (Bottéro 2001, pp. 70–71). Although it is not entirely clear when this system of numerical representation of the highest gods came into being, the spelling of the moon god’s name using the cuneiform sign for the number 30 is already widely attested in the Old Babylonian period in the first half of the second millennium BCE.

## Mythology

Myths are notoriously difficult to define and there is a wide range in how the term is used, both academically and in common parlance. Here I follow Robert Segal’s rather broad definition of myth: “I propose that, to qualify as myth, a story, which can of course express a conviction, be held tenaciously by adherents. But I leave open-ended whether the story must in fact be true” (Segal 2004, p. 6). Bruce Lincoln’s (1999) approach is difficult to apply to ancient Mesopotamia because the majority of mythological texts were authored anonymously. Still, mythological texts from ancient Mesopotamia are rich and manifold, and often conflicting stories existed at the same time. As mentioned above, the divine hierarchy was sometimes explained through mythological narratives; yet these tales contain other dimensions, and surely societal, psychological, and other elements can be distinguished. It is unlikely that they served just one purpose but contained many levels of interpretation and layers of meaning. An example here can be the so-called Babylonian Epic of Creation or *Enūma eliš*, “When upon high.” The story contains just one of many accounts of the origins of the cosmos and is moreover an amalgamation of different, partly older myths (Lambert 2013, and references therein). Yet, it was likely that the most important part of the story was not the creation of the cosmos but the elevation of the god Marduk to the highest position in the pantheon (Michałowski 1990; Katz 2011).

Already by the third millennium different yet concurrent mythological traditions can be distinguished (Michałowski 1998), yet the largest body of Sumerian mythological texts dates to the early second millennium and was probably mostly used in the education of scribes. As already stated by Michałowski (1998, p. 242), almost none of the very earliest mythological tales survived into the second millennium, and yet some older remnants may be visible in the tales as preserved in the early second millennium (Bottéro 1992, p. 235). This is an important point, because it could indicate that mythological tales were constantly rewritten and adapted according to historical and cultural needs.

Whether or not myths reflect human societal or political conditions is not clear. For example, whether the assembly of the gods was based on an actual collective decision-making body in human society, as proposed by Jacobsen in his essay on “Primitive Democracy” (1943), is far from clear. Assemblies as political institutions existed for most of Mesopotamian history, at least in some regions, and yet it is not clear how influential these institutions may have been. Others have seen mythology as a vehicle for political developments or societal values (e.g., Wilcke 1993), and even though the political and societal dimensions should not be underestimated, one should also be wary of reducing these tales to just a single aspect.

In the following only a few myths will be discussed in order to highlight some of the most salient aspects. As I will try to show below, many of the mythological tales are centered on the topics of order and chaos, even when they are overtly stories about the creation of humanity or the cosmos, about divine combat, mortality, or immortality. The stories explore in different ways how the divine order is disturbed and then (re)created, and what role humanity plays vis-à-vis the gods. An example here is the Sumerian myth “Enki and Ninmah,” which describes the creation of humanity (Black et al. 1998–2006 1.1.2; Lambert 2013, pp. 330–345). A younger generation of gods, forced to work for an older generation of gods, rebels against the order and the hard work they are forced to do; this is a theme that “Enki and Ninmah” shares with the Babylonian story of the flood, in spite of several differences in the narratives (Lambert 2013, p. 334). Enki, who is enjoying himself in the Abzu, his cosmic abode, is then put into action by his mother Namma, perhaps an ancient creation goddess (Wiggerman 1998–2001). She encourages him to invite the mother goddess to find a solution. Enki throws a banquet for the mother goddess, and they both become inebriated and decide to create humanity as part of a contest (Michałowski 1994). The challenge consists of assigning each of their creations a destiny – a place in society. Ninmah begins her creation taking clay from the Abzu; all of her creatures have a handicap, yet Enki assigns them a place in society that is appropriate for their skills. At the end it is finally Enki’s turn to create, and he creates what has been identified as the “first baby,” Umul, who cannot sit, stand, or eat (Kilmer 1976).

Myths written in the Akkadian language are different in the sense that they often make use of older mythologies that are combined in new ways. The myth with the ancient title *Enūma eliš* “When on High,” is the best example for this, but also other myths, such as Ištar’s Descent (Foster 2005, pp. 498–505), which is a short version of the older myth Inanna’s Descent to the Netherworld (Black 2004, pp. 65–76 1.4.1), give testimony to this kind of creative retelling. Even more true to the original is the twelfth and final tablet of the Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, which is an Akkadian translation of the Sumerian tale “Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld” (Gadotti 2014). The Sumerian tale describes the death of Enkidu, who goes to the netherworld to retrieve two objects that Gilgamesh had played with incessantly. Even though Enkidu receives instructions on how to behave appropriately in the netherworld, he disregards these instructions and therefore gets stuck in the realm of the dead, where he encounters ghosts.

Lambert (1986) and others have clearly shown how the *Enūma eliš* incorporated older mythologies surrounding the god Ninurta. Ninurta was the patron deity of Nippur and the son of the main god Enlil. It is especially the Anzu myth, in which Ninurta saves the world after the Anzu bird had stolen the tablet of destinies from Enlil, which may have served as an inspiration. Through his theft, the Anzu bird upsets the cosmic order and created chaos, so a hero god is needed to restore the equilibrium. The *Enūma eliš* (Lambert 2013; Gabriel 2014) is only overtly about the creation of the cosmos. The main purpose of the story is revealed in the final two tablets, when the god Marduk, the son of *Enki*/Ea, is made the highest god of the pantheon and takes the place of Enlil through being awarded the 50 names of Marduk. But before he became the highest god, he had to prove himself by saving the cosmos and restoring order. In the case of the *Enūma eliš* it was the goddess Tiamat who, together with other deities, had rebelled against the higher echelons of the pantheon, and therewith disturbed the cosmic order. Marduk, the only god brave

enough to face the rebels, is victorious and creates the cosmos from Tiamat's dead body, and through this act of violence creates and restores order. Through this combination of older myths, the *Enūma eliš* created a new divine genealogy, in which Enlil was replaced by Marduk, who became the new supreme deity.

The theme of order and chaos can also be discerned in the flood myth. The Babylonian myth, called the story of Atra-hasis in Assyriology, has enough similarities with the Biblical narrative to assume that the author of the latter had at least some knowledge of the Babylonian story. Whether or not the narratives about a devastating flood that the gods sent to destroy humanity were relatively late in Mesopotamian mythological history, as proposed by Chen (2013), remains to be seen. In the Babylonian flood story (Lambert and Millard 1969; Finkel 2013) the god Enlil is disturbed by the noise of humanity, which robs him of his sleep. After several attempts at sending plagues to decimate humanity, Enlil has finally reached the end of his tether and decides to eradicate humankind by sending an all-destructive flood. Ea, the Akkadian version of Enki, attempts to subvert Enlil's plan by warning one person of the flood and instructing him to build a boat. Ea's plan succeeds and humankind is saved, though the myth ends by naming several social institutions, which were meant to curb population growth, such as the installation of priestesses that had to remain childless.

The person whom Ea warns is called Atra-hasis, a name meaning "Exceedingly-wise," who is the Babylonian Noah. In other retellings of the flood story he is called Ziusudra (a Sumerian name meaning "Life-of-many/long-days") or Ūta-napišti (meaning "He found life" or "I found life"; George 2003, p. 153). The latter name appears in the retelling of the flood story as part of the Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, when Gilgameš visits ūta-napišti to learn from him the secrets of immortality.

Atra-hasis' first act after surviving the flood was to make an offering to the gods, and the gods are said to "gather like flies" around the offering. This myth, together with Enki and Ninmah as well as *Enūma eliš*, affirm that humanity's main purpose is to serve the gods and to "do the work" for them. The daily offerings (and other rituals) were thought of as humanity's obligation towards the gods, but the failure of the flood in eradicating humanity also showed that the Mesopotamians understood this to be a co-dependency: the gods did not want to do the work anymore, and so they had come to depend on humanity to provide for them.

Other myths, like the story of "Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld," deal with the topic of death and the netherworld. In "Inanna's Descent," Inanna, the goddess of love and war, decides to conquer the netherworld and depose her sister Ereškigal, goddess of the netherworld. Inanna uses a ruse to gain access to the netherworld, ostensibly going to the funeral of Ereškigal's husband, the Bull of Heaven; yet, her actions reveal that this was only a trick. Inanna asks her assistant to prepare for the possibility that she will not return, and on the way to the netherworld has to pass through seven gates. At each gate she has to give up an item of her accessories, which makes her vulnerable in the end. Though Inanna succeeds at first in her conquest of the netherworld, she ultimately fails as she dies. Though none of the other gods want to help her, it is Enki again who comes to the rescue: he fashions two creatures, who are able to travel to the netherworld and who then trick Ereškigal into giving up Inanna's corpse. Inanna is revived through the "potion of life" and can return to Earth. However, a price has to be paid; she has to find a substitute to

take her place in the netherworld. In her search for such a substitute she happens upon her husband Dumuzi, who is celebrating and ostensibly not concerned with Inanna's predicament at all, and so the goddess chooses him as her substitute. Another myth, Dumuzi's Dream (Alster 1972 = Black et al. 1998–2006, 1.4.3.) offers additional information: because Dumuzi is a god of vegetation, his sister offers to take his place in the netherworld for six months so that vegetation can come to life for six months during the year. "Inanna's Descent" is thus less a creation story than an imaginative tale about death and how even the highest gods are not above the laws of the netherworld.

Although the Anzu myth, the *Enūma eliš*, the flood story, and Ištar's Descent are all myths that have overtly different topics, it is clear that the underlying theme is that of order and chaos. If one god or supernatural being leaves the designated position in the cosmos, such as Anzu, who steals the tablet of destinies, Tiamat, who rebels against the given order, humanity, who inadvertently disturb the god Enlil's sleep, or Ištar, who decides to conquer the netherworld, it is either a hero god (Ninurta or Marduk) or the god *Enki/Ea* that has to restore the balance, either by combat or through trickery.

Many other mythological tales existed: in the story of "Enki and Ninhursanga" the god Enki mates with the mother goddess and creates successive generations of goddesses, with whom he commits incest. As rightly proposed by Gadotti (2009), this story and another Sumerian myth ("Enlil and Ninlil") should be interpreted as narratives in which a male god rapes female goddesses. While one has to admit that translating Sumerian myths provides many challenges, especially when it comes to distinguishing linguistically between consensual and non-consensual sex, the goddesses clearly expressed that they did not consent. While it is difficult to interpret such myths, one could argue that such stories, although they take place in the divine world, may act as a warning. After Enki raped his great-great-great-granddaughter, Uttu, the goddess of weaving, she becomes sick and asks Ninhursanga for help. Ninhursanga removes Enki's semen from Uttu's womb and apparently plants his seed into the earth. Enki, not giving up, then eats the plants that have grown from his seed and becomes sick. Finally, the mother goddess removes the plants, ultimately Enki's offspring, from his body and heals him. While there surely must have been a humorous or entertaining aspect to many of these stories, myths such as "Enki and Ninmah" may also explore social boundaries of male (and female) behavior.

Not all mythological tales could be discussed here, and it is to be hoped that future studies will further our knowledge of the societal and cultural meaning of these tales.

## Rituals

The concept of ritual, like myth, is equally difficult to define, and theoretical literature on the topic abounds (Bell 1997; Grimes 2014). For the purpose of this chapter, ritual is understood to refer to religious ceremonial practices in the widest sense: the realm of rituals included festivals and processions that were structured around the "cultic calendar;" divination; magic or incantations; medicine; and rituals for the care of divine statues. A comprehensive typology of rituals from ancient Mesopotamia is still lacking. The rituals that are commonly designated as part of divination, magic, and medicine overlap with what some scholars identified as part of the ancient sciences (e.g., Geller 2010; Rochberg 2014; Scurlock

2005). Böck (2013, pp. 194–195) argues against using the term “science” for Mesopotamian medicine due to its embeddedness within the realm of the religious. It is important to underline here that the ancients did not recognize this division of religion and science, but that this reflects a modern approach within the history of science. In the following it will only be possible to highlight a few examples of religious rituals in ancient Mesopotamia, because a complete overview would go far beyond the framework of this contribution.

The “cultic calendar” included a large number of festivals, which differed regionally and, at least in early history, often played a more important role for the local pantheon (Cohen 1993; Sallaberger 1993). In some cases, the same festival was celebrated in different places and acquired a “national” importance, as was the case with the Akitu or New Year’s festivals (Ambos 2013).

The Akitu is, perhaps, one of the most analyzed festivals from ancient Mesopotamia, and has been used to bolster different schools of thought within the history of religions (Bell 1997, pp. 17–20). Recent research has offered many new details on the Akitu festivals, both on the Akitu around the spring equinox, close to the beginning of the Babylonian calendar year (Bidmead 2002; Zgoll 2006, and references therein), as well as on the second Akitu festival around the autumn equinox (Ambos 2013). The sources for our reconstruction of the ritual are diverse, both chronologically and geographically. Thus, an Akitu festival and New Year’s celebrations are already attested in the third millennium BCE, but as Zgoll (2006: 14) has pointed out, they have little in common with the well-known later versions of the ritual. The most detailed accounts date to sometime in the second half of the first millennium BCE (Zgoll 2006, p. 15; see also Linssen 2004), and it is therefore unclear how much the ritual may have changed from older celebrations.

The Akitu festival at Babylon, likely the most important one, was a celebration that stretched out over 11 or 12 days, yet we are better informed about the actions on some of these days than on others (Zgoll 2006, p. 21). The rituals involved the king, the assembly of the gods, and priests, musicians, and singers. There was a private part, which took place behind closed doors, and a public part, which likely included the participation of the population at large. The first days were spent with ritual cleansing and other preparatory work, which included invocations of deities, especially Marduk, the patron deity of Babylon. The recitation of the entire text of the *Enūma eliš* took place on day 4; the ritual humiliation and justification of the king took place on day 5 (Kuhrt 1987); the god Nabû, Marduk’s son, killed enemies, represented in the form of figurines, on day 6; the gods received new robes on day 7; and on day 8 the gods assembled and traveled to the Akitu house, which was located outside the city wall of Babylon. The assembly of the gods was important, because the gods determined the king’s destiny during this time (Zgoll 2006, p. 31). The procession to the Akitu house went along the famous procession street and then through the Ishtar gate, where day 8–11 of the Akitu ritual took place. Though there is a lack of information for some of these days, it is clear that lavish offerings and banquets both for the gods and the people took place, and the king bestowed gifts upon Marduk and the other gods. Day 11 saw the return to Babylon, a second divine assembly, and finally resting time for Marduk and the other gods.

The second Akitu festival around the autumn equinox has been recently reconstructed through the meticulous efforts of Claus Ambos (2013). It is known that the autumn Akitu festival did not include the same elements as the spring Akitu; in place of the ritual

humiliation of the king was a ceremony that involved imprisoning the king in a reed hut for one night, thus showing a similar brief loss of status for the king.

Divination, magic, and medicine functioned, at least at times, as a structural system, though these different spheres are sometimes difficult to separate, at least within the practice of diagnosing, treating, and healing disease. Divination was used to diagnose the cause of illness or misfortune, to offer a prognosis on the length and healing prospects of the patient, or in general to foretell the future in order to avert possible evils. Magic and incantations were used to address and reverse the cause of evil, whereas medicine was used, in connection with incantations, to treat the physical symptoms of illnesses, though this is, admittedly, a rather simplified account of the system.

The large body of divinatory literature from ancient Mesopotamia, all in the Akkadian language, is still not completely edited, and gaps remain in our knowledge and understanding of this substantial body of knowledge, but the last two decades have seen great progress (see, for example, more recently, Brown 2000; Rochberg 2010; Maul 2013; Koch 2015; Winnitzer 2017). In ancient Mesopotamia, divination was seen as a way of communicating with the gods. It was understood that the gods conveyed their messages and answers to questions posed to them through omens, which then had to be interpreted. It is for this reason that divination, though difficult to define, belongs to the overall realm of religion (Koch 2015, pp. 1–3). Regarding a taxonomy of divination, Koch (2015, pp. 15–16) has recently proposed the application of the terms “artificial” and “natural” to categories of divination, following Cicero’s classifications, and “omens” and “oracles” to types of divination:

The distinction between the categories “artificial” and “natural” is based on the interpretative apparatus: artificial divination relies on signs or messages, which have to be decoded whereas natural divination is perceived as immediately intelligible. The distinction between types of signs into “omens” and “oracles” is based on the role of the actors taking part in the communication: man and divine being. While “omens” were perceived as sent by the gods, “oracles” were asked for.

(Koch 2015, pp. 16)

Divination also had the purpose of foretelling the future, and therefore it was often used to avert possible evil (Maul 2013). Already in the course of the second millennium, foretelling the future through astrology, out of which later mathematical astronomy grew, became an important profession down to the first millennium, but other forms of divination were still important (Maul 2013). Scholars who had specialized in divination functioned as advisers to the king (Radner 2011; Pongratz-Leisten 2014). The scholars were required to tell the king about negative omens so that appropriate steps could be taken to avert possible disaster. If the negative omen could not be averted, a substitute king ritual took place, in which a person was appointed king for 100 days, at the end of which the substitute king was killed to take away the evil prediction from the actual king (Radner 2003).

Once the cause of misfortune or illness had been determined, there were several means by which possible evil could be averted or the source of the misfortune/illness could be remedied. Like divination, this required the expertise of specialists.

Though the term magic has a difficult history in Western academic discourse, it is commonly used in Assyriology to designate rituals that include prayers and incantations (Schwemer 2011). There is a large body of incantation literature, including ritual instructions, for various cases of misfortune and illness; in ancient Mesopotamian belief these had supernatural causes, such as demons, witchcraft, ghosts, or an angry god. In some cases, one cause could be the underlying cause of another, as in the case of witchcraft, which could lead to a personal god's anger (Abusch 2002, pp. 27–63).

One of the most important demons was Lamaštu, the daughter of the sky god Anu (Farber 2014). In Walter Farber's words: "Her main goal on earth was to snatch and eat newly-born babies, which she accomplished either by trickery, posing as a midwife or a physician, or by sheer force, attacking her victims like a wolf or a lion" (Farber 2014, p. 3, including a comprehensive edition of the incantations against Lamashtu). The complex incantations against the demoness required elaborate procedures to banish the evil and heal the patients.

Witchcraft was considered an important cause for illness and misfortune, as is attested by the large body of anti-witchcraft literature (see, for example, Abusch 2002; Abusch and Schwemer 2011; Schwemer 2017). The Akkadian word for witchcraft is *kišpū*, a term that indicated "methods of inflicting suffering on other persons" (Schwemer 2017, p. 1). The longest, most important, and most complex anti-witchcraft ritual was called by its Akkadian title *Maqlū* "Burning," and had the goal of countering the evil effects of witchcraft and to ultimately destroy the witch that had caused the evil (Abusch 2015, 2016; Schwemer 2017). Although the texts mention both (female) witches and (male) warlocks as the instigators of witchcraft, it appears that the "stereotypical witch is primarily female" (Schwemer 2017, p. 1).

Incantations often consist of several parts: the text of the incantation, which also includes prayers, and a ritual, which consists of instructions for the specialist on how to perform the ritual that accompanies the incantation. Many examples can be found in translation in Foster (2005). The rituals often involved the making of figurines, which were used as substitutes and whose burying or destruction were meant to destroy the evil or banish it to the netherworld. Rituals prescribed amulets, which were designed to protect and heal the patient.

The specialist who was an expert for dispelling witchcraft, including healing a patient, was called the *āšipu*, variously translated as "exorcist" or "incantation priest." His practice of magic was considered legitimate and legal, although some rituals may fall in a grey area between legitimate and illegitimate magic (Abusch and Schwemer 2011, p. 4).

Whether or not ancient Mesopotamians believed in the efficacy of incantations, is difficult to answer. As Schwemer (2011) has pointed out, the rituals that were performed were rather seen as a possibility that could aid the unlucky person or patient in reversing the evils that had befallen them.

Both the *āšipu* "exorcist" and the *asū* "physician" were involved in the medical healing of patients, though their roles partially overlapped (Heeßel 2009; Böck 2013, p. 186). Thus the line between the sphere of the religious and the sphere of the "scientific" (i.e., medical healing through pharmaceutical treatments) cannot easily be established.

The diagnostic–prognostic handbook *Sakikkū*, though strictly speaking not an omen compendium, functioned as a handbook for practitioners to diagnose the underlying cause of illness, often attributed to the "hand of the god NN" (Heeßel 2000). It was important to identify the cause of the illness to treat a patient accordingly. In the words of Heeßel:

This elaborate and well-thought-out system aimed at using all available means to further the recovery of the sick person. The symptoms of the disease were viewed as containing vital information about the divine anger that led to the sickness. By using this information to determine the name of the god involved, the exorcist gained the means by which to reconcile the patient with the angered god and thereby eliminate the source of the disease. The patient, who could be sure that the immediate source of his disease was thus eliminated, no doubt looked forward with almost absolute certainty to the end of his suffering. The power of the placebo effect is well-known to modern physicians. On the other hand the pharmacological-therapeutic treatment ensured the recovery from the actual disease and its symptoms. Although we do not know exactly how effective these recipes were, since we have only started to identify the plants and drugs involved, I think we can safely assume that this treatment yielded at least partially positive results.

(Heeßel 2007, p. 129)

Furthermore, there is the possibility that the association of certain healing plants with deities may have enhanced the potency of these plants and therewith further aided the patient's recovery (Böck 2013, p. 171).

Other important rituals were required for the creation and maintenance of divine images. Ancient Mesopotamian gods were thought to have manifested themselves in images or statues, which played an active role in religious rituals and served as religious and cultural identity points. There were complex rituals that accompanied the creation of the divine image and the act of bringing it to life (Walker and Dick 2001; Berlejung 1998). But after the statue had come to life, daily rituals of feeding the gods were necessary to maintain divine goodwill and to keep the cosmic and social as well as political order (Lambert 1993; Maul 2008; Brisch 2017; Brisch forthcoming). The importance of these food offerings is alluded to in several literary and mythological texts, the best-known example being the flood story, as already mentioned above, in which the gods are described as gathering around the first offering after the flood "like flies." Thus, it was humanity's duty to take care of and feed the gods; otherwise the world risked extinction. The gods, in turn, had come to depend on humanity to provide them with foods, because providing for themselves had become too hard for them.

## Outlook

This brief overview, rather than aiming at giving a complete view, sought to highlight certain aspects of Mesopotamian religion. As in many ancient societies, religion permeated all aspects of society, and so it is sometimes difficult to draw the boundaries between what is considered religious and what is not, and similarly, to what constitutes a myth and what does not, as in the case of the Epic of Gilgamesh. Nevertheless, the rich mythologies offer fascinating objects of study for the history, culture, religious beliefs, and societal norms of ancient Mesopotamia, and many tales are still waiting to be mined and analyzed. It was suggested above that the framework of order and chaos can be seen in many mythological tales, perhaps in contrast to modern stories which often emphasize the battle of good versus evil. But many other narratives, both mythological and non-mythological, offer important information about religious beliefs, such as texts pertaining to "wisdom literature," prayers, hymns, and other religious texts. Religious rituals have come more strongly

into the focus of research over the past few decades, especially their importance for religious practices, cultural memories, as well as social, cultural, and political identities, yet much work remains to be done, many texts remain to be transliterated, translated, and analyzed. Much more could be added, yet it is to be hoped that this overview is just a starting point for those interested in ancient Mesopotamian religion.

## FURTHER READING

Bottéro (2001) is a good introduction, while Foster (2005) and Black (2004) have selections of texts. Hruša (2015) has an up-to-date bibliography, and Radner and Robson (2011) provide several valuable essays. Jacobsen (1976) and Oppenheim (1977) are still worth consulting.

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PART V

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**CULTURE**

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

# The Languages of the Ancient Near East

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*John Huehnergard*

## Introduction: Languages, Language Families, and Scripts

The Ancient Near East has the distinction of being the region in which the first writing, and thus the world's earliest written languages and records, appeared, with the emergence of Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs in the late fourth millennium BCE. Mesopotamian cuneiform was eventually used to write other languages as well, such as Akkadian, a Semitic language, and Hittite, an Indo-European language. And around the beginning of the second millennium BCE, speakers of another Semitic language, living in Egypt, distilled a few Egyptian signs into a short, easy-to-learn consonantal alphabet, from which most scripts in use around the world today are derived (apart from Chinese and its descendants).

Most languages belong to language families, whose members share similar vocabulary and grammatical structures because they descend from a common ancestor. Examples are the Semitic language family and the Indo-European language family, both of which are described below. Some languages, called isolates, are not part of a family, that is, they are not demonstrably related to any other known language; Sumerian, the first language considered here, is such an isolate.

## Sumerian

The world's first writing arose in the southern Mesopotamian city of Uruk, in the third millennium BCE. At first this comprised drawings of objects and signs for numerals, incised or pressed into moist clay tablets, presumably records of commodities and their amounts.

Eventually some of the signs were used not to indicate the object depicted, but rather for the sound of the name of the object; this is called the *rebus* principle, and it is the foundation of all true writing systems – a simple example would be the drawing of a bee and a leaf to write “belief” – since it allows any and all words, including words for abstract concepts and grammatical function words, to be expressed. Rebus writings such as “bee-leaf” are language-specific, since they rely on homonyms or near-homonyms to work. When instances of the rebus principle appear in the early Mesopotamian pictograms, they show that the language being represented is Sumerian (for example, the drawing of an arrow, pronounced *ti*, to write the verb “live,” also pronounced *ti*). The drawings of objects evolved over time, especially as they began to be impressed into the clay with the end of a reed stylus, which created lines ending in a triangular head; cuneiform means “wedge-shaped.”

Sumerian writing remained a mixture of signs that represented objects and the words for those objects, called *logograms* (“word-signs”), and signs that represented sounds, called phonograms (“sound-signs”). Many signs had both functions; for example, one sign represented both the word *en* ‘lord’ and the sound-sequence *e+n*. The phonograms represented syllables, either a simple vowel (such as *a* or *i*), a vowel plus a consonant (such as *en* or *ub*), a consonant plus a vowel (such as *di* or *la*), or a consonant plus a vowel plus a consonant (such as *nam* or *gur*). Sumerian writing is therefore said to be a logo-syllabic system. A sample Sumerian sentence appears at the end of this chapter.

Sumerian, as noted above, is a language isolate, unrelated to any other known language (although there have been many attempts to connect it with other languages). It is an agglutinating language; that is, speech elements are attached as units, with some modification, to form words and phrases, as in the writing *é lugal-a-na-ka* for the sequence /é lugal.an(i).ak.a/, literally “house king.his.of.in,” that is, “in the house of his king.”

The tens of thousands of Sumerian texts comprise many genres: administrative and legal texts, law codes, letters, royal inscriptions, and literary texts such as hymns, prayers, liturgies, and epics.

It is not certain when Sumerian ceased to be a spoken language; the question is debated by scholars, with opinions ranging from the late third to the mid-second millennium. But Sumerian continued to be learned, and written, as a literary language by Akkadian scribes until the death of cuneiform writing itself in the first century CE.

## Egyptian

Egyptian is a member of the Afro-Asiatic language group, which also includes the Semitic languages (see below), as well as Berber and Cushitic languages. Egyptian features with analogs in Semitic languages include certain pronouns such as *jnk* “I” (similar to Hebrew *ʔānōki*) and the suffix *-k* “your” (like Hebrew *-kā*); feminine nouns marked with the ending *-t*; a construction involving verbal adjectives, as in *rdj-kw* “I was given” (compare Akkadian *nadnā-ku* “I was given”); and causative verbs marked with a prefixed *s*.

Egyptian writing appeared soon after the earliest writing in Mesopotamia. The best-known variety of Egyptian writing, of course, is *hieroglyphs*. The hieroglyphic signs may represent the objects depicted, such as a crocodile for *msh* “crocodile,” although some of the signs are more abstract, such as an open rectangle for *pr* “house.” Some signs came to

be used to indicate the pronunciation of the object depicted, that is, as phonetic signs (the rebus principle, again); whereas Sumerian phonetic signs represent syllables, Egyptian phonetic signs represent consonants, either a single consonant, such as *m* or *f*, or a sequence of two consonants, such as *ms* or *gm*; or even sequences of three consonants, such as *nfr* or *stp*. Vowels are thus not normally indicated. Some signs were used to represent both words and phonetic values; the “house” sign, for example, was also used for the consonant sequence *pr* in other words, such as *prt* “seed.” A number of signs were also used as determinatives (classifiers), written at the end of a word to indicate the semantic class to which the word belonged; for example, verbs of motion were often written with a sign depicting “walking legs” at the end. See the sample Egyptian sentence at the end of this chapter.

Almost as soon as hieroglyphic writing appeared, a cursive variety, called *hieratic*, arose alongside it. Hieratic was written with ink on papyrus, and was more common than hieroglyphic, which was mostly reserved for more permanent, monumental inscriptions on stone and wood. An even more cursive variety of writing, called *demotic*, began to be used in the seventh century BCE.

Egyptian had the longest recorded history of any language. Several chronological phases of the language are distinguished: Old Egyptian, to about 2100 BCE; Middle Egyptian, spoken to about the sixteenth century, but used as the standard written language until the end of Egyptian history; Late Egyptian, until about 600 BCE; Demotic, from the seventh century BCE until the fifth century CE; and Coptic, written from the first century CE until the eleventh (though spoken for several centuries after that). The last stage, Coptic, was written not in a script derived from the hieroglyphs but in the Greek alphabet, with several additional letters derived from the demotic script. The latest dated text in hieroglyphic was written in 394 CE.

There are a vast number of Egyptian texts of many types, such as tomb inscriptions, including autobiographies; royal inscriptions; letters and administrative documents; mathematical and medical texts; religious and theological texts; hymns; instructions and other wisdom texts; and some of the world’s oldest stories.

## Semitic Languages

The Semitic language family, like Egyptian, is part of the Afro-Asiatic language group. The 45-century recorded history of Semitic, from the earliest Akkadian texts in the mid-third millennium BCE up to the Semitic languages of the present day (such as Arabic, Amharic, and Hebrew), is the longest of any language family. And for most of the history of the Ancient Near East, the Semitic languages constituted the most widespread language family.

The earliest Semitic language attested is Akkadian. Speakers of Akkadian borrowed the cuneiform writing invented for Sumerian and adapted it to their own language; logograms continued to be used, but much of Akkadian is written with the syllabic phonograms that are also used, though to a lesser extent, in Sumerian writing. Modern-day Assyriologists transliterate logograms with their Sumerian pronunciations; an Akkadian sentence such as *šarrum ana bītim īrub* “the king entered into the house” (literally, “king to palace entered”) could be written LUGAL *a-na É i-ru-ub*, where LUGAL and É are the Sumerian

words for “king” and “house.” Akkadian texts were written from the mid-third millennium BCE until the first century CE. Over the course of those 25 centuries, the language naturally underwent many changes. Assyriologists refer to third-millennium texts as Old Akkadian; thereafter, there are two major dialects, Assyrian in northern Mesopotamia and Babylonian in the south, and the following broad chronological labels are applied:

Old Assyrian	2000–1500	Old Babylonian
Middle Assyrian	1500–1000	Middle Babylonian
Neo-Assyrian	1000–600	Neo-Babylonian
	600–100 CE	Late Babylonian

Old Babylonian, the dialect of Hammurapi and of his famous laws, came to be regarded as the classical form of Akkadian. A later literary dialect in which scribes attempted to reproduce Old Babylonian, called Standard Babylonian, is the form of Akkadian in which important texts such as *Enūma elish* and the standard version of Gilgamesh are written. There are scores of thousands of Akkadian texts, in an impressive diversity of genres: myths and epics, hymns, prayers, encyclopedic lists of words and grammatical texts, mathematical, medical, and astronomical texts, historical records, lists of omens, and much more.

Another ancient Semitic language written in cuneiform was Eblaite, which is attested in some 4000 tablets found in the city of Ebla, about 60 km south of Aleppo in Syria, all dating to the twenty-fourth century BCE. Eblaite is closely related to Akkadian, and considered by some scholars to be a dialect of Akkadian rather than a separate language (Catagnoti 2012).

Akkadian and Eblaite, which are characterized by a distinctive verbal system, constitute East Semitic, one of the two main branches of the Semitic language family. The other branch, West Semitic, comprises all other Semitic languages. The earliest examples of West Semitic that have been identified are several lines that record anti-snake spells in the Egyptian Pyramid Texts of the mid-third millennium BCE (Steiner 2011). Another early form of West Semitic is found in several thousand personal names (plus a few dozen loan-words) in cuneiform texts (and some Egyptian texts) from the end of the third millennium until the mid-second millennium; these names, which are clearly composed of Semitic words (and god names), but just as clearly not Akkadian, are referred to as Amorite (Streck 2000). An example of such a name is that of Hammurapi himself, whose name, really *sammu-rāpi?*, means “the (divine) kinsman is one who heals” in West Semitic.

Apart from Amorite and those anti-snake spells, West Semitic languages are written in an alphabet. As noted above in the introduction, the alphabet was invented in Egypt, early in the second millennium BCE. Speakers of a West Semitic language used 27 Egyptian signs (some hieroglyphic, some hieratic) to represent each of the individual consonants of their language (Hamilton 2006). The principle behind the invention – called the acrophonic principle – was simple, but ingenious: each consonant was indicated with one Egyptian sign, a sign depicting an object whose name in the West Semitic language began with that consonant; for example, the Egyptian “house” sign was used to write the consonant *b*, because the West Semitic word for “house,” \**bayt-*, began with that consonant; similarly, for the consonant *r*, the sign for “head” was used, because the West Semitic word for

“head” was *\*raʔs-*. The consonants of every word in that West Semitic language could thus be written with just those 27 signs. The pictographic origin of the letters remained evident in examples of alphabetic writing through much of the second millennium BCE (from southern Egypt, from the Sinai peninsula, and from the Levant), but by 1000 BCE or so, the letter shapes had become quite abstract. Those early alphabetic inscriptions are all quite short, usually brief invocations of a god, or dedications, or, often, simple graffiti.

The earliest West Semitic language in which texts of any length are written is Ugaritic, the indigenous language of the ancient city of Ugarit near the coast of the northeast corner of the Mediterranean. Ugaritic texts, which date to the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BCE, are written in an alphabet, but the 30 letters of the Ugaritic alphabet – and Ugaritic texts – are written on clay tablets in a unique type of cuneiform. There are over 1500 Ugaritic texts, over half of which are administrative documents that record tax lists, deliveries, loans, and the like. The most famous Ugaritic texts are some 50 mythological and epic stories about gods and legendary kings, the poetic style of which is very similar to the poetry of the Hebrew Bible. Other texts are letters to and from prominent citizens of Ugarit, and copies of rituals and other cultic activities.

The Canaanite languages comprise a closely related sub-branch of West Semitic. The best attested Canaanite language is Hebrew, known especially from the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament). The earliest parts of the Bible, such as the poetry of Judges chapter 5 and Exodus chapter 15, reflect a rather archaic form of Hebrew, and may date to the twelfth century. Other parts of the Bible were composed over the following thousand years, and so Biblical Hebrew reflects a chronological span during which the language naturally underwent changes. Hebrew inscriptions dating to roughly the same timespan exhibit grammar that is essentially the same as the contemporary Hebrew of the Bible (Dobbs-Allsopp 2005). (A sentence from a Hebrew inscription appears at the end of this chapter.) Later Hebrew texts, such as the Mishnah and other Jewish writings from around the turn of the era, reflect a slightly different form of Hebrew. In the early centuries CE, Hebrew became extinct as a native language, although it always continued to be written. It was revived in the nineteenth century, and modern Israeli Hebrew is now the native language for several million people.

Hebrew scribes borrowed their 22-letter alphabet from writers of another well-attested form of Canaanite, the Phoenician language of coastal city-states such as Beirut, Byblos, Sidon, and Tyre, which is recorded in inscriptions from about 1000 BCE. The form of Phoenician known from colony cities, especially in North Africa, such as Carthage, is referred to as Punic. The name Carthage itself derives from the Phoenician–Punic phrase *qart ḥadašt* “new town.” Punic texts written after the destruction of Carthage by Rome in 146 BCE are referred to as Neo-Punic. Neo-Punic texts, including some Latin–Punic bilinguals, are found until the fifth century CE.

Other Canaanite dialects, likewise written in descendants of the Phoenician alphabet, include Moabite, which is known from one long inscription of the Moabite king Mesha (mid-ninth century BCE) and a few small fragments. Ammonite and Edomite are known from a small number of inscriptions dating from the ninth to the sixth centuries BCE. The earliest vestiges of Canaanite are found in cuneiform letters sent by rulers of Syro-Palestinian city states to their overlord, the king of Egypt, in the early fourteenth century

(called the Amarna letters, after the site in Egypt where they were found); although these texts are ostensibly written in Akkadian, they exhibit a verbal system that is not Akkadian at all, but is in fact very close to that of Ugaritic and early Hebrew (Rainey 1996).

Aramaic inscriptions, again written in the 22-letter alphabet borrowed from the Phoenicians, begin to appear in the mid-ninth century BCE. Most of these Old Aramaic texts, as they are called, are commemorative or dedicatory royal inscriptions, each exhibiting distinctive local dialect features. With the advent of the Persian Empire in 539 BCE, Aramaic became one of the official languages of the state administration, and a large number of texts on papyrus in this Official (or Imperial) Aramaic have been preserved, especially from Egypt; the Aramaic in which part of the biblical book of Ezra was written is also an example of this type of Aramaic. After the fall of the Persian Empire to Alexander in 330 BCE, Aramaic again presents distinct dialects, such as the inscriptional Palmyrene (in the city of Palmyra) and Nabataean; but a standard literary variety, based on Official Aramaic, is also used, for example, in the biblical book of Daniel, in Targum Onqelos and Targum Jonathan (translations, respectively, of the Torah and the Prophets of the Hebrew Bible), and in the Aramaic texts among the Dead Sea Scrolls. From about the third century CE, a more marked distinction between western and eastern Aramaic dialects is evident. Western Aramaic texts include the Jerusalem Talmud and a corpus of Christian Palestinian texts. Eastern Aramaic includes the dialect of the Babylonian Talmud; Syriac, the language of a vast Christian literature; and Mandaic, written by ancient and modern Mandaeans. Aramaic continues to be spoken today by some 100 000 people, formerly in Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, but now scattered throughout the world.

Texts in the ancient South Arabian languages begin to appear early in the first millennium BCE. Most have been found in present-day Yemen and southern and western Saudi Arabia, although a few have been found as far away as Egypt and Greece. The four main languages are Sabaic, Minaic, Qatabanic, and Hadramitic; of these, Sabaic, the language of the biblical land of Sheba, is by far the best attested, with texts continuing up to the sixth century CE. These languages are written in an alphabet of 29 letters, also descended ultimately from the pictographic alphabet described above, but along a different line of development from the 22-letter Phoenician alphabet. The several thousand monumental texts in stone (and sometimes in metal), in a beautiful script, include dedicatory and building inscriptions, commemorative inscriptions (some of them very long, describing military expeditions), oracles and atonement texts (Stein 2012–13). (A sample sentence from a Sabaic text on stone is given at the end of this chapter.) A cursive form of the alphabet, only recently deciphered, was used to write texts on palm-leaf stalks; these are letters and legal and administrative documents, several hundred of which have been published in recent years.

Ancient North Arabian refers to inscriptions in a continuum of languages that are related (but not ancestral) to classical Arabic. The texts are written in varieties or derivatives of the ancient South Arabian alphabet. The most numerous of these, by far, are tens of thousands of Safaitic rock inscriptions in the desert of southern Syria and northern Jordan and neighboring parts of Saudi Arabia, conventionally dated from the first century BCE to the fourth century CE, but possibly beginning several centuries earlier. Most of these short texts are simple genealogies, but a good number also include brief narratives of daily activities, rituals, and mourning (Al-Jallad 2015). The earliest inscriptions that

may be considered linguistic forerunners of classical Arabic are from the sixth century CE; Arabic writing proper is derived from the cursive Nabataean Aramaic script.

Semitic languages reached the region of present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea, probably from the Arabian peninsula, some time during the first millennium BCE. Texts in Classical Ethiopic, also called Ge'ez, first appear in the fourth century CE, in fairly long inscriptions of king Ezana of Axum. The Bible was translated into Ge'ez not long after, and Ge'ez also became the language of a very large Christian literature. Modern Semitic languages in the region include Tigrinya, the national language of Eritrea, and Amharic in Ethiopia.

## Indo-European Languages

The Indo-European family, which includes English, is so named because its member languages stretch from India to Europe. The oldest recorded branch of Indo-European is Anatolian, speakers of which probably entered Anatolia (present-day Turkey) in the third millennium BCE. The most prominent member is Hittite, attested from the mid-seventeenth to the early twelfth centuries BCE on some 10 000 clay tablets (in 30 000 fragments) written in Mesopotamian cuneiform, most of which have been found in excavations at the Hittite capital Hattusa (modern Boghazkale, formerly Boghazköy), although tablets have also been discovered at other Anatolian sites. Among the many types of texts are historiography, laws, treaties with vassals and with other major powers, myths, rituals, prayers, hymns, and letters.

Two other Anatolian languages are attested in the second millennium. Palaic, probably spoken in northwestern Anatolia, is known only from about a dozen ritual texts in Mesopotamian cuneiform, all fragmentary, from the same span of time as Hittite. Luwian (or Luvian) is also attested in a few cuneiform texts from the same period, likewise mostly rituals, but there are many more Luwian texts, mostly on stone, in an indigenous hieroglyphic writing system (which is also logo-syllabic in nature, like Mesopotamian cuneiform). Hieroglyphic Luwian inscriptions first appear in the fifteenth century; but the majority, narrative texts commissioned by local rulers in Syria as well as Anatolia, date to the first millennium (until the eighth century BCE).

In addition to hieroglyphic Luwian, several other Anatolian Indo-European languages are known from the first millennium BCE. These include Lycian, Lydian, and Carian, which are written not in syllabic cuneiform or hieroglyphic scripts, but rather in alphabets derived from the Greek alphabet (sometimes with significant additions and other changes), in inscriptions dating to the eighth through third centuries BCE. Lycian, spoken in southwestern coastal Anatolia, is known from over 150 inscriptions on stone, mostly short epitaphs, although there are also two longer texts, one of which is a trilingual Lycian–Greek–Aramaic inscription. There are about 100 inscriptions in Lydian, the majority from the region of Sardis in western Anatolia; these inscriptions are also mostly epitaphs, although a few decrees are also attested. Carian was spoken in an area between Lycia and Lydia; a few inscriptions, including an important Carian–Greek bilingual, have been found in that area, but a larger number of Carian texts are brief tomb inscriptions left by Carians in Egypt.

Phrygian, the language of the first-millennium BCE kingdom of Phrygia in central and western Anatolia, seems to be a separate branch of the Indo-European family. Several

hundred Old Phrygian texts, in an indigenous alphabet derived from early Greek, date from the eighth to the fifth centuries, mostly from the capital city, Gordion, one of whose kings was the famous Midas; the contents are difficult to determine because the language is not well understood. There is a chronological gap until the appearance of New Phrygian texts, over 100 in number, in the first and second centuries CE; these are mostly funerary, written in the Greek alphabet (and about half are Greek–Phrygian bilinguals).

Indo-Iranian is a large branch of the Indo-European family that includes languages such as ancient Sanskrit and modern Hindi and Persian. A few Indo-Iranian words and god names appear in Hittite and Hurrian texts from the mid-second millennium BCE. Gods such as Indra and Varuna appear as witnesses in treaty texts (and also form parts of some personal names), while other words are found in a text concerning horse training. The earliest actual Indo-Iranian texts attested, however, are in Old Persian, one of the official languages of the Persian Empire, from the sixth to fourth centuries BCE. A new script was created to write Old Persian, based on Mesopotamian cuneiform but greatly modified (it is partly syllabic and partly alphabetic). Most of the texts are royal inscriptions of the Achaemenid rulers (especially Darius I and Xerxes I, 522–465). Old Persian is quite closely related to Avestan, the language of the Zoroastrian texts of the Avesta. The language of the Medes, Median, is also an ancient form of Iranian; it is preserved for the most part only in loanwords in Old Persian.

The earliest Greek attested is Mycenaean, the language of the thousands of clay tablets written in Linear B, a logo-syllabic script derived from the earlier Linear A script (which is discussed in the section below on undeciphered languages and scripts). The inscriptions, which date from the fifteenth to the twelfth centuries BCE, are inventories (of personnel, rations, animals, and so on); most have been found at royal sites such as Knossos on Crete and Mycenae, Pylos, and Thebes in mainland Greece. Greek inscriptions written in the Greek alphabet, which was borrowed from the Phoenicians, begin to appear from the eighth century.

## Hurrian and Urartian

The Hurrian and Urartian languages are related to each other, but not to any other known languages. (A suggested connection to Northeast Caucasian languages has not found wide acceptance.) Because linguistic comparison with other languages is therefore not possible, both languages are incompletely understood, although progress on both continues to be made with additional texts finds and ongoing scholarship. Like Sumerian, Hurrian and Urartian are ergative languages; that is, in both nouns and verbs, the subject of an intransitive verb and the object of a transitive verb are marked in the same way, while the subject of a transitive verb, called the agent, receives a different marker (as if, in English, we said “by-her found I” instead of “she found me”). Most Hurrian texts are written in Mesopotamian syllabic cuneiform; a few Hurrian texts are known from the late third millennium, and a few more from the first half of the second millennium, but the vast majority are from the later second millennium, especially from the Hittite capital, Hattusa, but also from several other Late Bronze Age sites. Hurrian was spoken across

much of northern Mesopotamia and Syria, and in addition to texts written in the language, a large number of individuals bearing Hurrian names also appear in Akkadian texts from the same general area throughout the second millennium. Many Hurrian texts are rituals, but there are also literary works, songs, and a nearly-500-line Hurrian letter, one of the Amarna letters, sent by the Mittanian king Tushratta to the Egyptian king Amenophis III in about 1355 BCE. There are also a few Hurrian texts found at the city of Ugarit that are written in the local Ugaritic cuneiform alphabet (see above, under Semitic Languages).

Urartian, also written in Mesopotamian cuneiform, is attested from the ninth to the late seventh centuries BCE, mostly in stone inscriptions from the Iron Age kingdom of Urartu near Lake Van (although there are also a few clay tablets in Urartian). Most of the texts are commemorative royal inscriptions, referring to construction works and military campaigns. And although some 500 inscriptions are known, they are quite formulaic and repetitive, and so Urartian is less well understood than Hurrian. There are also a few brief inscriptions in a hieroglyphic script (or scripts), but these have not been deciphered.

## Other Languages

Hattic, also called Hattian, was a language of inhabitants of Anatolia before the arrival of speakers of Indo-European languages such as Hittite and Luwian. Hattic speakers wrote no texts; rather, the language is known only from some 550 fragmentary cuneiform texts, religious or cultic in nature, that have been found among the much larger corpus of Hittite texts in ancient Hattusa. Since Hattic is not clearly related to any other language, and since there are so few texts, it is not well understood, although some progress has been made with the help of 20 bilingual Hattic–Hittite texts (Goedegebuure 2010, 2013).

Elamite was the indigenous language of ancient Elam, in southwestern Iran. It too has no known linguistic relatives. Elamite texts were written in Mesopotamian cuneiform. A few inscriptions in Old Elamite date from the late third to the early second millennia; they include royal inscriptions and a treaty with a king of the Old Akkadian dynasty. After a gap of several centuries, Middle Elamite texts, dating to the last centuries of the second millennium, when Elam was a major power, are well attested; many of these are royal inscriptions, including historical texts and an Elamite–Akkadian bilingual, but there are also administrative texts. After another gap in attestation, Neo-Elamite inscriptions appear; fewer in number, these also include royal inscriptions, administrative texts, and a few legal texts. Achaemenid Elamite was one of the official languages of the Persian Empire. In official monumental inscriptions, it is always accompanied by a similar text in Old Persian. The famous inscription of Darius I at Behistun (Bisitun) was recorded in Elamite, Old Persian, and Akkadian. There are also several thousand administrative inscriptions from this period, most from archives in Persepolis, as well as a few letters. Elamite texts are not attested after the end of the Old Persian Empire in the late fourth century. (For the early inscriptions called “Proto-Elamite,” see the following section, Undeciphered Languages and Scripts.)

Kassite was the language of the Kassite people of the central Zagros mountains, some of whom created a dynasty that ruled Babylonia from the sixteenth to the twelfth centuries

BCE. No texts written in Kassite are attested; the language is known only from a cuneiform vocabulary text that lists 32 Kassite nouns with their Akkadian translations, a few Akkadian texts about horse breeding that contain some Kassite words, and a small number of Kassite loanwords in Akkadian.

## Undeciphered Languages and Scripts

The name “Proto-Elamite” is given to some 1600 inscriptions on clay tablets, most from the city of Susa, that date to the late fourth and early third millennia, that is, just after the invention of writing in southern Mesopotamia. The inscriptions, in a script similar to but not the same as early Mesopotamian writing, are accounting texts, and while much of the content has been worked out, the language encoded by the writing has not been determined (Englund 2004; Dahl 2013).

It was noted above that Linear B, the script used to write Mycenaean Greek, is in all likelihood derived from an earlier Cretan script called Linear A, with which it shares a large percentage of signs, both phonetic and logographic. Thus, Linear A can to some extent be “read,” and although there are nearly 1500 texts (from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-fifteenth centuries), most are quite short, and so the language recorded in the texts, which was presumably a language of the Minoans, is so far unidentified; most of the inscriptions appear to be accounting texts, plus a few votive texts (Palaima and Bibee 2013). There are also some 360 very brief inscriptions, on stone seals, in a Cretan hieroglyphic script, contemporary with or slightly earlier than Linear A, and from which Linear A writing probably derives. Also from Crete is the famous Phaistos Disk, a round clay tablet some 16 cm in diameter found in an archaeological context of the eighteenth century BCE; on both sides are pictographic signs that were impressed by means of 45 individual stamps (making the disk the world’s earliest example of movable type). Although many “decipherments” have been announced, the uniqueness of the document and the fact that its signs are not obviously related to any other writing mean that no proposed decipherment can be tested or proved.

Cypro-Minoan refers to several related syllabic scripts found on inscriptions from Cyprus (and elsewhere, including Ugarit) and dating to the second half of the second millennium BCE. These scripts seem to be related to the Cretan linear scripts described in the preceding paragraph, and to a later syllabic script used on Crete in the first millennium BCE to write a dialect of Greek. Thus, some of the signs can be read, but the language of the Cypro-Minoan texts remains undeciphered (Duhoux 2013).

At the site of Byblos in Lebanon were found a small number of inscriptions in a hieroglyphic script, dating to some time in the Bronze Age, though more precise dating has proved difficult. The number of hieroglyphic signs, between 65 and 100 (depending on whether some forms are variants of others), suggests a syllabic writing system. Some of the inscriptions are on bronze, others on stone; some are quite short, only three lines, while others are longer, up to 41 lines. The few proposed decipherments, which assume that the language represented is Semitic, cannot be confirmed without additional material available.

## SAMPLES OF SCRIPTS AND TEXTS

Line 1: original script

#### Line 2: sign-by-sign transliteration

### Line 3: morphological analysis

#### Line 4: word-by-word gloss

#### Line 5: translation

Sumerian (a dedicatory inscription, 21st century BCE; after Volk 2012: 1)

1. \* 𒀭 𒊩𒌆 𒄑 𒋻 𒀭 𒊩 𒂗 𒄑 𒋻 𒀭 𒊩 𒂗 𒄑 𒋻 𒀭 𒊩 𒂗 𒄑 𒋻 𒀭 𒊩 𒂗 𒄑 𒋻
  2. <sup>d</sup>inanna nin- a-ni ur-<sup>d</sup>namma nita kala-ga lugal uri<sub>5</sub>- ma-ke<sub>4</sub> é- a-ni mu-na-dù
  3. <sup>god</sup>Inanna nin.an.(r) Ur.<sup>god</sup>Namma nita kalaga lugal Urim.ak.e é.ani mu.na.(n).dù
  4. Inanna lady.his.(for) Ur-Namma man strong king Ur.of.agent house.his here.for-him.(he).build
  5. Ur-Namma, the strong man, the king of Ur, built her temple for his lady Inanna.

Middle Egyptian (from the story of the Shipwrecked Sailor, line 61; Allen 2015: 22)

1.          

2. gm m n j   h f 3 w snake p w j w f   m come j t move

3. gm<sup>m</sup>.n.j   h f 3 w<sup>snake</sup> pw jw.f   m jjt<sup>move</sup>

4. found.past.I   snake   it   is.it   in coming

5. I found it was a snake that was coming.

Hebrew (beginning of an inscription from Lachish, early 6th century BCE; after Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 306; pronunciation in line 3 as in Biblical Hebrew)

1. read from right to left: *ḡl w̄ xōš w̄ t̄šāq x̄ q̄šāq t̄šāq ošw̄t̄ w̄t̄šāq t̄šāq l̄k*
  2. read from right to left: *mlš t̄šmš ynd? t? hwhy ſmšy šw? ynd? l?*
  3. *?el ?ădōn.î Yă?oš y.a.šma?* Yahweh ?et *?ădōn.î ſəmūšat šälōm*
  4. to lord.my Ya'osh he.cause.hear Yahweh direct.object lord.my report.of peace
  5. To my lord Ya'osh: May Yahweh cause my lord to hear news of peace.

Ancient South Arabian (beginning of a Sabaic wall inscription, mid-first millennium BCE; after Stein 2012–13: 2.35; the pronunciation in line 3 is an educated guess)

1. read from right to left: የኩ እን ሽያዎች ይ ቤት የዚህ የኩ እን ሽያዎች
  2. read from right to left: የተ ነበ በሩክኩ ደቻ እኩ ፍኩው የሸቱ የኩ እን ሽያዎች
  3. ዘላ-ሩክ ዝኩ ስፋ የአያ ወ-ባኩያ ቀለ ተቻ(ሸ) የተ ነበ በሩክኩ ዝኩ ስፋ
  4. ዘላ-ሩክ የአያ ወ-ባኩያ ቀለ ተቻ(ሸ) የተ ነበ በሩክኩ ዝኩ ስፋ
  5. ዘላ-ሩክ የአያ ወ-ባኩያ ቀለ ተቻ(ሸ) የተ ነበ በሩክኩ ዝኩ ስፋ

## FURTHER READING

Reliable overviews of most the languages treated here can be found in Woodard (2004), Kogan et al. (2010), Gzella (2012), and Hasselbach (2020). Recent introductions to the Sumerian and Egyptian languages are Foxvog (2016) and Allen (2014), respectively. Surveys of the Semitic language family include Huehnergard (1995, 2004, 2011), Rubin (2010), Weninger et al. (2011), and Huehnergard and Pat-El (2019). Among the many surveys of the Indo-European language family, the following recent treatments can be especially recommended: Ramat and Ramat (1998), Fortson (2009), and Beekes (2011). A complete and up-to-date treatment of Hurrian is not available in English, but see Campbell (2015), and, for an introduction in German, Wegner (2007). For undeciphered scripts, see Daniels and Bright (1996) and Robinson (2009).

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# Mesopotamian Art

*Marian H. Feldman*

An article on Ancient Near Eastern art might attempt to describe the vast wealth of artistic production created over many millennia, but such a task proves impossibly large. Instead, this chapter explores several Mesopotamian works of art through a variety of perspectives and interpretations. It concentrates exclusively on Mesopotamia and even then eschews comprehensiveness in order to penetrate more deeply into questions raised by the art objects.

One can divide the modern discipline of the study of Mesopotamian art into three major periods. The first, which followed the archaeological discoveries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was characterized by basic documentation and sometimes rather speculative conclusions. Starting in the 1930s and culminating in the fifties, sixties, and seventies, a second phase consisted of the publication of lavishly illustrated surveys that sought to chart the full measure of artistic (usually understood as stylistic) development from prehistory to the coming of Alexander the Great. A period of less homogeneous studies emerged in the 1980s, marking the third phase.

Although there are still relatively few art historians specializing in the Ancient Near East, the field has experienced a kind of renaissance during this last phase, especially within American colleges and universities, where scholars have been grappling with conceptual, socio-historical, and methodological questions that push the intellectual purview beyond cataloging and stylistic development. This recent work has broached a host of issues including, for example, aesthetics, the function of art as storytelling, relationships between text and image, sexuality, and the nature of representation. Not too surprisingly, the trajectory sketched here parallels that of the discipline of art history as a whole.

An issue that underlies and continues to vex discussions on Mesopotamian art is that of artistic legitimacy. Arguing for a relevance to Western art history often entails viewing Near Eastern art within the value hierarchies of Western art, while conversely, support for its particularity tends to cast the Near East as “other,” marginalizing it within the discipline.

The first view tends to see Mesopotamian art as the foundation for Classical Greece. This characterization appears early on, for example in Perrot and Chipiez's two-volume study, *A History of Art in Chaldaea and Assyria* from 1884. They were limited to the first millennium BCE since principally Neo-Assyrian archaeological discoveries in northern Iraq were available. With reference to the depiction of the human body, they wrote: "[Mesopotamia] created many types that were transmitted to the Mediterranean nations, and soon adopted by them. These types were perfected, but not invented, by the Greeks" (1884: 2, p. 80). On the other hand, Malraux wrote that Sumerian art was invisible for us, by which he meant it was unimaginable because it lay outside the visual apparatus of Western culture (Malraux 1961, p. xiii).

The Western versus non-Western tension is evident also in the dichotomy established early in Mesopotamian art scholarship between "conceptual" art and "naturalism" understood as a distinction between non-Greek and Greek arts (Perrot and Chipiez 1884: 2, p. 82). Working from the normative assumption that the imitation of nature motivates representation, this theory claims that the artists of Mesopotamia strove to depict "what they knew" rather than "what they saw." Such notions persist but are being contested by scholars such as Winter (1995) and Bahrani (2003), who seek to understand Mesopotamian conceptions of art on their own terms. Trends in contemporary art, such as modernism in the early and mid-twentieth century that questioned the basis of art in illusion through movements such as abstraction, have provided an impetus for this reappraisal. For example, both Malraux (1961, p. xlvi) and Mazenod (1980) consider the modern viewer freed from the constraints of the Classical canon and thus primed fully to appreciate Mesopotamian art.

Concepts of beauty and realism that formerly flowed through much art historical scholarship have faced challenges in the discipline over the past quarter of a century, allowing art historians of the Ancient Near East to position themselves as an independent field that both contributes to and benefits from discussions in the larger discipline of art history. Nevertheless, questions of what constitutes art as distinct from artifact and its relationship to aesthetics and illusionism continue to affect scholarship. For example, Collon in her recent art survey begins with the disclaimer: "The objects ... are not always what we now understand as art. But art is so often a question of personal taste, and what is beautiful to one person or within one culture may not be so to another person or in another context" (Collon 1995, p. 15).

The supposed conflict between art, as the object of disinterested aesthetic contemplation, and artifact, as evidence for ancient history, surfaces in several textbooks. For example, the editor's note to the first edition of Frankfort's (1954) *Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* hails Frankfort's contributions to art appreciation: "[Frankfort's] greatest love was the work of art for its own sake, and he regarded it as his task – as indeed the present book fully proves – to present oriental art as art, and not as archaeological evidence." But Frankfort himself writes in the introduction: "[Near Eastern arts] remain enigmatic, unless we acquire some insight into the spiritual climate and the geographical and historical conditions in which they were created. In other words, it is the archaeologist who must build the scaffold from which we can view these ancient monuments as works of art" (1954, p. xxv).

Acknowledging the Euro-centric biases that even the word art carries – namely, the distinction between craft and fine art according to function or lack thereof – Winter has proposed a reconstruction of indigenous terminology and concepts. She suggests as a working definition of art "any work that is imaginatively conceptualized and that affords

visual and emotional satisfaction, for which manufacturing skill is required and to which some established standards have been applied" (Winter 1995, p. 2570). This flexible definition, specific to Mesopotamia rather than universal, has the merit of being derived from the surviving objects and texts rather than imposed from later classically influenced concepts of art.

In the early twentieth century the increasing archaeological finds spurred a desire to construct an unbroken narrative of the history of Mesopotamian art, understanding history as a sequence of causal events and thus art history as stylistic development leading seamlessly from one period to the next. Frankfort begins his seminal book, "Strictly speaking, a history of the art of the ancient Near East has never been written," referring to the new wealth of information at his disposal (1954, p. xxv). For many scholars, tracing an unbroken development of Mesopotamian art formed the primary objective, despite the generally acknowledged obstacles of unevenness of evidence and archaeological serendipity (Woolley 1935, p. 9; Parrot 1961b, pp. 3–4; Garbini 1966, p. 10; Strommenger and Hirmer 1964, p. 7; Moortgat 1969, p. vii; Mazenod 1980; Collon 1995, p. 40; Harper et al. 1995, p. 11). Moortgat bemoans the historical and artifactual gaps that make "the writing of a truthful history of the art of Ancient Mesopotamia" extremely difficult (1969, p. x). A motivating factor in tracing artistic development lies in the belief that artistic products reveal the true nature of a people. Parrot (1961a, p. xviii) writes, "Looking at the plumed horses [of the Neo-Assyrian period wall paintings from Til Barsip in northern Syria] galloping towards a lion pierced with arrows, we learn something of the mentality of these born fighters ...". More recently, this sentiment has been echoed with respect to carved Neo-Assyrian reliefs: "They... constitute one of the most impressive and eloquent witnesses of ancient Mesopotamian civilization, giving us an extraordinary glimpse into the minds and material culture of [the Assyrians] ..." (Reade 1995, p. 39).

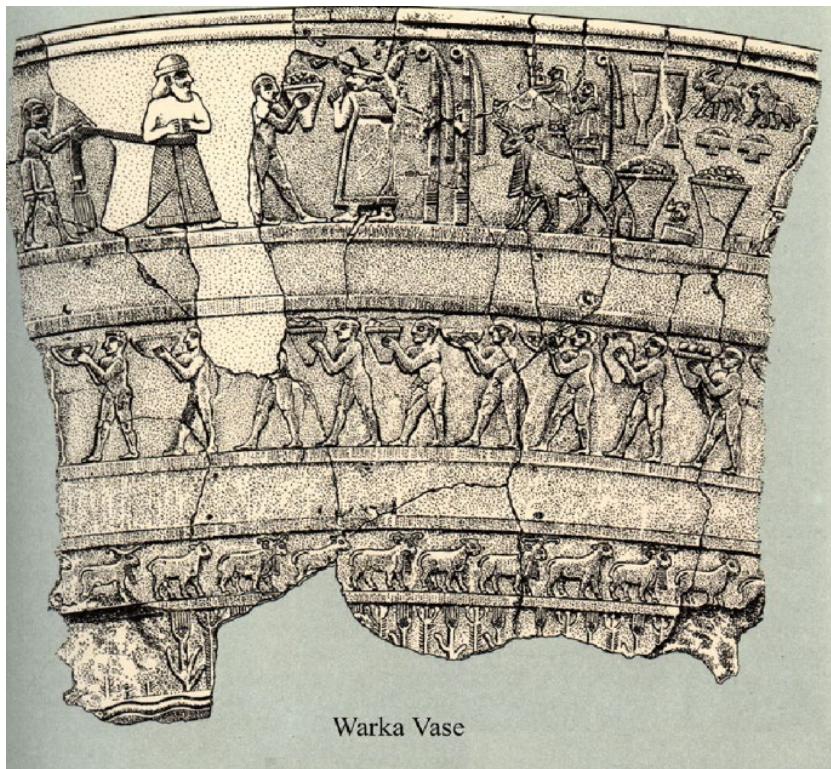
In recent years, a growing disbelief across disciplines in our ability to discern universal humanistic laws and to construct seamless narratives has prompted more particularized scholarship that focuses on single art works, time periods, or theoretical issues. These specialized studies analyze questions about art's context and relation to society, such as overlapping meanings, audiences, or socio-political impact. As one of many examples, Thomason (2005) explores the role of collecting luxury objects in the formation of Mesopotamian royal identity. Additionally, an interest in the complicated relationship between inscribed text and figural representation has borne intellectual fruit across a range of periods and artifacts (Winter 1989; Russell 1993; Suter 2000; Bahrani 2003; Slanski 2003).

## The Warka Vase

The choice of where to begin a narrative of ancient Mesopotamian art remains bound up in the contested definition of art itself, as well as in the question of whether to include prehistoric material. However, most scholars include in the canon the carved reliefs and sculptures of the proto-historic Late Uruk period (3500–3000 BCE). Foremost among these is the so-called Warka vase, a tall, cylindrically shaped stone vessel carved around its exterior in low relief, and not surprisingly, it appears in all standard treatments of Near Eastern art (see Figures 21.1 and 21.2). At first glance, the vase appears simple: a series of



**Figure 21.1** (a and b) The Warka Vase, two views. (c) The Warka Vase close up. Source: Vorderasiatisches Museum, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany / Olaf M.Tessmer / Art Resource, NY.



**Figure 21.2** The Warka Vase, line drawing. Source: Adapted from Jennifer Mei, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

registers, or areas divided by lines, rise from undulating water at the bottom, through paired crops and sheep, nude male offering bearers, to the topmost register depicting a female figure facing a mostly broken person who can be reconstructed as a male authority figure typically known in the scholarship as a “priest-king.” The vase was found in a hoard in Level III of the Eanna temple precinct at Uruk. That it was broken and repaired in antiquity, in addition to its style, has suggested to many scholars an earlier date in Uruk IV, which places it more or less contemporary with the first appearance of writing and cylinder seals (about 3300 BCE). A small fragment of an identical second vase preserving part of an attendant from the upper register was bought on the art market, a pairing that was echoed in the self-referential depiction of two such vases on the Warka vase itself.

Since its excavation, the Warka vase has assumed a preeminent place as exemplar of late fourth millennium cultural characteristics from the stylistic to the religious. Frankfort wrote, “By its subject and style it allows us to perceive the spiritual climate in which the art of this period came into being” (1954, p. 11). Most scholars have associated the imagery with rituals of the sacred marriage of the goddess Inanna, whose symbol of a curving reed bundle appears twice directly behind the female figure and in whose sacred precinct the vase was discovered (Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951, p. 151; Frankfort 1954,

p. 10; Parrot 1961b, pp. 71–72; Moortgat 1969, pp. 12–13; Amiet 1980, p. 70; Hansen 1998, pp. 46; Hansen 2003a, pp. 23–24; Bahrani 2002). The sacred marriage, understood as the event of the upper register, provides the agricultural abundance shown in the lower registers. From a slightly different but complementary point of view, the lower registers have been read as foundational for the event at the top: the water provides life for the crops and herds that in turn supply the offerings to be presented to the goddess.

The Warka vase provokes fundamental questions about narrative, the nature of representation, and the relationship between art and complex society. The compositional structure of the vase, its superimposed registers that encircle the cylindrical body, has been hailed as the earliest representational narrative. Groenewegen-Frankfort wrote, “The vase offered an ideal surface for the representation of a cyclic event and the liveliness of the figures is unimpaired by their rhythmic sequence in a broad strip which seems a self-contained spatial world” (1951, p. 152). Amiet characterized the depiction as an “unfold-ing procession” (1980, p. 70), and Parrot noted, “the reliefs can be read from top to bottom or vice versa ...” (1961b, p. 70). From a structuralist perspective, the registers order the natural, human, and divine world into a purportedly harmonious and hierarchical whole (Winter 1983). The production of the vase pre-dates known textual narrative by several hundred years, since the earliest written narrative is on the Stele of the Vultures from the reign of Eannatum in the twenty-fifth century BCE, but its conception at the same time as the explosion of early record-keeping at Uruk may be linked to an emerging desire to store information in a format that could be retrieved by third parties (Pittmann 1994, pp. 191–192).

Consideration of figurative narrative leads to issues about the nature of representation in Mesopotamia in general, particularly since it was during this period at the end of the fourth millennium that increasingly complex imagery was first produced. The connection with information storage is one possible motivation for this sudden appearance, but it does not fully explain the specific choice of Mesopotamian representational styles.

Discussion of the Warka vase contributes to this issue with the debate surrounding the identification of the female figure, which has occupied most scholarly discussions about the work. For the most part, the debate has revolved around whether she represents the goddess Inanna or her priestess, a question considered pressing because of what Groenewegen-Frankfort (1951, p. 151) described as the “almost weird concreteness” and “curious actuality” of the scene and the unfortunate ancient breakage of the figure’s headdress, the ancient Mesopotamian locus for divine identity from at least the mid-third millennium onward. It is not, in fact, certain whether the conventions for indicating divinity with horns, known from the third millennium, were already in use in the fourth millennium. Moortgat, however, offered a perceptive alternative that obviates the need to choose between one or the other possibility: “we may perhaps come nearest to the truth if we simply avoid this sharp distinction between Myth and Reality” (1969, p. 13). In a similar vein, Bahrani (2002) argues that the ambiguous nature of the representation contributes to a referential loop that ties the imagery to both the ritual enactment by a human priestess and a human king (that is, Moortgat’s reality) and the myth of the sacred marriage of gods. The discussions concerning the identity of the female figure recall a much more recent work of art, René Magritte’s *La Trahison des Images* (*The Treachery of Images*), the

earliest version of which dates to CE 1929. The oil painting consists only of an illusionistically rendered image of a pipe, under which, in elegant script, flows the phrase, “ceci n'est pas une pipe” (“this is not a pipe”). Magritte's painting warns us of the deceit of images, because while they may contain a certain concreteness or actuality, they are always somehow something other than the thing itself. The Warka vase figure, and for that matter all Mesopotamian figurative representation, may occupy a very different relationship with the real from what we are used to considering (Bahrani 2003).

## Cylinder Seals

No review of Mesopotamian art can ignore seals, nor should it overlook their relationship to writing and administration. At their most basic level, seals are markers of a self-conscious system of recording and preserving information that worked together with writing and other communication techniques (Winter 2001). During the Late Uruk period (3500–3000 BCE), a peculiarly Mesopotamian form of seal appeared: the cylinder seal, spool shaped and carved in reverse around the circumference of the seal's surface. When rolled across a malleable surface such as clay, it produced a continuous frieze of imagery (see Figure 21.3). The production and use of cylinder seals continued until the end of the first millennium when they were gradually replaced by stamp seals. From the perspective of a comprehensive narrative of art, seals offer the best material for charting development and changes over time and place, since they were produced in fairly large quantities during every major period of Mesopotamian history. Frankfort's treatment of cylinder seals established a chronology of stylistic development, which still stands today albeit with subsequent refinements (Frankfort 1939; Collon 1987). Porada, in a summary article at the end of her illustrious career, called cylinder seals “remarkably revealing of the people who made and used them ...” (1993: 563).

The unique characteristics of seals, however, make their fit within normative art historical frameworks somewhat uncomfortable. This includes the nature of their image-making



**Figure 21.3** Late Uruk seal impression. Source: Orderasiatisches Museum, Staatliche Museen, Berlin, Germany / Olaf M. Tessmer / Art Resource, NY.

capabilities. The seals themselves, even when made from valuable and probably culturally significant materials such as the blue stone lapis lazuli, served a primary function of creating an image on another surface. These created images could exist in multiples, confounding notions of singular works of art. In addition, ancient sealings on discarded pieces of clay are often broken, preserving only part of the imagery (Collon 1987, pp. 5–7). Their small scale, usually only centimeters in size, has prompted a variety of different justifications for considering these items as art, often referring to them as “miniature masterpieces.” A noted exhibition in Paris during the early 1970s hung huge photographic enlargements of modern cylinder seal impressions in a recreation of the European painting gallery (Collon 1987, p. 7; Winter 2000b, p. 52). Studies of seals have since branched into an array of different methodologies, the most common being a functional approach to sealing practices (Gibson and Biggs 1977; Hallo and Winter 2001).

Most scholars accept that the appearance of the quintessentially Mesopotamian cylinder seal and the invention of writing during the Late Uruk period were linked to their roles within an emerging complex administrative hierarchy associated with urban temples. What has been less explored are the ways in which this relationship shaped and affected the specific forms that each assumed (Pittmann 1994; Bahrani 2003, pp. 96–120). Pittmann has argued that both writing and seals represent “two facets of a larger system of representation” (1994, p. 189). She notes that the emphasis on legibility, standardization, and structure characterizes both seals and writing as means of information storage over time and space beyond the single moment of an event (Pittmann 1994, pp. 189–92). Bahrani (2003, pp. 99, 107) posited a related argument that archaic writing and visual arts followed similar representational structures, which exerted a reciprocal influence on one another. Both arguments stress the need to study the written and the visual realms in concert with one another, seeing both as equal partners in the presentation of abstract or intangible ideas.

## Statues

Ancient texts frequently refer to divine statues enshrined in their temples. While no cult statues have survived, numerous stone statues that apparently depict worshipers or dedicators of the statues have been recovered from temples in the Early Dynastic Period (2900–2350 BCE) throughout greater Mesopotamia. Some, such as the hoard from the Square Temple at Tell Asmar in the Diyala River region, were buried as a group within the shrine (see Figure 21.4). Others, for example at Mari and Assur, were found in the ruins of destroyed temples and lay smashed and scattered around the benches upon which they probably stood. The largest numbers were excavated at sites in the Diyala River region, Mari, and Nippur, though they have also been found at sites in far southern Mesopotamia, at Assur in the north, and at Tell Khuera in northeastern Syria. Thus, they present a pan-Mesopotamian phenomenon that exhibits a remarkable unity of conception and presumably also of religious belief and ritual practice. Yet within this coherent type, exceptional variation in terms of pose, dress, and gender, combined on occasion with inscriptions citing a named person and title, suggest that these figures represented individuals across a broad spectrum of society. What all share is an emphasis on a frontal view and a focus on



**Figure 21.4** Votive statues from Tell Asmar. Source: Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

the statues' eyes. Particularly in those of the so-called abstract style, the enormous shell, lapis lazuli, and bitumen inlaid eyes stare fixedly upwards with an "eerie sense of absolute and focused attention" (Winter 2000a, p. 22). The animated nature and active force of these statues, and indeed of all Mesopotamian representation, has been repeatedly remarked upon (Frankfort 1954, p. 23; Parrot 1961b, p. 106; Moortgat 1969, p. 34; Bahrani 2003; Hansen 2003a, p. 29). Those statues bearing inscriptions verbalize this animation, often exhorting the figure to act on behalf of the dedicatory.

Some of the earliest studies attempted to sort the large number of statues into a sequence showing stylistic development over time. Frankfort, who excavated the Diyala examples, proposed a two-fold sequence from Early Dynastic I/II (2900– 2600 BCE) to Early Dynastic III (2600–2350 BCE). According to his analysis the earlier style "devotes itself to geometric approximation with passionate intensity. It reduces to abstractions not only the main forms, but even the details like chins, cheeks, and hair" (Frankfort 1954, p. 26). The subsequent style "is not merely a modification, but ... the antithesis of the earlier one. Instead of sharply contrasting, clearly articulated masses, we see fluid transitions and infinitely modulated surfaces. Instead of abstract shapes, we see a detailed rendering of the physical peculiarities of the model" (Frankfort 1954, p. 28). This strictly linear chronological stylistic development has not received confirmation from other archaeological sites, and the problem remains underexplored.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Frankfort's basic stylistic scheme has remained prominent in discussions about these works.



**Figure 21.5** Votive statue of Ur-Nanshe, the singer, from Mari. Source: De Agostini Editore/Age Fotostock.

More recently, study of these statues has shifted to questions of gender and patronage, since they include an unusual diversity of human types, particularly women, who were often absent from ancient Mesopotamian art. Asher-Greve, noting that there were more than two gender categories in Mesopotamia – male, female, castrated, and sexless – reexamined one of the more enigmatic votive statues, that of the singer Ur-Nanshe from Mari (see Figure 21.5) (Asher-Greve 1997, p. 438). Seated cross-legged, the beardless figure with long hair wears a short tufted skirt; the bare chest features effeminate breasts. According to understood Mesopotamian gender markers, such as secondary sex features, dress, and name, Ur-Nanshe seems neither wholly female nor male, and a suggestion that the figure represented a castrated person may be supported by the figure's stated profession as singer. Taking the Early Dynastic votive statues together with other such works from later in the third millennium, Bahrani (2001, pp. 97–109) traces women and patronage in Mesopotamia, linking them to archives of elite women who appear to have had a degree of economic autonomy.

The 20 or so seated and standing statues of Gudea, ruler of Lagash around 2100 BCE, represent a related form of statuary from a slightly later period. Typically carved out of gleaming black diorite, they range in size from small to larger than life size (see Figure 21.6). Unlike the Early Dynastic votive statuary, by the end of the third millennium those who might be represented apparently became restricted almost entirely to the ruler. The Gudea statues, while always praised for their technical virtuosity in carving the hard stone, often

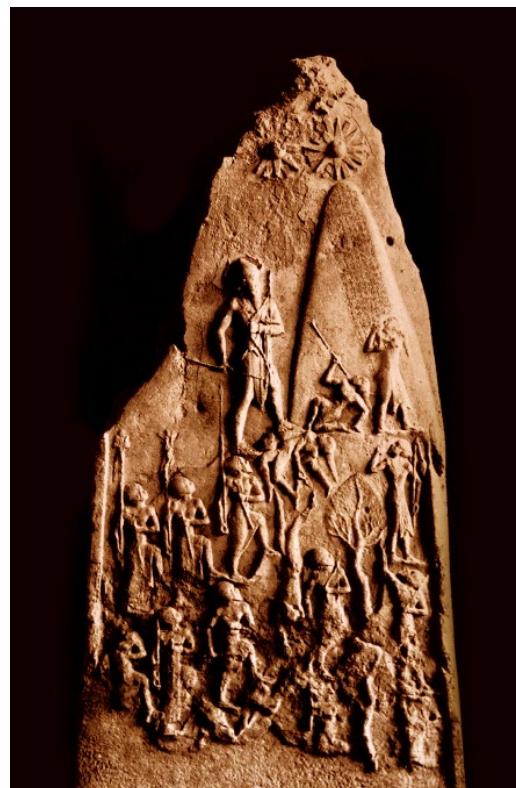


**Figure 21.6** Gudea of Lagash standing. Source: PRISMA ARCHIVO/Alamy Stock Photo.

suffer from the biases of Western art historical values, most acutely that of originality. Winter sums up such views that consider Gudea “the arch-icon of the oriental ruler: relatively narcissistic, else how could there be at least 20 remaining statues of him ...; not very imaginative (his statues ‘resemble one another so closely’ that a small sample ‘adequately represent(s) the whole group,’ said Frankfort); imbued with traditional values of permanence and piety (his ‘immutability’ manifest in the cylindrical block, witness to a ‘tendency which permeated all the Eastern world,’ according to Moortgat)” (Winter 1989, pp. 573–574). Winter’s approach differs as she examines “the combined verbal and visual message ... with a view toward an understanding of the affective intent of the whole within the specific Mesopotamian context” (Winter 1989, p. 573). She proposes that Sumerian terminology used to describe Gudea in the texts also underlies stylistic features, such as his muscular right arm, that remain consistent from statue to statue, and she argues that the necessity for these repeated forms lies in their essential role as descriptive of the ideal ruler (Winter 1989, 1998a, pp. 67–70). In addition, Winter situates the statuary within its ancient temple context, arguing for animated and interactive use of the statues in ritual activities (Winter 1992).

## The Stele of Naram-Sin

Probably the most celebrated of Mesopotamian monuments is the victory stele, or pillar, of Naram-Sin (2250 BCE) (see Figure 21.7). Unlike the Gudea statues, since its discovery in 1898 it has been hailed for its originality, unified composition, carving style, and details (de Morgan 1900, p. 144; Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951, p. 163; Frankfort 1954, p. 43; Parrot 1961b, p. 174; Moortgat 1969, p. 51; Amiet 1980, p. 104; Hansen 2003b, p. 195). The almost two-meter or six-and-a-half feet tall stele, which probably preserves only two-thirds of the original height, showcases the majestic figure of Naram-Sin – the relief carving so deeply undercut that he appears almost sculpted in the round – surmounting a scene of warfare set in the mountains of western Iran. Wearing a horned headdress indicating his deification, Naram-Sin dominates the upper part of the stele, while three astral symbols occupy the topmost space, relegating the divine presence to a symbolic level. Standing with one foot placed firmly on the crossed and naked bodies of his enemies, tribal peoples from the mountains, he looks dispassionately at the pleading figures to his right. Below Naram-Sin, the scene divides along a central axis: to the left, the organized ranks of Akkadian soldiers appear relentlessly to ascend the mountain; to the right, the



**Figure 21.7** Victory stele of Naram-Sin. Source: G1D977/World History Archive/Alamy Stock Photo.

disorganized and uncivilized enemies tumble downward in defeat. A partly preserved text above Naram-Sin identifies him and recounts the victory. A second inscription, added over a thousand years later by an Elamite king, records that he took the stele back to Susa, where it was excavated another 3000 years later.

Much of the scholarship on the Naram-Sin stele has focused on its unique artistic aspects, grappling with the question of continuity and tradition versus discontinuity and innovation. Kantor (1966) viewed the depiction of the mountain with its trees as a landscape that was a major innovation of the Akkadian period, breaking from previous Mesopotamian and, in particular, Sumerian tradition. Recently, Winter has contested a reading of Naram-Sin's stele as landscape in the sense of the Western artistic genre. Instead, she argues that the trees and mountain, in their specificity of kind and place, "serve to naturalize, to present as equally 'natural,' the transcendent [sic] stance and status assumed by the ruler" (Winter 1998b, p. 7).

Comparisons of Naram-Sin's stele with earlier works as well as later pieces have provided material for arguing both for and against the disruptive position of Akkadian art within an overall narrative of Mesopotamian history. There can be little disagreement that the formal qualities of Naram-Sin's stele stand in contrast to those that preceded and followed it, most notably in its apparent disuse of registers as an organizing compositional structure. Actually registers were used, but they were tilted to form diagonal lines that provided dynamic thrust to the composition. What is at issue is the degree to which this was revolutionary rather than developmental, and what it means for a socio-historical understanding of the Akkadian period.

Early scholars saw the break with Sumerian artistic traditions as so radical that they attributed it to the arrival and conquest of a new ethnic group, the Semitic-speaking Akkadians (Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951, p. 162; Frankfort 1954, p. 41; Parrot 1961b, p. 170; Moortgat 1969, p. 45). Such interpretations are driven by notions of the ethos or spirit of a people, usually defined ethno-linguistically, that manifested itself in cultural production, especially art. Nigro has traced the sequence from the beginning of the Akkadian period, with Sargon's fragmentary stelae, to Naram-Sin, arguing not for an "unspecified 'Akkadian' spirit," but rather for "the specific ideological purpose of celebrating victory as military expansion." He connects an increasing interest in unified narrative to the centralization of a multi-city empire rather than to any ethnic qualities of the Akkadians (Nigro 1998, p. 292). Nissen offers a related argument, positing that the Akkadian rulers sought to emphasize the material world in order to weaken the influence of local temple institutions that had previously dominated the individual city-states (Nissen 1988, pp. 165–197).

## The Stele of Hammurabi

The stele of Hammurabi (1792–1750 BCE) is perhaps better known for its legal text than its art historical properties (see Figure 21.8). The tall (2.25 m or  $7\frac{1}{3}$  feet), irregularly shaped diorite stele was found at Susa in the same area as Naram-Sin's stele. Its inscribed text is indeed monumental, consisting of a prologue, nearly 300 individual laws, and an epilogue carved into 42 columns that encircle the boulder. Though not the oldest



**Figure 21.8** Code of Hammurabi. Source: BP29B3/Zev Radovan/BibleLandPictures/Alamy Stock Photo

preserved law code, it is the most complete, and many of the laws contain the Biblical principle of talion (“eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth”), which has ensured it a place in schoolchildren’s history books. Only the upper part of the stele’s front remains bare of text; there the surface is carved into high relief, showing Hammurabi standing before the enthroned sun god Šamaš who extends in his right hand a rod and ring, insignia of authority (see Figure 21.9). The manner in which this representational scene was cut away from the original surface of the stone on which the text was inscribed creates the illusion that the text literally forms a platform supporting god and king.

Of the scene itself Frankfort writes, “it conveys, not only a sense of confrontation, but of communication between the lord of justice and the lawgiver” (1954, p. 59). The composition places Hammurabi at eye level with the god, establishing a reciprocity of visual exchange that can be equated with Babylonian conceptions of the positive regard that emanates from the gods’ gaze and that connects this work back to the Early Dynastic votive statues. Winter quotes an Old Babylonian hymn to the goddess Ishtar which gushes, “Prosperity is created by her gaze” (Winter 2000a, p. 37). Moortgat pointed out that the rendering of the divine horned headdress in true profile occurred for the first time on this stele; this he considers its “unique merit” for blending “three-dimensional reality with a

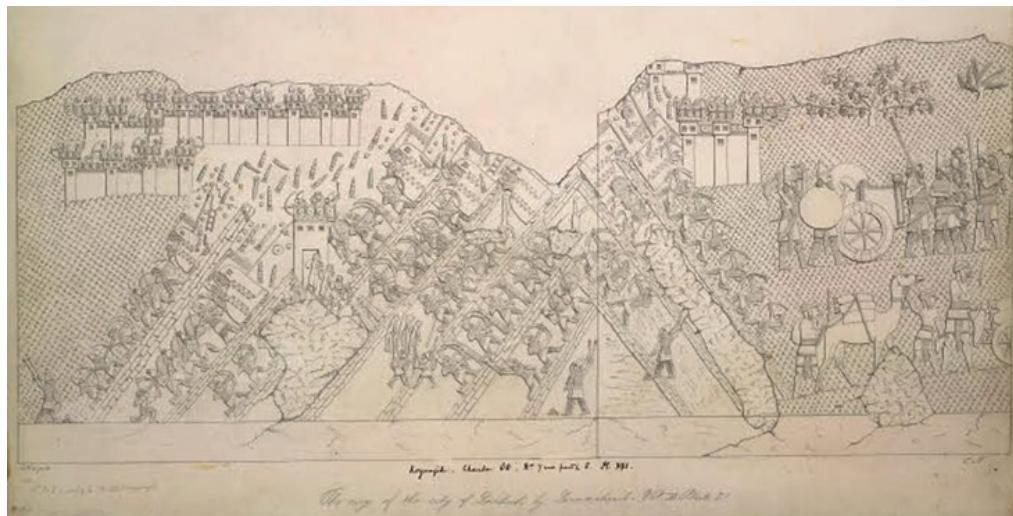


**Figure 21.9** Code of Hammurabi, detail of upper relief. Source: D75C2X/EmmePi Travel/Alamy Stock Photo.

two-dimensional image” (Moortgat 1969, p. 86). If, however, illusionism simply for the sake of imitating reality did not take precedence in Mesopotamian artistic philosophy, this shift in perspectival rendering instead may be associated with a renewed and monumentalized emphasis on vision as a critical form of divine communication.

## Neo-Assyrian Reliefs

The subfield that has seen probably the greatest amount of study and research is Neo-Assyrian art, particularly in the area of the carved relief orthostats, or dressed stones, that adorned the walls of the great palaces at Nimrud, Khorsabad, and Nineveh from the ninth through the seventh centuries BCE. Groenewegen-Frankfort (1951, p. 170) considered them a “most striking innovation ... entirely secular and narrative,” and they offer fertile



**Figure 21.10** The siege of Lachish, Southwest Palace, Nineveh. Source: The Trustees of the British Museum©.

material for her exploration into the depiction of time and space. The notion that Assyrian reliefs presented purely non-religious imagery has recently been disputed by studies of all the reliefs, not just the most commonly published ones, within their architectural setting (Russell 1998). Nonetheless, the historical narrative reliefs, many of which depict detailed representations of battles set in topographically diverse areas, have claimed the greatest attention.

Of particular interest is the apparent linear development of spatial representation from the ninth century down to Assurbanipal, the last important Assyrian king, in the mid-seventh century (Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951, pp. 172–181; Frankfort 1954, pp. 91, 93–99; Parrot 1961a, pp. 42–43; Moortgat 1969, pp. 134, 137, 149, 154, 157; Amiet 1980, p. 251; Russell 1991, pp. 192–215). The ninth century narratives organize most of the figures on a single ground line so that they stand the full height of a register. An example is the carved orthostats of Assurnasirpal II which are divided into two pictorial registers separated by the so-called Standard Inscription listing his titles and military deeds.

In contrast, a seascape of Sargon II at Khorsabad and almost all of Sennacherib's reliefs from the Southwest Palace at Nineveh used the entire height of the over two-meter tall orthostats as a patterned background for numerous small figures (see Figure 21.10). This change has often been interpreted as deriving from a progressive technical ability to depict perspectively accurate space. Assurbanipal's reliefs, however, present a challenge to this developmental account, because they exhibit an inconsistency in using both these as well as other representational modes. It may be highly misleading to evaluate these compositional differences by standards established in Renaissance one-point perspective, an artistic concept that derived from a very different social, political, and religious context. Indeed, the diversity of representational styles used by the Neo-Assyrians for composing figures in space suggests that, rather than striving for a single, all-encompassing illusionistic

perspective, they manipulated spatial and perceptual elements in multiple ways to provoke varied meaningful responses. Groenewegen-Frankfort's understanding of the spatial presence evoked in Assurbanipal's lion hunts as "dramatic space" and "significant voids" comes close to this idea, although she remains bound to the Eurocentric definition of representational perspective (1951, p. 181).

Moortgat (1969, p. 130, emphasis Moortgat's) proposed that the reliefs were created in a program of propaganda for the king. He wrote, "painting and relief are not merely used to decorate vacant wall surfaces as the servant of architecture: on the contrary, sculpture in the round and two-dimensional art combine to create a new organic form of art, *architectural sculpture*: even the words and writing in the ornamental bands of cuneiform combine with the relief friezes to glorify the concepts of king and empire in the great pictorial annals". Winter (1981) elaborates upon this concept, arguing that both Assurnasirpal II's ninth-century reliefs and the royal titles carved on every orthostat physically structured a multidimensional definition of Assyrian kingship along the four walls of his Nimrud throne room, which stood as the metaphorical and ideological center of the empire. Further studies of Neo-Assyrian historical narratives have enriched the scope of this scholarship (Marcus 1987; Russell 1987). Several recent studies have extended the inquiry to examine the ways in which the relief imagery itself participated in the construction of imperial ideology (Cifarelli 1998; Thomason 2001).

Specific subjects have also been the focus of research, especially the celebrated lion hunts of Assurbanipal (see Figure 21.11). Scholarly treatment of these has ranged from the almost purely formal to the psychological to a religiously oriented approach.



**Figure 21.11** Detail of Ashurbanipal's lion hunt, North Palace, Nineveh. Source: The Trustees of the British Museum©.

Our modern response to Assurbanipal's hunts has clearly impacted scholarship. Moortgat (1969, p. 157) wrote, "... when we look at the king's contests with lions, we are moved not so much by a sense of the conquest of evil than by pity for the tragic fate of the beasts." Groenewegen-Frankfort (1951, pp. 180–181) said, "the artist of the hunting scenes ... showed that he possessed the emotional depth which could convey the tragedy of suffering and defeat, of desperate courage and broken pride ... an artist who revealed the depth of his fear and pity for these doomed creatures and raised his scenes to the stature of tragedy." It has even been suggested that the artist of such pathos-inducing figures as the so-called Dying Lioness was a captive who identified with the hunted prey and sought to subvert Assyrian imperialism, though this opinion has not received much support (Barnett 1976: 13; Reade 1995, p. 88). A unique study of the lion hunts by Bersani and Dutoit (1985) makes no attempt to displace our response onto the ancient Assyrians, but rather explores the way in which the formal qualities of their violence tap into our psychological pleasures. Recent studies that draw upon an expanded repertoire of visual and textual sources have sought to situate the reliefs better within the context of Assyrian conceptions and point to the ritual and sacred implications of the imagery in view of scenes that depict the king pouring libations over dead lions and the artificial nature of several of the represented hunts (Weissert 1997; Watanabe 2002). A forthcoming dissertation contends that no one meaning inheres in these reliefs, but rather that the dynamic process of interaction between them and their various audiences produced a spectrum of meanings tied to power relations surrounding the king (Aker 2007).

## Conclusion

The preceding account of several Mesopotamian artworks reveals the changing lenses through which they have been viewed and interpreted. With such a rich academic tradition, it is little surprise that over the past ten years, scholarship has begun to examine the history of European and North American exploration in the Near East and its impact on the field as a discipline. Some have concentrated on the documentation of these activities, charting specific narratives of excavation and scholarship (Larsen 1996; Russell 1997). Others have taken a post-colonial approach, arguing for the Western invention of Mesopotamia and for the multidimensional ways in which archaeology was both affected by and had an effect on the imperialist as well as on the popular identity of the West (Bahrani 2003; Bohrer 2003). As Bohrer states, "... the work of filtering, revising, and reconstructing Assyria was staged not only in nineteenth-century museums, but throughout its richly varied visual culture ... Further, the ordering, circulation, and emulation of the Ancient Near East (both within and beyond museums) must be seen in connection with larger complexes of social tensions, suppositions, needs and desires ..." (Bohrer 2003, pp. 3–4).

## NOTE

1. For one example of the lack of exact correlation between the two styles and archaeology, see Hansen (2003a, p. 29).

## FURTHER READING

Major illustrated surveys of Near Eastern art include Frankfort (1954), Parrot (1961a,b), Strommenger and Hirmer (1964), Moortgat (1969), Amiet (1980), and Collon (1995).

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

# Egyptian Medicine

*Tanja Pommerening*

The following contribution is aimed at students and the general public and tries to give an overview of the essence of ancient Egyptian medicine.<sup>1</sup> In principle one can take several approaches. Many may ask themselves what knowledge of medicine was already available in ancient Egypt. One can read the sources from a modern perspective and judge the knowledge from an evolutionary point of view: What did people already know? How have our understandings developed? What mode of development happened? In what state was medicine? And were there, in comparison with earlier medical cultures, universal understandings which were available from the beginning? At the end of such a comparison the modern person strives for universal bases and a consciousness of progress over the millennia.

Such a process is obsolete today on anthropological and cultural historical grounds, and above all it is really not helpful, because it does not see medicine as specific to a culture. It looks only from the modern situation, and sees today as the point of comparison and assumes that all cultures develop in a similar way on the basis of clear lines of development, step by step, in order to reach the contemporary situation. In comparisons, Egyptian medicine stacks up especially positively because it had already reached a meaningful state of knowledge. But such an approach ignores the idea that Egyptian medicine as observed relies on completely different models of thought and concepts. The specific nature of ancient Egyptian medicine cannot be understood in this way, and the comparisons are mostly flawed because they are ripped from their context. Even when one assumes that the knowledge was seamlessly transferred, one must still reckon with thousands of years of transmission of knowledge with changes in concepts and new conceptualizations.

A comparison of systems of medicine demands an adequate basis, and so can only be dealt with analytically through culturally immanent elements in their own contexts; that is, one must, as much as possible, reconstruct an emic view. In doing so, for example, one

must figure out how medicine was sometimes integrated through the course of cultural contacts into new cultural contexts, and so changed.

The goal of this chapter is therefore to create as much as possible a culturally immanent view of ancient Egyptian medicine around assumptions based on interdisciplinary scientific work (for the methods, see Pommerening 2016, pp. 184–203). And so we focus above all on the elements that appear to define the system over a very long duration, though naturally within this system we can see changes over the course of time that depended on external conditions of cultural contact and internal changes (Pommerening 2012).

## Sources and Research

The most important sources for the reconstruction of a culturally immanent view are medical texts from Egypt. They are handed down on papyri and ostraca, or pottery shards. The oldest known texts written in the ancient Egyptian language come from the nineteenth century BCE (Papyrus Kahun, Papyrus Ramesseum V), and the youngest from the Roman period in the third century CE (papyri from Tebtynis in the Fayum Oasis). Most texts are written in “hieratic”, the usual script for writing. Only on the Papyrus Ramesseum V do we find cursive hieroglyphs, which otherwise are usually used in religious texts. Younger medical texts are written in the very cursive administrative script called demotic, known from about 650 BCE. These texts are different in content from those written in hieratic.

But what should we understand in general by “ancient Egyptian medical texts” (see Pommerening 2016, pp. 195–202)? One can only come to an understanding through consideration of the texts of the papyri by looking at what was medically relevant from the ancient Egyptian point of view. There were specific types of texts with a set formal structure and unifying Egyptian designations, like (1) what we today call teaching texts, (2) “prognoses,” and (3) medical prescriptions (recipes for preparing pharmaceuticals). Teaching texts convey experiences in diagnoses and practice; the so-called prognosis texts address pregnancy, birth, and viability on the basis of tests; and prescriptions deliver knowledge about the indication, ingredients, measurements, preparation, and use of pharmaceuticals.

On the basis of these typical representatives of preserved text types, we can demonstrate what types of texts are also to be put into the medical category: among these are excerpts, which convey medically relevant background knowledge, like the book on the medical uses of the castor-oil plant (in Papyrus Ebers and Papyrus Louvre E 32847), or the theoretical book about the secret knowledge of the physicians on the function of the heart (in Papyrus Ebers and Papyrus Berlin 3038; see below). In almost all papyri there are also magical parts in the form of incantations. These were introduced by the Egyptian word for “spell” or “incantation,” and were used during various procedures (see below). A further kind of text within the medical papyri is protective rites. In 2018 for the first time the 7-meter-long medical papyrus Louvre E 32847 became accessible (Bardinet 2018), and it had among other things teaching texts, prescriptions, incantations, predecessors of pharmacopeias, and protective rites with precise directions for embalming and the materials used.

On the basis of the papyri one can see that the area of ancient Egyptian medicine was conceived as broad. It included, along with physicians’ diagnostics and procedures in surgery and pharmacology, also concern for health, prognostication, use of recitations, as

well as practices for bringing the dead through to the other world by ritual resurrection and restitution of the body. To this were connected scientific practices like observation, empiricism, theory and interpretation through experience of the world.

The papyri passed down are composed differently according to their themes. There are sources that concern only one area of medicine, for example the Papyrus Kahun (1900 BCE) with gynecology (Collier and Quirke 2004, pp. 58–64), the Brooklyn Papyrus 47.218.48/85 (around 600 BCE) concerning snakes and the treatments of snakebite (Sauneron 1989), the Chester Beatty VI papyrus (around 1250 BCE), which deals with sicknesses in the rectal-anal complex cured by enema (Jonckheere 1947), and the Papyrus Edwin Smith (front, supposedly with an original text from around 2300 BCE) on surgical practice (Sanchez and Meltzer 2012). In contrast, for example, the Papyrus Ebers (compiled around 1550 BCE) is a large composite manuscript of different “books,” and offers something that might help for almost every illness, like an encyclopedia. In 20 meters of length it has 877 individual items (Ghalioungui 1987). Egyptologists divide the papyri into medical (see above) and medical-magical (for example, London Papyrus BM EA 10059; Leitz 2000), and purely magical papyri, and this distinction emphasizes the mass of incantations. Medical papyri have few of them; in medical-magic texts incantations predominate and a healing treatment is emphasized; and in purely magical papyri there is no relation to medical treatment visible. This division has led in the past to people seeing medicine and magic as separate areas.

Philological research into ancient Egyptian medicine is predominantly carried out in German-speaking areas, and this means that most publications on the subject are in the German language. One means of help for the translation of medical texts in the narrower sense is the nine-volume *Grundriss der Medizin der alten Aegypter* (Grundriss I–IX) by Grapow et al., published between 1954 and 1973. In all it contains transcriptions, translations, commentaries, and background information for 24 medical papyri, papyrus fragments, and ostraca. Individual terms were discussed under the corresponding entries; however, the understanding of some words in the meantime has been updated since that publication.

The Leipzig internet site “Science in Ancient Egypt” (<http://sae.saw-leipzig.de/startseite>) provides an overview of all the medical texts now known (44 papyri, 16 ostraca), among which are some that have not yet been edited. In spite of the English title, the texts are published in German translation. An English version is planned. The long-term goal of the project is to prepare all medical and magical texts in a translation understandable to laypersons in German and English, and also to discuss the state of earlier translations. Translations and transcriptions for an Egyptological professional public will be made available in the context of the same project in the Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae (TLA: <http://aaew.bbaw.de/tla/>), a very valuable internet site for Egyptologists, which makes ancient Egyptian texts available in the form of an annotated digital corpus. Culturally immanent translations of individual text excerpts and also complete papyri in English can be found, among others, in Leitz (2000), Collier and Quirke (2004), Ghalioungui (1987), Nunn (1996), Sanchez and Meltzer (2012), and Strouhal et al. (2014).

The source material for ancient Egyptian medicine, however, goes beyond these text sources. It includes objects like healing statues (which are equipped with magical incantation material), protective amulets (among others also in the form of papyri, which were worn

under the chin), drug containers (for example the typical kohl containers for eye makeup), medical tools (among others devices for measuring), architectural finds (for example the temple sanatoriums found since the Roman period), as well as mummies and skeletons (Allen 2005, Nunn 1996). The latter offer a way to assess the state of health of that time, the usual diseases, burdens and handicaps, and their methods of treatment. This area has developed newer and better techniques that render pictures (computerized tomography, magnetic resonance imaging) and use the growing dynamic of DNA analysis (e.g., see Aufderheide 2003; Raven and Taconis 2005; David 2008; Metcalfe et al. 2014; Ikram et al. 2015; Forshaw 2016). Also there are other textual sources and inscriptions that give indications about the interaction with those who are suffering, the professional status of the medical personnel, the availability of remedies, the system of health, and the transfer of medical knowledge; one can also learn about the conceptualization of the normal body from pictorial sources (see Grapow et al. 1954–1973; Westendorf 1999; Austen 2014; Strouhal et al. 2014).

## The Ancient Egyptian Conception of Illness

In ancient Egypt, health counted as the normal situation worth maintaining. The word appears frequently in formulae of greeting for wellbeing and prayers, especially in the phrase *ankh wedja seneb* – “may he live, be whole, and healthy.” To be unhealthy, the texts show, is not to have full possession of all the senses, members may be unavailable or lacking, ability to work is limited, the mood is afflicted or the body weak.

The most used words for the undesirable situation are “not to be healthy” or “to have pain” (*mer*) or “suffering” (*men*). These words always have a negative connotation outside the medical texts and describe situations that need to be bettered, including those of a psychological and chronic kind. Many individual symptoms are associated with the signs for pain and suffering in the medical texts, for example, various forms of wounds, boils, swellings and fevers, burning, reddening, contraction, pressures, stiffness, being tired, weakness, looseness, bulging, outflow, wetness, trembling, and so on. We find the word *khayt* in a general conception of sickness and self-diagnosed suffering. If one has an unhealthy situation, medical treatment serves to make one healthy or to heal. With this the suffering is put aside or driven away.

Unlike our tendency to define narrowly a bundle of symptoms and systematically categorize sicknesses (e.g., tetanus, diabetes or diphtheria), the ancient Egyptian sources do nothing similar. Rather, an individual symptom or an individual painful or unusual happening causes the suffering and gives the name of the sickness (Example (a) below). Such a usage appears today in the ordering of injuries. We speak of a head basis fracture (*International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* = ICD 10 Code: S02.1) or a jaw dislocation (S03.0). In ancient Egyptian texts about wounds, ulcers or interior sicknesses, several individual symptoms were bundled together and this was understood as a complex of sickness (Example (b) below). In contrast to today, there was no overarching classifying term, but just a collection of chosen symptoms. In numerous cases many individual symptoms were brought together, and they were attributed to a particular cause for sickness that gives the name of the sickness (Example (c) below).

*Example (a), Papyrus Edwin Smith, case 27 (9, 13–16)*

Experience for a gaping wound of his chin: If you examine a man because of a gaping wound of his chin that has reached the bone, you should consequently examine the wound (and) if you find his bone uninjured, there not being a gap (or) an impression in it, then you say in regard to him, “One suffering with a gaping wound of his chin which reaches the bone. A suffering which I will treat.”

*Example (b), Papyrus Edwin Smith, case 5 (2, 11–15)*

Experience for a gaping wound in his head, his skull being broken: If you examine a man because of a gaping wound in his head which reaches the bone, his skull being broken, so you examine consequently his wound: (symptom 1) (and) if you find that break which is in his skull is deep (and) sunken under your fingers, (2) the bloating on it is swollen, (3) blood comes from his two nostrils (and) from his two ears, (4) he suffers from spasms in his neck (and) (5) he is not capable of looking at his two shoulders (and) his chest, then you say in regard to him: (diagnosis) “One suffering with a gaping wound in his head which reaches the bone in which his skull is broken and he suffers from spasms in his neck. (judgment) A suffering which cannot be treated.”

*Example (c), Papyrus Kahun, case 3 (1, 8–10)*

Experience for a woman that suffers from her (symptom 1) rectal-anal complex, (2) her pudendum and (3) the roots of both of her upper thighs. Consequently you will say in regard to her: (diagnosis) “These are discharges of the uterus complex” (treatment follows).

All three examples are taken from the so-called “teaching texts.” Such texts are divided very frequently by a headline, a statement of the examination with symptoms, a finding from diagnosis and the results for the treatment in the form of a judgment (three possibilities: (1) “a suffering which I can treat, (2) a suffering with which I will fight, (3) a suffering that cannot be treated”), as well as the actual treatment.

The diagnoses are introduced usually with the words “then you say in regard to him” or “consequently you will say in regard to him” and it is either (a) a symptom, (b) the enumeration of many symptoms, or (c) the cause of the symptoms. That is, as already said, there is on the level of language no new technical term that names a complex of symptoms concretely, even if on the level of observation clearly several signs can be combined and subsumed into a headline. Only by making distinctions among different cases can we today discover specific conceptualizing by working backwards.

The medical texts convey a large number of symptoms and causes, and their translation in general from a linguistic and also a medical point of view often offers great difficulties. Many translators (e.g., Ebbell 1938) have tried to convert such ancient Egyptian terms into our modern, scientifically cast nosology (categorization of diseases), and so disciplinary terms are introduced directly into the translations from today’s medical nomenclature, which comes mostly from Greek or Latin. This is misleading because ancient Egyptian medicine is distant from ours both systematically and historically (Pommerening 2009). Since they had no separate concept of disease, but only symptoms and causes are given, the ancient Egyptian words cannot be translated with a modern terminology of illness.

In addition, our medical terminology today has been thrown into continual change, so that for example today's medical term migraine (according to ICD classification) is distinguished from the hemicranias of former times (Pommerening 2010a). That is, even in the instances in which one can assume that an illness was conceived as a collection of symptoms, a direct translation is difficult. Translations of medical texts therefore should always be supplied with the broadest possible commentary.

Although the symptoms in the ancient Egyptian texts cannot be combined with overarching names of illnesses, it is possible to attain distinct ideas about illness (on the method, see Pommerening 2016; emic perspectives are also in Bardinet 1990, 1995; with regard to conceptions of anatomy, see Walker 1996).

For this purpose, the order of the texts within the manuscripts is relevant. The Papyrus Edwin Smith, for example, conveys the so-called "book of wounds," which in total contains 48 teaching texts and 69 explanations that were added later. The cases are ordered anatomically from top to bottom (from head to toe), beginning with wounds of the head. The text breaks off with case 48 in the area of wounds of the chest. The wounds are ordered according to seriousness, usually from simple flesh wounds to complicated breaks. When one looks at individual instances, one can discover the editorial work of the copyist. This we can see, for example, in case 7 (3, 2–4, 4 *passim*): "Experience of a gaping wound in his head, which reaches to the bone (and) penetrates the sinuses complex of his skull." The first section consists of a thorough examination of the wound, its evaluation and the treatment for it. Finally, two complications are introduced in the form of differential diagnoses. Both lead to other instructions: (1) "If however you find that man after his body has a temperature because of that wound in the sinuses of his skull, because that man has taken *ti3* because of that wound, then (...)." The result is that the man cannot be treated. (2) "If you however find that man, after he has turned pale, after he had first trembled (...)." Here then a treatment is suggested. The case shows that a cluster of diagnostic signs is explained differently if there appear further signs. And so a weighing of symptoms for the evaluation was relevant and the processes of sickness were combined. The symptoms in differential diagnosis (1), "(And) if you find his face wet from sweat, the cords of his neck are stretched, his face is red, his eye teeth belong to his spine, the smell of the cavity of his head is like (the smell of) the secretion of small cattle, his mouth is bound, his two eyebrows are spoiled (?), his face is as if it cries," result in the diagnosis "One suffering from a gaping wound in his head which reaches to the bone (and) penetrates the sinuses of his skull, after he (the man) has taken *ti3*, (so that) his mouth is bound and he suffers from spasms in his neck..." Not all symptoms are named in the diagnosis. The term *ti3* seems to represent what we might call a specific disease in modern terms, but in ancient Egyptian thought the *ti3* was the cause of the illness. The man has a *ti3*. That is similar to what we say today, to "have a germ." In the Papyrus Edwin Smith the *ti3* starts from the wound; the Papyrus Kahun (1, 16) shows that the *ti3* also can proceed from the uterine complex.

Also composite manuscripts show how illnesses were categorized. An overarching comparison of all papyri is still not available. As an example we will choose Papyrus Ebers. It offers 36 sections which begin with the words "Beginning from..." and then brings together several clusters of texts. The following categories appear: first the sufferings or pains of the abdomen, eyes, ears, nose, teeth, and so on. Within these categories illnesses

are sorted usually according to the symptoms (outflow, swelling, temperature, bite, burning, boils, and so on) or the causes (*wekhedu*-substances, worms, *aaa*-poison seeds, mucus). Otherwise in the same papyrus several parts are ordered by the medical treatment used (anointing, potions, enemas, and so on) (Pommerening 2017a, pp. 167–195).

In order to convey an impression of the terms for sufferings, symptoms or causes, there is in the following a selection from the individual headlines of the texts from Papyrus Ebers. The emphasized categories express some of the 36 sections introduced by “Beginning from” in the order of the papyrus (see Pommerening 2017a, pp. 185–189).

**Sufferings of the abdomen:** blockages, swelling, blood, temperature, worms, *wekhedu*-substances, dislocation in the rectal-anal complex, bewitching, *aaa*-poison seeds, mucus.

**Sufferings of the head:** pains, trembling, sicknesses of the skin of the head, falling out of hair, becoming gray, spot baldness.

**Urine sufferings:** accumulation of fluid, overflow, moisture.

**Sufferings of the heart:** temperature, pains, weariness, weakness, itching, pounding, narrowness, forgetfulness, flooding, trembling, enlargement, dislocations, weak pulse, fluttering, dancing (see also below).

**Sufferings characterized by mucus:** in the pelvis, in the stomach or in the neck, sniffles.

**Cough**

**Sufferings of the eye:** growth of *wekhedu*-substances, scratches, *wekhedu*-substances in the eye, pulling together of the pupil, unevenness, white spots, blood, tears, temperature, blindness, raging, sniffles, accumulation of water, inflammation, darkness, poor eyesight, cloudiness, pellets, fats in the eye, curling up of hair.

**Sufferings of the extremities/muscles:** trembling, lameness, weakness, pains, stiffness, temperature, knots, air, twisting, flooding, deafness, convulsions, loss of feeling.

**Sufferings of teeth and mouth:** squeezed teeth, abscesses, swelling, gorging, pus, swallowing blood, accumulation of *wekhedu*-substances.

**Sufferings of the ears:** cleavage, break, putrefied water, moisture, pus, wound secretion, swelling, deafness.

**Sufferings of women:** outflow, pains, swelling in the external genital area, barrenness, bleeding, delay of birth, sick breast; otherwise according to the Papyrus Kahun: sicknesses of the uterus complex like blood obstruction, discharge, heat, abscesses, itchy places.

**Tumors:** (several types are differentiated by name).

## Bodily Functions and Direct and Indirect Causes of Disease

An unusual aspect of the medical tradition is the treatises or passages that examine the functions of the body and the origins of illnesses. The central aspect here deals with the heart (*hati*) and the so-called *metu* (a term for cords which are hollow); the oldest references come from the period around 1550 BCE. They explicitly connect theory, practice and knowledge of diseases (Papyrus Berlin, text 163; Papyrus Ebers, text 854–856).

Text 854 of Papyrus Ebers offers at first a physiological sketch under the title: “Beginning of the secret knowledge of physicians (*sunu*), knowledge of the going of the heart (*hati*), the knowledge of the heart (*hati*).” The discussion begins with a description of the connection of the heart with other body parts through the *metu*, here translated as “cords”. These cords are hollow and convey the air and water to the various parts of the body. Moreover, some of them transport other things, for example blood and mucus, which are both regarded as material of illnesses. The following are some text excerpts as examples.

*Papyrus Ebers, text 854b (99, 5–6)*

There are four cords in both his nostrils. There are two which give mucus; two that give blood.

*Papyrus Ebers, text 854c (99, 6–10)*

There are four cords inside both his temples, which in consequence cause the bleeding of the two eyes (and) that some illnesses (*khayt*) of the two eyes arise through them and through the two eyes being open. As for the water falling out of them, it is both the iris–pupil complexes of the two eyes giving it.

The text further explains which cord runs where, what it carries and which sufferings can derive from it. It ends with the cords in the rectal–anal complex and the statement that all cords unite here and therefore contribute to the situation where all parts of the body can be overflowing with excrement, which, as we see from other texts, causes symptoms of illness.

*Papyrus Ebers, text 854o (100, 11–14)*

There are four cords which are open to the rectal–anal complex: they are those that allow it (the rectal–anal complex) to be supplied with water and air. The rectal–anal complex also opens to each vessel cord of the right half (and) the left half together with the two arms (and) the two legs. It is (possible) to have overflow of excrement.

This describes the system of cords not only functioning in a physiological healthy way, but it also shows at the same time that they may be also the distributors of various materials of illnesses (for example, sicknesses, blood, mucus, excrement). This becomes even clearer in Papyrus Ebers, text 856. Here the *wekhedu*-substances (a concept of illness materials) are emphasized by the headline:

*Papyrus Ebers, text 856a (103, 1–2); see Papyrus Berlin,  
text 163a (15, 1–2)*

Beginning of the book of the circulation of the *wekhedu*-illness materials in all the parts of the body of a man, as something that is found in writings under the feet of the (God) Anubis in Letopolis; for the Majesty of the king of upper and lower Egypt, Usaphais, the justified, it was brought.

These illness materials, which seem to be generated in this text from secretions, can be spread among the systems of cords in the body.

*Papyrus Ebers, text 856b (103, 2–3); completed with help from Papyrus Berlin, text 163b (15, 5)*

As for the man: There are 22 cords in him to his heart; they are those that give air to all the parts of his body.

Papyrus Ebers, Text 856g (103, 13–16) = Papyrus Berlin, Text 163g (16, 1–3)

There are two cords in him to the back of his head.  
 There are two cords in him to his chest.  
 There are two cords in him to his eyes.  
 There are two cords in him to his eyebrows.  
 There are two cords in him to his nose.  
 There are two cords in him to his right ear; in them appears the breath of life.  
 There are two cords in him to his left ear; in them appears the breath of death.”

*Papyrus Ebers, text 856b (103, 16–18) = Papyrus Berlin, text 163b (16, 3–17, 1)*

The whole length comes to his heart and is divided to his nose. The whole length unites itself in his rectal-anal complex. Sufferings in his rectal-anal complex arise through them. There are secretions, which accompany the advent (of illness). It is the cords of his two legs in which death begins.

The three texts passed down explain the number, action, and function of the cords and their role in causing illnesses, but they are not at all similar in every point. The number and course of the cords are presented differently, and also additions from other teaching opinions in the tradition (“someone else says”) show that there was a discussion about the situations presented. But the central theme of all the texts is the explanation of the cords not only in their physiological function but as models for explanation about how the illness materials can spread within the body. Materials like blood, mucus, or excrement, which appear in general in the body, allow illnesses to develop in particular target organs through the system of cords. Especially remarkable are the *wekbedu*-illness materials, which arise as secondary illness materials from excrement or when death starts, or which come into the body through openings like the eyes, nose, ears, anal complex, and so on.

Explanations about the specific illness materials flow together in various teaching texts and prescriptions; the following teaching text can be an example. It comes from a big collection exclusively devoted to the upper digestive system (both in functional and topographical sense).

*Papyrus Ebers, text 192 (37, 17–37, 20) = 195 (38, 17–38.20)*

If you examine a man who suffers in his upper digestive track (*ra ib*) and often vomits, and if (symptom 1) you find it (the illness) on his front, (2) both his eyes are red, (3) his nose is swollen, (diagnosis) you shall consequently say in regard to it: “These are putrefaction products of his mucus, [it] cannot get up to his groin area as his mucus.”

Here we can see the same perspective: mucus material is not correctly evacuated, but is changed into putrefaction products and provokes the disease.

The cord models in general explain the transportation of materials as the causes of illness in the body, but they still say nothing about why people experience the relevant deviations from the norm, that is, from health. Such indications are to be found widely distributed through all medical text genres. Gods, the dead, enemies, priests and demons and their shadows are named in the medical texts as subordinate causes of the most varied kinds of illnesses. They can work into the damaged body through breath, blowing, witchcraft (*heka*) or “poisonous semen” (*aaa*), and can throw the system out of balance.

The statements found so far go for both men and women, even though usually the man seems to be the addressee of the text. We can reconstruct additional physiological concepts for women, which in the first instance surround fertility, menstruation, conception, pregnancy, lactation, and specific diseases of women. In the center of these concepts is the uterine complex (*idet*), to which most illnesses are traced in the specifically female medical texts (for example Papyrus Kahun). The causes of all sorts of corporal problems of women are derived from overflows, narrowings, secretions or stoppages of the uterus complex. Mythological texts always express an open connection between the mouth and the vagina, and also the use of particular pharmacological means shows that a cord was assumed to run from the vagina to the uterine complex to the mouth. This results also in the mythological discourse also showing the idea of impregnation through the mouth. When this is carried over to the physiology of the traditional system of cords, one can see that it perfectly accords with the idea of the cord from the mouth, through the uterine complex to the vagina.

Actually, though, such a connection is not explicitly mentioned in the three texts adduced above. On the contrary, the male sex organs are made the theme (Papyrus Ebers, text 854i (100, 7)): “There are two cords to each of his two testicles. They are the ones that give semen.” From this one can probably derive that the medical theoreticians and the advocates of the theoretical physiological writings about the system of vessels and the origins of diseases connected with it were themselves male. Nonetheless, we can see in the treatises on conceptions of the physiology of women that the idea of flows and changes of body materials was a general one.

## Diagnostics

Before healing practices were introduced, the medical professions undertook a thorough inquiry into the signs of disease. How this happened we learn above all from the teaching texts. This kind of text, which we have already discussed above, is found through the whole Pharaonic period and reached its final form by the period of the New Kingdom (Pommerening 2014). The bodies already deemed sickly (see above) were examined continuously through probing with the fingers. Physicians clarified what hurt where and to what extent bodily peculiarities existed; they examined body colors, bodily excretions, changes of constitution, and so on. A special role was played also by measuring the pulse in various parts of the body, as two papyri especially mention. The so-called “book of wounds” adds a gloss directly after the first case (1, 3–9) which explains the procedure of

examination (which in Egyptian *khayt* also means “to measure”). A man is “measured” by putting the hand on various parts of the body and by checking the “going” of the heart. A long gloss ends with the words: “[He measures/examines the going] of his heart, in order to learn the experiences which emerged here. [He] said [that] it [will be measured/examined] in order to learn what emerged there.”

Papyrus Ebers, text 854a (99, 2–5) interprets the result of the measuring process as follows: “As for these (cords) on which each physician, each Sekhmet priest (or) every magician places both (his) hands (and) his fingers, (namely) on the head, on the back of the head, also on the hands, and on the place of the *ib*-heart, on both arms, on both legs, and so on. It is because of the heart that he examines/measures. For it is the case that it (the heart) speaks (‘beats’) at the front in all the vessels of each part of the body.”

We can learn from a collection of explanations for different heart conditions how detailed, for example, the changes in the area of the heart were registered, and with the help of which theories the symptoms were explained (Papyrus Ebers, texts 855e–z). Here are some examples:

### *Papyrus Ebers, text 855e (100, 14–15):*

About the weak heart (*ib*): It means that the heart does not speak (because) the cords of the heart are dumb. Your two hands do not feel them, which occurs because of the air, which fills them (the cords).

### *Papyrus Ebers, text 855f (100, 16–17)*

About the tired heart (*ib*): It means that the heart is weak because of the heat of the rectal-anal complex (...).

### *Papyrus Ebers, text 855g (100, 17–18)*

About the heart (*ib*) that spreads itself out: It means that the cords of the heart are under faeces.

### *Papyrus Ebers, text 8551bis (101, 8–10)*

About the heart kneels down for the *wekhedu*-illness materials: It means that his heart (*ib*) inside of his torso is small and *wekhedu*-illness materials will fall on his heart. So it is consequently dim and it therefore consequently kneels down.

### *Papyrus Ebers, text 855q (101, 18–20)*

About his heart that flutters a great deal, while a piece of fat is under his left breast: It means there is some descending through his heart. So his illness spreads out.

Back to further teaching texts. A large number concern, for example, tumours, wounds, and the illnesses of the woman. For ulcers, their consistency, displacement, color, smell, size and sometimes also their content were tested. With open wounds, the range was exactly observed as well as the appearance of the resulting deficits with mobility and the

senses. The texts about women's medicine include gathering of symptoms for the whole body, although in the texts so far handed down the term "palpate" or probe with the fingers is not found. Possibly the diagnosis comes from questioning. Within the whole of the teaching texts, questions to the sick people appear only seldom, but it is clearly recognized within the whole set of symptoms named that not just visible changes were observed, but also a questioning of the sick person or relatives took place.

Other text forms inform us about the type and nature of gathering symptoms about illnesses. For example, the headlines of prescriptions name indications, which apply to the symptoms or causes of illnesses, that must have been conceived in some way. Diagnostics about snakebites comes from Papyrus Brooklyn 47.218.48+85. The form and the extent of the bite wound are studied, along with the presence of swellings as well as other perceptible symptoms of poisoning. It was also useful for therapy to know which snake could be implicated. For this purpose the papyrus offers in its first section a compendium about the appearance of snakes, their level of danger, and their attribution to particular gods. In the second section follow prescriptions and incantations for the prevention of bites and the treatment of the person bitten.

When we put the diagnostic procedures together, we can see that all senses (touch, vision, smell, hearing and sometimes also taste) come into consideration. Further, some diagnoses are only specified when particular surgical measures were carried out. People appealed to empirical knowledge, which offered a larger basis for comparison because it was systematically fixed in writing, and over the course of time the usage was established or rejected. There was an ongoing annotation of earlier texts, and this is observable through glosses and marginal commentaries. Also we can prove that new texts were being developed.

The text genre of prognoses in medicine, in contrast, seems associated with the area of divination, oracles, and hemerology. One finds such predictions (so far) without exception in the area of pregnancy, ability to bear children, and the judgment of the viability of a child. Either body signs were explained directly or remedies were provided for testing and observing the reaction. The result was to be read directly from the reaction. The procedures can be clearly seen from a culturally immanent perspective as being theoretically strongly justified, while from today's point of view it seems empirically often doubtful. For example, a garlic bulb was introduced into the vagina in order to test whether a woman was capable of getting pregnant. If it could be smelled in her mouth, then a pregnancy was deemed possible. If there was no smell perceptible, a birth was deemed impossible. The author of this test probably had in mind the idea of a birth canal connected to the mouth noted above. Amazingly, it is exactly some of these prognosis tests that are preserved in a similar form in the Greek Hippocratic corpus (= CH, compiled in the fifth to fourth century BCE), and here one can speak of borrowing. The ancient Egyptian method can be approximately reconstructed as follows from the tradition seen in the Papyrus Carlsberg VIII (IV 1, x+4-x+6) and the Papyrus Kahun, case 28 (3, 17–19): "To determine one who will give birth from one who will not give birth. Consequently you arrange that a garlic bulb rests in her vagina, until the land becomes bright (overnight?). If the smell develops in her mouth, she will be able to give birth. If there is no smell, she will never give birth." The Greek version (CH, "Diseases of women," 2nd book, chapter 2) reads: "[...] One takes a garlic bulb,

puts it in the mouth of the vagina; the next day one sees if (the woman) smells in the mouth from it. If she smells in the mouth, she will become pregnant, otherwise not."

## Treatments and Prevention

Treatments are directed against the symptoms as well as against the causes of the sufferings according to the assumed Egyptian paradigm, that is, against the direct cause of illness (the illness materials) and the superordinate indirect causes of illness (enemies, gods, the dead, and so on). Even if the direct means of suffering can be observed (bite of an animal, burning, a fall or something else) or can be theoretically explained (transformation of food that is not properly transported out of the body, the independent life of the female uterine complex, or something similar), the illness event, meaning the disorder in deviation from the normal, is traced back to the influence of gods, the dead, and demons according to the Egyptian view of the world.

The task of one proficient in healing was also based on this superior understanding of causes mediating between the world of the gods and the sick person. Through initiation, the healer himself was protected from spirit powers. At the same time he became an actor in a reconstructed battle between the powers that influenced the sick person and their opponents. Such battles or conflicts were called forth into memory through incantations, or reconstructed through the manufacturing of remedies.

Incantation 3 from Papyrus Ebers (2, 1–6) explains that drugs and magic together should be highly effective (Fischer-Elfert 2005a; Pommerening 2016, pp. 267–273):

Incantation for drinking a remedy: If the drug works, so it will work, what is going to drive out things from this my heart (and) from these my body parts. Strong is the magic together with the drug – it will be tied backwards (= strong is the drug along with the magic). Did you remember then that Horus and Seth were brought to the great palace of Heliopolis, when Seth's testicles and [the eye of Horus] were discussed? So consequently he (Horus) exists flourishing just like one who is on earth. He does everything as he wishes, just like these gods, who are there.

Words to be spoken when drinking the drug. Really excellent: (tested) a million times.

In general, events from the world of the gods are recited and presented as mythical precedents for the earthly situation. In the context of recitation, specific deities can be identified with healers while others are identified with the sick person. The healed sick person is often represented by Horus, who, as a child, was saved by his mother Isis from burnings, snakebites, persecution by Seth, and such, or, as an adult, Horus was saved through the knowledge and tools of Thoth. Seth here represents the image of an enemy, that is, the troublemaker, who deserves to be judged. Mythical episodes regarding the opponents Horus and Seth are frequently found in ancient Egyptian literature. The physician acts not only as a negotiator. In Papyrus Ebers the healers are presented as the followers of Thoth (see incantation 3 above); in the Louvre Papyrus E 32847 the physician is even himself identified with this deity.

Spells with manifold references to myths came to be inserted in different contexts: in the preparation of a remedy (incantation for beer, honey, fat and plant slime, for some

drugs, for the measuring of drugs, for particular preparations of remedies), in its application (incantation for drinking or applying a remedy, applying a bandage, vomiting), or in a direct claim about a cause of suffering, but also for its prevention.

The healer protected himself with the following spell from causes of illness (Papyrus Ebers (1, 11–11; compare also Papyrus Hearst, text 78, 6,5–11)):

Beginning of the incantation for applying a remedy on any part of the body of the man:

I have come forth from Heliopolis / together with the greatest of the great house (the temple of Heliopolis) / the lords of protection / the rulers of eternity.

I have come forth from Sais / together with the mothers of the gods / after they gave me their protection.

I have incantations, composed by the lord of all, / in order to repel the effect / of a god, a goddess / of a dead man, a dead woman / – and further – / which are in this my head, / in this my neck, / in these my shoulders, / in this my flesh, / in these my limbs / to punish the accuser / the supervisor of those who send disturbance in my flesh / (and) a barging into these my body parts as something that enters / in this my flesh / in this my head / in these my shoulders, / in this my body, / in these my body parts.

I belong to Ra. / He has said: / “I am the one who protects him (the sick) from his enemies.” / Thoth is his leader. / He provides that script can be put into speech; / he creates the collections (of recipes); / he gives (magical) power to the wise and the physicians following after him / in order to free the one whom (his) god wishes to make him live. / The one whom his god wishes, that he keeps in life – that one am I.

To be recited during the application of a remedy on any body part of the man who is sick. Really excellent, (tested) a million times.

The incantation makes it clear that for one's own protection first one needed initiation in a temple. Here the healing knowledge would be passed on and the connection to the relevant deities set up, who alone decided over death and life for the medical healer. The healer appears again according to this incantation in the entourage of the gods and protects against the sicknesses or treats them in accordance with the will of the gods.

But patients could create protection even without the direct help of a healer. So one could find helpful preventive incantatory material widespread among the people, especially since the New Kingdom, probably because it could be distributed in a variety of ways (amulets, statues, Horus stele), and a healer was no longer necessary after the medium was made effective. And so here it was obviously enough to wear the magical spell, for example, in the form of an amulet around the neck, or to activate a spell without involving a healer through a water libation, if it was placed on a publicly accessible stele (Horus stele) or healing statue. Such protective magic was frequently combined with pictures. The contents of most spells involved on those media show that the most general possible effect was to be strived for. This also allowed the establishment of impersonal circles of address for the incantations as well as a multitude of named causes for illness. As an example, here is a protective spell against still births:

Another amulet, which is made for a woman whose children came forth but the ones being born by her did not live (survive). O Ra, O Atum, O Khepri, O Shu, O Tefnut, O Geb, O Nut, O Osiris, O Isis, O Be (= Seth), O Nephthys, O gods and goddesses, who are in heaven

and on earth, look, what the enemy, the female enemy, the dead, the female dead and so on – (namely) the gods and people, male and female, who do such kinds of evil – have done against (the Lady) (to be named), born by (Lady) (to be named): they do not allow for her (the Lady to be named) a male son or a female daughter who lives (survives) (... following incantation).

Papyrus Brooklyn 3=47.218.02, x+3.9f (Guermeur 2012; Dils 2017)

The pattern seems simple: among others, the gods of Heliopolis (creating gods) are invoked, but also others who are not listed by name. After this, some causes of illness are named as examples. The name of the patient is still left open (to be named), and the whole procedure must therefore be personalized.

Next to protective amulets against specific symptoms, there were also amulets of a general sort (OADscr T1 Rs 16–19; Pommerening 2018): “We protect her against every sickness of the books, against every sickness that has no prescription, and against every sickness for which a lector priest comes.”

Furthermore, it was possible to have preventive protection against illnesses, if the gods and the ancestors were propitiated. This happened from the point of view of every individual by living in accordance with *Maat*, the honoring of the gods and caring for ancestors.

If, in spite of the efforts to protect, illnesses did break out and people wanted to heal them through the application of remedies (also in combination with incantations), the calling of a healer was unavoidable. Therapy consisted usually of surgical measures and/or supplying remedies in combination with the recitation of magical spells (Pommerening 2009). The tradition of prescriptions is especially comprehensive. Almost 2000 prescriptions are available in a recently published edition (Pommerening 2012). They give data about indications, compositions, preparations, and applications of the remedies. The ingredients come from the world of plants, animals, and minerals. For example, from the world of plants we see cumin, celery, grapes, dates, figs, pomegranate, beans, barley, dill, Christ’s thorn, sycamore figs, willow, chufa; from the world of animals we have brain, tongue, tooth, spine, spinal cord, flesh, lung, liver, spleen, bile, hoof, milk, blood, urine, excrement of various animals; from the world of minerals we have clay, ochre, malachite, galena, lapis lazuli; also beer, honey, water, and wine.

In the choice of drugs the most important element was not always observation of pharmacological effects (special effects were, for example, purging, ending of pain, changes in the skin), but rather complex theoretical systems of thought played a more important role, which were oriented toward an assumed way of working. Above all, in the basic study of the prescriptions one can recognize a general way of thinking in terms of analogies and interconnected structures as well as precise observation of the processes of disease (as a semiotic basis for the choice of the drugs). The choice of ingredients was oriented to the present appearance of the illness and knowledge of the process of development of the illnesses. In the framework of the preparation process this development of the illness could almost be reenacted, in order to replace the cause of the illness, which was seen as an enemy, with the healing remedies (see examples in Pommerening 2017b). It is interesting to note the designation of the term we translate as “drug”: literally, it is *pekharet*, “the one that turns around.”

In this way the choice of remedies in many cases was based on the *Similia similibus* principle (similar things with similar things), which depends on similarities in character and analogy. The goal was to drive out the attacking causes of illness, which represented demons, gods, enemies, or dead people, and which spread out into the body in different forms of illness matters (*wekhedu*-illness materials, worms, *aaa*-poisons, mucus, putrefied material). With pharmacological materials the characteristics missing from the sick circumstances were substituted, and the one who caused the illness was forced to leave the body, for example through enemies or sympathetic magic. In the context of the process of preparation of remedies, individual drugs and the patient were bound together and the illness and healing processes were imitated. One can see that a battle between the cause of disease and his enemies was begun, which expressed on a higher plane a mythical battle between gods and was brought out anew within the body of the patient, with the help of various drugs. As a result the patient went forth healthy, exactly as Horus was victorious on the plane of the gods (Pommerening 2017b).

The composition of remedies and the individual stages of preparation of ancient Egyptian prescriptions cannot always be reconstructed according to today's science (with modern pharmacological methods), but they could be established with the help of the reconstruction of culturally immanent systems. Within all of the transmitted prescriptions there are two variants distinguishable in the process of choosing drugs. (1) The choice of drugs happens on the basis of observation and experience, and so a theoretical idea is derived. For example, the theory that "black things help against black things" can arise from the experience that bitumen helps against inflammation, shown after burning by fire. (2) The choice of drugs is based on a theoretical concept as the starting point. For example the idea that black things help against black things may primarily play a role in the choice of drugs in the Papyrus Ebers, text 482: "Beginning of the pharmaka for burn(s): What has to be done against it on the first day: black mud. To be put on it." All remedies, also those based on theoretical ideas, were tested for a long time period. In this way a concept in some instances might bestow further effective remedies, though other theoretical ideas might not help. Both variants of choice can be found in the papyri, and this means that today we do find both kinds of prescriptions: those that are actually helpful on an empirical basis, as well as other less helpful remedies.

The prepared remedies were made effective from an ancient Egyptian point of view by analogy to the appearances and the behavior of the sicknesses, and through spoken words, and they could take over the role of substitutes in a medical process. They obtained their effectiveness, however, also from a special process of measuring, which also referred back to the mythical precedents in the world of the gods (Pommerening 2010b). Both systems of measuring (represented by *oipe-* and *dja*-measures used since the New Kingdom) in the healing texts and the measuring containers required by them are conceptually closely connected to the myth about the healed eye of Horus. Ever since the Middle Kingdom one can find references to the healing of the wounded eye of Horus in the Wedjat eye, that is, to the intact eye. An aspect of the "healed" eye is that its parts are counted and inspected and again refilled. Expressing this is an incantation (Papyrus Hearst, text 212, 13,17-14,2) for the so-called *debeb*-measuring container:

Spell for the *debeb*-measuring container, when it is taken, in order to measure a drug. As for this *debeb*-measuring container, with which I will measure this drug: It is the *debeb*-measuring container, with which Horus measured his eye, and it was inspected: Life,

wellbeing, and health were to be found. One measures this drug with this *debeb*-measuring container, in order to dispel any kind of illnesses which are in this body. To be continued according to ability.

Such measuring containers have been preserved, and they note the numbers for measurement of their units which correspond to the system of numbers in the medical papyri, so that it is possible even today to recreate prescriptions with the exact measurements.

Also the use of such measuring containers in combination with spells came to be an essential part of the healing process. The drugs measured produce an additional effectiveness on the basis of their specific quantity. In general, ancient Egyptian pharmacology seems especially elaborate and systematic in its continual theoretical emphasis, which connects what happens in nature to mythological happenings (which were from the contemporaneous view, in my opinion, just as real). In contrast to pharmacology of today, it included recitations and the preparation of the remedy in the presence of the patient.

## Healing Personnel and the Interaction with the Sick

The medical texts in some places mention the target group to which they are addressed. In the first place there are physicians, but also the priests of Sekhmet (the lion-shaped goddess), the staff of Selkis (goddess in the form of a scorpion), protectors, and lector priests. The various healing titles which persisted over the long period of ancient Egyptian history give the impression that the areas of practice were always needed, but demanded different assumptions. This is reflected also in the manuscripts, which, depending on the topic, name other people addressed. They also make clear, however, that the group of physicians, priests of Sekhmet, and protectors was involved in diagnosis as well as therapy. Some composite manuscripts unite the knowledge of everyone involved in medicine.

There are also many persons attested who at the same time bear various different medical titles on their steles and in their tombs, so for example some priests of Sekhmet also had titles of physicians (compare Ghalioungui 1983). This situation indicates that there was a transfer of knowledge among the named professional groups. It also requires that there must have been an overarching institutional authority, which collected the knowledge and then developed and transmitted it further, circumstances permitting. Such an authority existed at the latest from the period of the New Kingdom, but possibly earlier; this was the so-called house of life, which was also an archive of secret writings.

Healers went through a special professional education and were initiated into their craft and the secret texts, as shown in the above-mentioned incantation Papyrus Ebers, text 1. The recitation of the incantation assured for them the protection against contagion, and associates them anew after the initiation with the world of the gods.

The risks of contagion with certain illnesses were well known to them, as we know from the tasks of the priests of Sekhmet and the scorpion conjurer (Quack 2005;

Engelmann and Hallof 1996; Känel 1984). They should keep leprosy outside the city, report epidemics of humans and animals, and treat special skin diseases. The medical care of sick or wounded soldiers also belonged to the area of concern of the Sachmet priests. Further, the workers in the workshops, at the pyramids, in the quarries, and in the mines enjoyed healthcare, as sources of different kinds attest. Professional designations like “highest physician of the Theban city of the dead” or “physician of the royal necropolis” show the administrative character of this healthcare. One of the oldest systems of healthcare can be reconstructed for the workers’ settlement of Deir el Medina (West Thebes, around 1550 to 1080 BCE). Here the state paid for the workers and their wives (Austen 2014). The official healing profession there included physicians and scorpion conjurors. Probably the wise woman, “the knower,” was outside the state system (Austen 2014).

Ancient pathological finds (Nerlich et al. 2000, Strouhal 2005) show that persons who could no longer take care of themselves because of bodily infirmity nonetheless could live to a good age. From the Instructions of Amenemope it follows that people with bodily or mental limitations should not be ostracized (see Fischer-Elfert 2005b):

Do not laugh at a blind person / and do not mock a dwarf / and do not curse the state of a lame person / Do not mock a man who is in the hand of God / and do be not fierce against him, in order to wound him.

Blindness, dwarfism and various deformations of parts of the body are found in relief and in sculptural representations of high officials, and this shows the social integration of these people. According to the theory attested in the Late Period, that is, according to the “Book of the Temple” (Quack 2005), people with particular bodily and character peculiarities should be excluded from the temple service. This included, among others, those people whose body parts were too big, too little or somehow mutilated, and such people who had white skin, or red skin or were covered with pustules. We know almost nothing about the social and religious practice in individual cases, for example, whether highly placed people like the pharaoh Siptah or the Amun priest Nesparehan could still serve in the temple service despite his ill-formed back because of spinal tuberculosis (Pommerening 2009; Fischer-Elfert 2005b).

## NOTE

1. I want to thank Daniel Snell for the translation of my contribution into English. This chapter is based to a large extent on earlier studies, namely Pommerening (2009, 2016).

## FURTHER READING

Pommerening (2017a,b) and Strouhal et al. (2014) give modern views of the texts and the problems in English.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

# Warfare in Mesopotamia

*Sarah C. Melville*

War, broadly defined as open, declared conflict between organized societies, is one of the most enduring, complex, and multivalent of human activities. This chapter explores how the people of the Ancient Near East waged war from the third millennium to the fall of the Neo-Babylonian Empire in the sixth century BCE. Given the vast temporal and geographical expanse involved, we can consider only those continuities and changes that most affected the state's capacity to field an army, military organization and technologies, tactics, and ideology. Since any one of those topics, in any period under discussion, warrants a monograph, the following overview focuses on Mesopotamia and, where relevant, Hatti, Egypt, Syria-Palestine, Urartu, and Elam. Although evidence is distributed unevenly across time and among different cultures, a wide range of written and material sources sheds light on the conduct and meaning of warfare in the Ancient Near East.

The ancients decried war as evil, but there is no indication that they believed lasting peace possible. To them, conflict "was inherent in an intelligent and complete creation" (Foster 2007, p. 78). People feared war's destructive power, even as they sought its potential benefits. Warfare toppled thrones, caused widespread devastation, altered cultures and societies, and depleted populations. But it also spurred state formation and presented opportunities for social advancement and improved living conditions. International conflict inspired technological innovation and fostered the exchange of ideas between ethnic groups and across geographical regions. Over time, as similarly organized opponents faced one another repeatedly, they developed shared practices and expectations that helped limit the effects of war. At no time was violence the only method of conflict resolution, nor did military leaders usually intend the enemy's annihilation.

Across the Ancient Near East, from at least the fourth millennium BCE, urban-based agrarian societies and nomadic tribes went to war to protect or procure raw materials, human resources, and territory, or to enhance and secure their own power. The ability of a given state to raise an army and maintain it in the field depended on economic and

resource capacity, social organization, and cultural beliefs. Though the restrictions that these imposed varied from society to society and over time, everyone faced similar military challenges, which they dealt with as best they could. The following practical constraints shaped warfare in the Near East throughout ancient times:

- Everyone was associated with an authority figure – a clan patriarch, tribal chief, city ruler, or king – who made military decisions and led armies.
- An army could stay in the field only for as long as it had access to food, water, weapons, and crucial gear.
- Warfare was seasonal. Laborers could only leave their fields for limited periods, usually late spring through early fall, when crops were available to forage. Occasionally, well-equipped armies overwintered at a siege site or conditions allowed an extended campaign season.
- Due to the dry, rugged environment, the availability of potable water and food restricted armies to established routes of march.
- Well-organized and resourced states could support standing forces and manage campaigns into distant territory, but only the most powerful could hold and rule what they conquered.
- Temporary levies made up the bulk of all armies, and the state provided their equipment, sustenance, and remuneration.
- Armies consisted of infantry and equestrian units armed with hand-held weapons and armor. Equipment varied a great deal, and was reused and repurposed as necessary.
- Battle and siege tactics, military strategy, engineering, and fortification styles were established early and retained their fundamental character thereafter.
- Technological change tended to be incremental rather than revolutionary, since it took time for new techniques to spread, and new materials, such as iron, to become widely available.

Although states expanded and contracted, rose to prominence, and disappeared altogether, no king ever achieved widespread, lasting peace.

## Kings, Gods, and Warfare

Monarchy, like religion, remained central to state organization and military power throughout ancient times. The risks entailed in warfare required justification; therefore, military action became inextricably bound up with ideologies of kingship and religion (Pongratz-Leisten 2015; Mander 2016).

During the Early Dynastic Period in Mesopotamia (2900–2350 BCE), priest-kings led armies on behalf of their gods. Gradually, power shifted from temples to the crown, but the relationship between the two institutions always remained symbiotic. When kingship became hereditary toward the end of the period, the king solidified his role as intermediary between the divine and earthly realms, and so outranked all other humans. The warning that the biblical prophet Samuel gave to the Hebrews about monarchy applied equally well to other Near Eastern cultures: “This is what the king who will reign over you will

claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots... and you yourselves will become his slaves" (Samuel 8:10–18).

In ideological terms, war became a contest between kings that the gods decided, whereby the victorious ruler proved his legitimacy, and the loser revealed his inadequacy. Success on the battlefield could transform a rebel or usurper into a legitimate king, while defeat signaled the gods' disapproval. Both Sargon of Akkad (2334–2279 BCE) and Sargon II of Assyria (721–705 BCE) used this kind of retrospective reasoning to justify seizing power, while the latter's death in battle tainted the memory of his otherwise successful reign (Melville 2016a).

Before going to war, and throughout the campaign, leaders sought to secure the gods' support through divination. In one Early Dynastic (2900–2350 BCE) text, for example, the king of the Sumerian city-state, Lagash, described how the city's patron god, Ningirsu, came to him in a dream and foretold the defeat of neighboring Umma (Cooper 1986, pp. 34–35). Using a more direct approach, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar I (1125–1104 BCE) claimed that the god Shamash "ordered him to plunder the land of Elam" (Frame 1995 = RIMB 2.4.10.15). Divination queries followed standard procedures and language. A typical Assyrian example from the seventh century BCE asked:

God, Shamash, great lord, give me a firm positive answer to what I am asking you! From this day, the 10th day of this month, Sivan of this year, to the 29th day, the day of the moon's disappearance of this month Sivan of this year, for 20 days and nights, passing and the coming days included, the term stipulated for the performance of (this) extispicy, within this stipulated term, (should) Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, who is now intent on sending men, horses and troops, as he wishes, to Sirish, (and) whom your great divinity knows, in accordance with the command of your great divinity, Shamash, great lord, (and) your favorable decisions, should the subject of this query, Esarhaddon, king of Assyria, strive and plan? Should he send men horses and troops, as he wishes to Sirish? Is it pleasing to your great divinity? (Starr 1990, #28)

The text goes on to question how much resistance the enemy would offer and whether the Assyrians would successfully "kill what there is to kill, plunder what there is to plunder, and loot what there is to loot." Prognostication in its various forms not only guided commanders, but encouraged the troops to endure the hardships involved in war (Sazonov 2016; Abrahami 2016). In the first millennium, when empires encompassed vast territories, astronomical divination kept the king informed about the distant areas he ruled.

Kings and priests performed rituals during every stage of a campaign. A variety of experts, including a celestial diviner, extispicy priest, exorcist, and lamentation priest usually accompanied armies on campaign (Rochberg 2004, pp. 44–97). No decision could be made without consulting the gods. During the Old Babylonian period (c. 2000–1550 BCE), one commander assured the king of Mari, "I had extispicies (reading of sheep's entrails) done for the well-being of the troops of my lord... and the extispicies were sound, and the troops of my lord may move from their position" (Heimpel 2003, p. 216 = ARM 26 103). If a reading proved negative, priests sometimes repeated the process or looked at other kinds of

omens. Pre-battle ceremonies like the Babylonian rite called “So that in battle arrows do not come near a man,” promised physical protection and thus helped allay soldiers’ fears (Frame and George 2005, p. 281).

Post-battle rituals purified the participants from the blood taint incurred in combat, thanked the relevant gods, and celebrated victory. After his defeat of the Urartians in 714 BCE, Sargon II enthused: “I entered my camp with joy and exultation, with players on lyres and flutes. To Nergal, Adad, Ishtar, lords of battle, to the gods who dwell in heaven and the netherworld, and to the gods who dwell in Assyria, I offered splendid sacred sacrifices” (Thureau-Dangin 1912 = TCL III 156–163). The same king cited an eclipse and a favorable extispicy to justify his unconventional side-campaign against the city-state Muşasir in the same year (Thureau-Dangin 1912 = TCL III 315–320). Rulers such as Sargon of Akkad (2334–2279 BCE) and Shalmaneser III of Assyria (859–824 BCE) washed their weapons in the sea in purification rites to symbolize that they had reached the edge of the civilized world (Frayne 1993, p. 14; Grayson 1996, p. 9). Upon returning home, additional ceremonies involving military parades, the dedication of plunder to temples, and the punishment of vanquished foes confirmed a war’s legitimacy (Noegel 2007; Nadali 2013; Niditch 2014). Such events also invited civilians to appreciate the king and army, and helped combatants reintegrate into society (Spalinger and Armstrong 2013; Kelle 2014; Melville 2016b). A successful war not only reinforced the established social hierarchy, but maintained order and affirmed cultural identities.

## **Warfare in the Third Millennium**

Fortifications, cylinder seals, skeletal remains, and military artifacts found in fourth millennium levels at Syro-Mesopotamian sites such as Hamoukar and Habuba Kabira, indicate that organized warfare advanced along with fortified cities and systems of government well before writing had fully developed (Nadali 2007; Algaze 2008, p. 70). Whether the earliest settlement walls served to keep out raiders intent on stealing cattle and goods, or armies set on conquest is disputed, but by the Early Dynastic period (c. 2900–2350 BCE) war had become a complex, organized enterprise.

### ***Early Dynastic Mesopotamia (c. 2900–2350 BCE)***

In southern Mesopotamia a constellation of city-states shared the Sumerian language, culture, agricultural way of life, and warfighting methods. Urban defense systems included ditches, earthen ramparts, and massive mudbrick curtain walls punctuated by fortified gateways (Zingarello 2015; Butterlin and Rey 2016; Rey 2016). Some Sumerian city-states formed alliances for religious purposes, mutual economic benefit, or to counteract a more powerful enemy. In roughly 2600 BCE the confederation, the Kiengi League, included the wealthy city-states Shuruppak, Kish, Umma, Nippur, Adab, and Lagash. The king of Kish probably led this supra-regional organization whose name, meaning the “assembly place”, referred to the area where soldiers from these cities mustered before going on campaign (Foster 2005b, p. 83; Steible 2015). The object of the campaigns is not clear, however. Nor did the confederation prevent war between its members or protect them from ruin.

Both Shuruppak and Kish were destroyed during this period, whereas a border conflict between Umma and Lagash continued intermittently for over 150 years without achieving a clear resolution (Cooper 1986; Frayne 2008; Mander 2016, pp. 11–14). When in about 2520 BCE a dispute arose over a strip of land located between the two city-states, the king of Kish, as nominal head of the Kiengi League, arbitrated a settlement and set up a new boundary marker. Nearly a hundred years later (c. 2450), after the king of Umma removed the stone and seized the land, the conflict erupted again. This time the king of Kish did not intervene, for his city had lost power and Lagash had dropped out of the league (Sallaberger and Westenholz 1999, p. 30, no. 58). Once again, the king of Lagash emerged victorious and established new borders. A few years later, when the king of Umma seized one of his enemy's irrigation canals, the war started up again. Although the rulers of Lagash prevailed each time, they did not attempt to take and destroy Umma. Lagash was strong enough to impose hegemony over Umma, but did not have the manpower to seize and occupy the city. Far from resolving problems, peace provided the loser with the breathing space to re-arm, and as soon as he felt strong enough, hostilities broke out anew.

The inscriptions that narrate the Umma–Lagash war follow a set pattern: a clear statement of the enemy's impious crime, obtaining the gods' approval, victorious battle, celebratory rituals to thank the gods, and the just king's punishment of the enemy (Fink 2016, pp. 55–56). Other contemporary city-states followed similar military-religious procedures. For example, twenty-fourth century letters from the Syrian city Ebla outline the course of its conflict with rival city Mari, and adhere to the typical pattern delineated above (Archi and Biga 2003). These same elements characterize campaign accounts in later periods as well.

Aside from contingents of permanent royal or temple guards, Early Dynastic armies consisted of common levies, occasionally augmented by mercenaries hired from neighboring cities. Spearmen predominated, and wielded several types of spears including those affixed with a notched butt knob for throwing atlatl-style (Weber and Zettler 1998, Fig. 140; Schrakamp 2010). Polearms, simple bows, slings, maces, and battle-axes are also attested. Axes took a variety of forms, including those with rounded, flat blades for cutting and those with thinner, heavier blades for piercing. Bronze or copper daggers and short swords were prestige weapons too costly to make for conscripts. Rare depictions of sickle swords and the recurve bow – both characteristic of Middle Bronze Age (2100–1550 BCE) armies – indicate the early invention of these weapons, if not their widespread adoption (Aruz 2003, Fig. 52 and Plate 98). Tower shields made of metal-studded hide or bundled reeds protected archers and spearmen, who needed both hands to wield their weapons. Evidence of smaller, personal shields does not appear in Mesopotamian art. Leather, copper or bronze helmets, thick capes with appliqué metal discs, and possibly chest protectors served as body protection (Hamblin 2006).

The depiction of massed soldiers on a monument known as the Stele of the Vultures that commemorates the Umma–Lagash war has led to the assumption that the Sumerians fielded armies capable of fighting in tight phalanx formations (Gilibert 2004–2005; Hamblin 2006, p. 57; Fink 2016). The fact that Sumerian city-states could not spare large numbers of agrarian workers to complete the training necessary to fight in formation casts doubt on that conclusion. Royal bodyguards could have trained together, but it is more

likely that whatever array soldiers adopted before battle dissolved upon contact with the enemy. After the first exchange of javelins and arrows, battle probably involved loose, shifting groups engaged in hit-and-run close-quarter combat until one side retreated.

The ruler and other elites rode to battle on heavy, solid-wheeled war carts pulled by donkeys, onagers or even bovids. The reins passed through the animals' nose rings and thence to the driver through a metal double-ring affixed to the wagon shaft (Weber and Zettler 1998, Fig. 139). These two- or four-wheeled vehicles carried a fighter and driver. Since the carts' wide turning radius, clumsy rein system, and weight hampered maneuverability, it is likely that they served as transportation to and from the battlefield or as stationary firing platforms, rather than attack vehicles. Indeed, the Stele of the Vultures depicts the king arriving at the battle on his chariot but fighting on foot (Winter 1985; Alster 2003–2004). Large javelin-holding quivers attached to the cart augmented the chariot warriors' firepower. The driver would also have access to javelins for self-protection or to cover the retreat of his passenger.

Not as closely bound together as the southern city-states, polities in northern Mesopotamia and Syria developed a more competitive and aggressive political tradition:

Here were rival polities in walled cities, each with a surrounding territory of smaller settlements, and, unlike Sumer, extensive, uncultivated lands between them peopled by pastoral nomads. There was no central sanctuary as at Nippur, no ideology of a single land, no legitimization of kinship save that won and kept by force of arms. No one could cut off or divert the Euphrates or its tributaries to bring a city to submission, so any would-be conqueror had to breach its massive walls. Alliances were forged regularly, by treaties with solemn oaths or by marriage, and broken just as regularly. (Foster 2016, p. 165)

Ebla and Mari, the most powerful Syrian cities, waged war almost yearly to punish recalcitrant allies or challenge enemies (Biga 2015). People in the region developed complex fortification systems to withstand the siege towers and battering rams raised against them (Nadali 2009). In the north, as in Sumer, “successful wars always saw a major exchange of goods from the royal treasury, the income of booty and the expenditure of gifts for the victorious general and his army...” (Sallaberger and Schrakamp 2015, pp. 34–35). Victory also brought an influx of prisoners, some of whom faced slavery or execution. Those more fortunate had families or city leaders to pay for their ransom (Catagnoli 2012, pp. 49–50).

### *The Sargonic Period (2334–2113 BCE)*

The warfare of Early Dynastic Mesopotamia led to a period of even greater conflict. After usurping the throne from the king of Kish in about 2334 BCE, Sargon of Akkad initiated a period of conquest and change that would set the stage for future empires. The Sargonic dynasty created the world's first territorial empire with provincial administrations and a central government (Foster 2016, pp. 80–83). Unlike their predecessors, these Akkadian kings managed to consolidate power, resources, and production sufficiently to embark on long-range campaigns and hold vanquished territories. At its height, the Akkadian Empire claimed hegemony over territory as far afield the Persian Gulf (Magan and Marhashi) and the Indus River Valley (Meluhha), as well as formidable city-states in Syria (Ebla, Nagir, and Mari) and Assyria (Assur, Gasur, and Nineveh). Expansion depended on military power.

In contrast to earlier kings, the Akkadian rulers fought almost constantly. The inscriptions of Sargon and his grandson Naram-Sin claim multiple campaigns in a single year (Frayne 1993). Administrative reforms, increased material resources, and manpower reserves afforded the Akkadian kings much greater scope for military activity, for they could support substantial standing forces as well as temporary levies. The process of centralization, through which the crown acquired land, allowed kings to maintain permanent troops by allotting fields to soldiers for cultivation (Foster 1993, p. 27). For example, a tablet from Mugdan (Umm el-Jir), a settlement in Babylonia, records the transfer of land from the local governor to the soldiers of the captain, who oversaw their farm work as well as military activities (Hackman and Stephens 1958 = BIN 8 144). The system offered the advantage of not only feeding soldiers in the off-season, but producing surplus to provision troops on campaign. Attacks on cities became more common under the Sargonic kings. One of Naram-Sin's inscriptions describes the conquest of Armanum, which boasted a triple-wall defensive system (Foster 1982).

In addition to infantry, the Akkadian army included unit officers, city governors, generals, and their support staff, as well as messengers, physicians, diviners, servants, and other administrators (Abrahami and Battini 2008; Schrakamp 2010). Infantry grouped by weapon type probably attacked in sequence. After troops released missiles against the enemy, spearmen moved in for close-order combat, followed by axemen, who dispatched fleeing or wounded enemies (Foster 2016, p. 167). Thrusting weapons included lances with long shafts and a weighted butt knob for balance, and shorter spears without the counter-weight. Axe types ranged from those with narrow, flat blades and to those with thicker, heavier heads and curved handles. Body armor all but disappears from the art of this period, though texts show that the palace issued helmets to spearmen (Foster 1993, p. 27; Schrakamp 2010). The ungainly war carts of the Early Dynastic period seem to disappear from the battlefield as well. Constant warfare eventually led to internal discord and stagnation that invited outside intervention.

### *The Third Dynasty of Ur (2120–2004 BCE)*

Rulers of the Third Dynasty of Ur developed an even more centralized economy focused on territorial expansion. Shulgi, the dynasty's second ruler (c. 2094–2047 BCE), marshalled his resources to secure plunder and access to trade routes, especially in the east (Garfinkle 2014). The economy soon became so militarized that "warfare offered the crown opportunities to create social pathways that bound individuals more closely to the state" (Garfinkle 2013, p. 160). That is, like their Sargonic predecessors, the kings of Ur acquired land that could be distributed to military personnel for services rendered. On the kingdom's periphery, military settlers guarded the border, farmed, and paid taxes to the crown for the privilege (Steinkeller 1987). Weapons, armor, and basic military organization generally followed the Akkadian model (Lafont 2009).

The Ur III system facilitated expansion in the short term, but ultimately proved unsustainable. Even massive cross-country walls erected in northern Mesopotamia could not hold off nomadic incursions. In the wake of the state's collapse, Amorite tribes settled in Sumer and assimilated into the urbanized cultures there, though the disruption caused political fragmentation that inhibited the formation of expansionist states and large

standing armies. The Ur III dynasty marked the final flowering of the Sumerian language, as Akkadian dominated thereafter.

## The Second Millennium

### *The Middle Bronze Age (c. 2100–1550 BCE)*

Political volatility characterized the Middle Bronze Age in the Near East. Resource constraints and relative economic parity necessitated alliances, as regional polities competed with one another for supremacy: Mari, Yamhad, and Qatna in Syria; the kingdom of Assyria in northern Mesopotamia; Eshnunna in central Mesopotamia, and Isin, Larsa, and a newcomer, Babylon, in the south. The kingdom of Elam threatened from southwestern Iran. Ambitious leaders engaged in international intrigue, shifting alliances, economic competition, and conventional warfare until Hammurabi (1792–1750) maneuvered his way into brief supremacy by holding off Elam and defeating Eshnunna and Mari (van de Mieroop 2008; Heimpel 2003).

Kings relied on traditional recruitment strategies to raise large armies of untrained levies augmented and controlled by small contingents of permanent soldiers and officers. Individually, a king could not raise a large enough force to defeat a coalition of his enemies. As one official from Mari described the situation, “There is no king who is strong on his own: Hammurabi of Babylon has a following of ten or fifteen kings, Rim-Sin of Larsa the same, Ibal-pi-El of Eshnunna the same, Amut-pi-El of Qatna the same, and Yarim-Lim of Yamhad has a following of twenty kings” (Dossin 1938, pp. 117–118). If numbers in letters are to be believed, allied forces could be quite large. A letter from Zimri-Lim to Hammurabi about supplying troops for a joint military operation mentions 30 000 men (Sasson 1969, pp. 7–8; ARM II 67). The Mari archive also contains a sequence of letters concerning the long, complex process of levying troops from allies and vassals. In that case, however, Mari’s combined forces amounted to only 3900 men (Heimpel 2003, pp. 89–93).

One of the period’s most important advances in military technology involved the chariot. Technical innovations and wider availability of the domesticated horse inspired the development of the proper battle chariot. The abandonment of the old rope and nose-ring in favor of a bridle and rein system improved maneuverability and maximized horsepower. Spoked wheels and better engineering made for a faster, lighter cab, now widened to enable the warrior to fight from the moving chariot without the driver getting in the way. Although the chariot required constant maintenance and horses were sometimes in short supply, chariotry soon became the combat arm *par excellence* of Near Eastern armies (Hamblin 2006, pp. 145–153).

Despite the prevalence of chariots, sieges appear to have been more common than large-scale pitched battles during the Middle Bronze Age (Burke 2008). For the first time, texts describe the construction of massive ramps to allow siege towers and battering rams to pass over ditches and earthen ramparts, and approach the city walls. One letter to Zimri-Lim of Mari reporting on the siege of the city Razama states that the besiegers “heaped up a ramp toward the city (and) the front of the ramp reached the base of the city

wall” (Vidal 2009, ARM 14 104). The letter goes on to describe how the defenders responded by making multiple sorties and even digging tunnels, presumably to undermine the ramp. Similar examples demonstrate that the full range of siege tactics had become commonplace by this time. Attackers tried blockade, frontal assault, mining, sapping, escalade, and ruse, while defenders countered by undermining ramps, burning siege towers and battering rams, making sorties, and constructing secondary walls (Eph'al 2009). The Old Babylonian scribal curriculum even included mathematical word problems about siege ramps, although the problem sets did not reflect military practice. The army did not need to use mathematics to engineer the ramps, which simply required manpower, hard work, and whatever material soldiers could find (Melville and Melville 2008; Melville 2014).

### ***Late Bronze Age (c. 1550–1150 BCE)***

During the Late Bronze Age, as economic development led once again to increased centralization, the theater of war expanded, and richer states extended their power over a widening circle of neighbors. Geographically distant peoples, who had previously interacted chiefly through trade, diplomacy, or the occasional raid, now met in open warfare. In Egypt, the 18th (c. 1550–1298 BCE) and 19th Dynasty (1297–1190 BCE) pharaohs pushed northward into the Levant, where they competed against the Mitanni in Syria and the Hittites from Anatolia for hegemony over Syro-Palestinian city-states such as Ugarit and Kadesh. In Mesopotamia, the Kassites, having taken over Babylonia from the east, sought to control Assyria and thereby check the Mitannian threat, while the Assyrians tried with varying success to resist both the Mitanni and the Kassites.

Each power relied on vassals, allies, and military force to gain the upper hand and neutralize enemies. For example, a treaty between the Hittite king Tudhaliya IV (c. 1237–1209 BCE) and his Syrian vassal Shaushgamuwa of Amurru explained the balance of power, at least as Tudhaliya saw it: “The kings who are equal to me (are) the king of Egypt, the king of Karduniya (Babylon), the king of Assyria [and the king of Ahhiyawa]. If the king of Egypt is My Majesty’s friend, he shall also be your friend, but if he is My Majesty’s enemy, he shall also be your enemy,” and so on (Singer 2003, p. 99). Treaties, diplomacy, and dynastic marriage ties decreased the number of major international conflicts, and when war did break out, common practices and shared expectations helped to limit the destruction (Podany 2012). However, kings relied on their armies to create an impression of power. Anyone without a strong military or the protection of an overlord would be easy prey for enemies.

During this time, the composite bow made of strips of wood, horn, and sinew glued together saw widespread use in warfare, especially among elite chariot troops. Infantry in the Assyrian army still used the less expensive simple bow (Llop 2016, p. 213). Armor developed as well. Helmeted chariooteers and archers adopted the bronze scale-armor jerkin, while shield-bearing infantry typically wore only leather or bronze helmets. Shields of varying sizes and shapes were constructed of wicker, or wood and leather with metal bosses. The bronze sickle sword spread throughout the Near East, but was particularly popular in the Levant and Egypt (Maxwell-Hyslop 2002). Sharpened along its outer edge like a scimitar, the sword was used for slashing, rather than stabbing. As improved metal

technology increased production capability, short, stabbing swords gradually replaced the sickle sword. Other close-combat weapons included clubs, metal rods, wooden staves, and metal-sheathed staffs (Darnell and Manassa 2007, pp. 74–75). Bronze bladed lances, spears and javelins, as well as maces, axes, and slings also continued in use.

Chariotry attained a new level of prestige during this period. Excavated Egyptian chariots reveal that the lighter-weight cabs and a better yoking system increased speed and maneuverability, so that chariot warriors could fight on the move (Cantrell 2011; Crouwel 2013; Genz 2013). Effective chariotry required horses trained to work in teams. A Hittite tablet known as the Kikkuli Text (c. 1350 BCE) describes the training of chariot horses and attests to the greater attention paid to equitation across the Near East (Raulwing 2005, CTH 284). Chariots played an integral role on the battlefield, but chariot tactics continue to be a matter of controversy, since no text or image portrays chariot maneuvers in detail (Vita 2008; Archer 2010, pp. 58–66).

The earliest detailed descriptions of battle tactics date to the Late Bronze period. In about 1457 BCE at Megiddo in northern Israel, the Egyptian army of Thutmose III engaged rebellious Canaanite vassals led by the king of Kadesh (Redford 2003, 2006). Thutmose outwitted his adversary by choosing the direct, but treacherously narrow route to the battlefield. When the armies engaged:

The southern flank of his majesty's army was at the southern mountain [by?] the Kina [brook] and the northern flank was northwest of Megiddo, while his majesty was in the middle of them, [the god Amun] protecting his body in the melee and the strength of [the god Seth fills] his limbs. There his majesty overpowered them while leading his army. They fled, falling headlong [toward] Megiddo with fearful faces, having abandoned their horses and chariots of gold and silver in order that they be dragged and hoisted by their clothes into the city. (Hoffmeier 2003, p. 11)

The Pharaoh led the center division of the three deployed, and successfully routed his enemies, who fled into Megiddo, hoping to withstand a siege. Afterward, the Egyptians enclosed the city with a ditch, rampart, and palisade of “fresh branches of all their fruit trees” (Hoffmeier 2003, p. 12). The successful blockade forced a surrender, after which the Egyptians, following common practice, plundered the city and deported the populace. Apparently, the Egyptians had enough troops to circumvallate Megiddo, but not the quantity or quality necessary to risk a frontal assault. That Thutmose chose blockade over attack also indicates that his troops had access to sufficient food and water to starve out their enemies.

Another Egyptian Pharaoh, Ramses II (1279–1213 BCE), battled the Hittite king, Muwatalli II (1295–1272 BCE), at Kadesh, in Syria, in about 1274 BCE (Kitchen 2003, pp. 32–40; Spalinger 2005, pp. 209–234). Ramses' battle accounts give insight into military tactics. Allegedly, the Hittites tried to misdirect the Egyptians by sending two men posing as deserters to give false information about their army's whereabouts. The ruse might have worked had the Egyptians not beaten the truth out of a second group of captured Hittite soldiers. Subsequently, the Hittite army launched a surprise attack on the Egyptian flank, and having routed it, pursued the fleeing troops straight to Ramses' camp. Despite the surprise, the Pharaoh managed to defeat Muwatalli's army decisively.

The Assyrians, who fielded similarly organized armies (Postgate 2008), also wrote about deception in warfare. The Epic of Tukulti-Ninurta I (c. 1244–1207 BCE) describes how his Kassite enemy, Kashtiliash IV (c. 1232–1225 BCE), dragged-out a pre-battle exchange with the Assyrian king “as a ruse until he could draw up his warriors, and until he had made ready his battle plan, the chariotry was held back” (Foster 2005a, p. 311). After achieving the desired delay, and despite resistance from his own soldiers, Kashtiliash then launched a surprise attack on the unprepared Assyrians, who managed to withstand the onslaught and triumph. Notwithstanding the propaganda value of accounts that painted the enemy as perfidious, it appears that using deception to gain a battlefield advantage was not unusual. These battle accounts demonstrate that desertion, trickery, ambush, and spying were standard aspects of war during this period.

Although the international system maintained stability for a time, it collapsed in the twelfth century, when a lethal combination of crises overwhelmed the great powers (Drews 1993; Cline 2015). Already weakened by famine, plague, natural disasters, and internal political divisions, the Hittites, Kassites, and Syro-Palestinian city-states could not defend against armies of dispossessed poor and migrating tribes bent on killing and taking plunder, rather than negotiating the balance of power. Even though the Egyptians and Assyrians lost territory, they managed to hold off their invaders. The type of international diplomacy and wars that characterized the Late Bronze Age gave way to more intense competition and conflict in the new millennium.

## The First Millennium

Experienced players on the geopolitical stage – Assyria, Babylonia, Elam, Egypt, and the Syro-Palestinian states – faced relatively new competitors, such as Phrygia and Urartu. Semi-nomadic Aramaean, Chaldean, Median, and Arab tribes, together with less powerful peripheral city-states, had a destabilizing effect on the larger powers. Efforts to gain hegemony over unreliable buffer kingdoms often led to proxy or “cold” war situations, as skirmishes, espionage, and political posturing kept border zones on perpetual alert. Despite cataclysmic changes to the geopolitical map, the fundamental rules of political discourse and warfare survived. Kings represented their people before the gods and led armies, while defeat suggested divine anger and abandonment, and the “might makes right,” “winner takes all” mentality persisted.

Since the textual and material evidence from Assyrian sites far exceeds that of other contemporary cultures, the following emphasizes Assyrian military practices. Fighting nearly constantly, they gradually came to dominate the Near East and rule the largest empire the world had yet seen. In many ways, however, the Assyrian military was the product of 2000 years of Near Eastern warfare. Overall, they did not diverge much from the traditional ways and means of war. Rather, they gained the advantage through superior political acuity, organizational ability, technological knowhow, and logistical capability. The strategy of always taking war to the enemy protected the Assyrian heartland from invasion and encouraged economic development there. Although the Urartians, Babylonians, Elamites, Egyptians, Phrygians, and Syro-Palestinian states put similar armies in the field, they rarely won wars against the Assyrians, who could recover more quickly from setbacks.

Early on, however, the Assyrians struggled to regain territory lost to the Aramaeans during the crisis at the end of the Bronze Age in the twelfth century BCE. Ashurnasirpal II (883–859) and Shalmaneser III (858–824) reestablished hegemony over the Euphrates and initiated the first stage of Assyrian expansion. Since reduced territory had severely limited the economic and manpower resources these kings could dedicate to war, they could not govern directly all the lands they conquered. Instead, they made yearly campaigns to plunder target areas, enforce a tentative hegemony, and deprive enemy leaders of the means to fight back.

The ninth-century Assyrian kings used terror as an effective way to prevent further resistance. Massive building projects, monumental inscriptions, and narrative reliefs added to the impression of overwhelming might. A typical campaign account claimed:

At that time, in my accession year (and) in my first regnal year, after I nobly ascended the royal throne, I mustered my chariots and troops. I entered the pass of the land Simesi (and) approached the city Aridu, the fortified city of Ninnu. I besieged the city, captured (it), massacred many of his (people), (and) carried off booty from him. I erected a tower of heads in front of the city (and) burned their adolescent boys (and) girls. While I was residing in the same city, Aridu, I received tribute from the people of the lands/mountains Hargu, Harrnasa, Simesi, Simerra, Sirisu, (and) Ulmanu: teams of horses, oxen, sheep, (and) wine. (Grayson 1996, Shalmaneser III AO. 102.2. i 14b–18a)

Without the economic foundation to support a large standing army and provincial administrations, fear and rapine proved the most effective ways to win the resources needed to improve the Assyrian core and fund additional expansion. As the Assyrian capacity to wage war increased, wholesale massacres diminished, though brutal punishments remained an accepted way to communicate political messages, as indeed they always had (Radner 2015). The Assyrians stand out from other Near Eastern societies not in their willingness to use violence for political purposes, but in their willingness to advertise the fact. Extreme punishments, such as flaying and impalement, also helped the king fulfill ideological expectations, for he was duty-bound to avenge Assyrian deaths and punish treaty-breakers.

In the Assyrian army, annual levies always predominated, but by the middle of the eighth century, and increasingly thereafter, the core consisted of regulars that garrisoned frontier forts, guarded provincial capitals, or served the royal family. Governors raised and outfitted troops in their provinces through a conscription system similar to those used in earlier periods. The crown appointed recruitment officers to oversee the annual muster and the maintenance of standing forces (Postgate 2008). Except for specially exempted religious centers, such as Assur and Harran, every village, town, and city within the empire had to supply men for military service. Troops raised from among conquered peoples, whom the Assyrians deported to new areas, served in special divisions under the command of the chief eunuch, who also administered the equestrian corps of the standing army (Oded 1979; Dezső 2012b).

From the ninth century on, the Assyrian kings also made special arrangements with tribal groups, such as the Gureans from Anatolia or Itu'eans from the Middle Euphrates, to serve as auxiliaries. The Itu'eans proved particularly versatile, acting as military police,

messengers, and reconnaissance forces (Postgate 2000, pp. 100–104). In one letter, for example, the governor of Assur asked the king to transfer 100 Itu'eans from Arrapha to oversee a group of carpenters in his (the governor's) absence (Parpolo 1987, # 97). As heavy spearmen, Gurrean auxiliaries wore a distinctive crested iron helmet with cheek pieces, a chest protector, and boots. The auxiliary light archers, the Itu'eans, wore no armor of any kind, preferring their native short kilt, headband, and bare feet.

Assyrian heavy spearmen of the standing army wore conical iron helmets and scale armor, as distinct from the Gurrean auxiliaries or levies equipped with the conical helmets but no body armor (Barron 2010; Dezső 2012a). Neo-Assyrian kings standardized weaponry to the degree possible without modern mass production techniques. In addition to composite recurve bows, Assyrian soldiers used spears about nine feet long, with iron or bronze tanged or socketed blades. Officers carried maces to designate rank, and most soldiers carried short, multipurpose stabbing swords as backup in case their primary weapon failed. Fully armed soldiers carrying large wicker or leather woven body-shields protected vulnerable archers and slingers, who did not wear body armor or use shields. Spearmen and sword-wielding levies used shields of varying sizes and materials, including round or elliptical wicker bucklers, small rectangular or oval shields, and larger round shields made of wood or leather and bronze, similar to the Greek hoplite's shield (de Backer 2016).

Equestrian units played an important role in first millennium armies. After the ninth century, Assyrian chariots became increasingly larger and heavier. By the seventh century, they had large spoked wheels reinforced with iron hobs for traction. Teams of three to four horses pulled an extended cab that held up to four men: a driver, a shield man, and one or two fighters (Postgate 2000, pp. 93–98; Dezső 2012b). The Assyrians often absorbed the chariotry of conquered foreign armies into their own forces. After defeating the Syrian city of Hamath in 720, for example, Sargon II (721–705 BCE) drafted 200 chariots into his army, and he acquired 50 more when he captured Carchemish in 716 (Dalley 1985). Throughout the Neo-Assyrian period chariots continued to play a battlefield role, but after Sargon's reign emphasis shifted to cavalry, and by the time of the Assyrian Empire's last great king, Ashurbanipal (669–627 BCE), sculptured palace reliefs no longer depicted Assyrian chariots in combat. Urartian chariotry was similar to that of the Assyrians, whereas in the seventh century BCE, the Elamites fielded unusual flatbed war carts. The Elamite vehicles had large, multi-spoked wheels and an unprotected body, so that all the occupants had to sit or kneel (Barnett 1975, Figs 147, 151).

Cavalry revolutionized warfare in the ninth century, when for the first time, mounted soldiers became a regular combat arm of the Assyrian army. At the time of Shalmaneser III (859–824 BCE) troopers rode in pairs, with one rider controlling the reins of both horses while the second discharged a bow. Without saddles, stirrups, or martingales (rein holders), riders could not control their horses while fighting. Cooperative cavalry pairs proved an ingenious, if ultimately unsatisfactory, solution to this problem. Early equestrians could not operate together in formation because riders sat too far back on the horses' withers to control their mounts well enough to coordinate with other rider-pairs (Archer 2010, p. 67). Within a century, the martingale and forward seat positioning gave riders sufficient control to ride and fight as individuals, although apparently they never managed the type of formations that characterized later Greek and Roman cavalries.

The idea of cavalry spread quickly throughout the Near East, and different cultures developed their preferred tactics and weapons. Unlike the Assyrian cavalrymen, who carried both thrusting spears and bows, Urartian horsemen favored javelins, while the Israelites rode as archers, and Elamites fielded regular, spear-carrying cavalry (Gökce and İşik 2014; Cantrell 2011). During the same period, Arab nomads rode camels into battle. Each camel carried a driver and an archer (Barnett 1975, Fig. 174).

The need to procure horses drove interstate competition over control of trade routes and access to good breeding land, particularly in Iran and eastern Anatolia. Indeed, the inability of chariots to operate effectively in mountainous terrain may have inspired the development of cavalry in the first place (Archer 2010, p. 71). Always struggling to provide mounts for the army, Assyrian kings demanded horses as tribute, fought and traded for them, and collected them as tax payment. The crown built up vast herds of mares kept in state-run corrals for breeding. Some of the larger horse breeds, such as Kushite horses from Egypt, were reserved for chariot teams, while the sleeker breeds from the Taurus and Zagros Mountains made better cavalry mounts (Heidhorn 1997). Mules, donkeys and sometimes camels served as pack animals.

Under the Assyrians, campaigning reached a new level of complexity that required more, specialized personnel: engineers to build camps, bridges, and siege machinery; spies to gather intelligence; foragers; grooms; scouts and messengers. In addition, doctors, diviners, scribes, cooks, and body servants attended the king and other elites. Some soldiers managed prisoners, deportees, and plunder including horses, cattle, sheep, and goats. On campaign, high-ranking officers lived in large, comfortable tents set up within a fortified enclosure. However, most soldiers probably slept in the open around campfires, cooked their own food, and looked after their own wounds.

Extended campaigning required setting up distinct spheres of supply, since consumption quickly exceeded transport capacity. As the troops mustered and then marched through home territory, they could live off distributed rations or provisions retrieved from prepared depots along the way, and when a campaign took the army into allied or subject territory, it could expect to receive food and fodder locally. In enemy lands, the army depended on skilled foragers to collect small cattle, grain, and other foodstuffs (Marriott and Radner 2015). Soldiers received some rations, but starvation and its attendant diseases always threatened.

As in other periods, battle tactics received cursory attention in campaign accounts, and so it is difficult to discern exactly how the Assyrians and their contemporaries fought. Texts indicate that armies could carry out maneuvers such as ambush, flanking, double envelopment, or oblique order attack (Scurlock 1997; Nadali 2010; Fagan 2010). Large-scale pitched battles were relatively rare during this period, for they proved too costly for armies of equal strength and a poor gamble for those facing longer odds. During his 17-year reign, for example, Sargon II (721–705 BCE) recorded only five major battles, three of which occurred in a single year, 720 BCE (Melville 2016a, p. 194). The more usual campaign strategy involved devastation or siege.

Looting and burning took vital stores away from the enemy and provided for the campaigning army without entailing much risk. Devastation also put pressure on the enemy to do battle or capitulate. Opponents rarely opted to meet the Assyrians in open battle, but fled into fortified cities in hopes of withstanding a siege. Depending on conditions, the

Assyrians sent sappers to undermine the walls, or build ramps to bring siege towers, ladders, and battering rams within striking distance. Contingents of archers and slingers provided covering fire for attacking soldiers, while cavalry met enemy sorties or cut off escape attempts (Eph'al 2009; de Backer 2013). Although the Assyrians mastered siege technology and tactics, difficult terrain or campaign conditions sometimes prevented the use of towers and battering rams. In the Zagros mountains, for example, they often had to make costly frontal assaults without the protection of siege engines.

Once a city had been captured and the surrounding territory subdued, the Assyrians usually deported the populace to new lands (Oded 1979). As Sennacherib (704–681 BCE) recorded such a situation:

I surrounded (and) conquered the city Bīt-Kilamzāḥ, their fortified city. I brought out of it people, young (and) old, horses, mules, donkeys, oxen, and sheep and goats, and I counted (them) as booty. I destroyed, devastated, (and) turned into ruins their small(er) settlements, which were without number. I burned with fire the pavilions (and) tents that they relied upon, and reduced (them) to ashes. (Grayson and Novotny 2012, 3.22–23)

Widespread destruction of property and crops made it impossible for the indigenous people to stay where they were, thus forcing them into dependence on their conquerors. Like the Assyrians, the Urartians and Babylonians also carried out mass deportations (Çilingiroğlu 1983).

After nearly 300 years of supremacy, the Assyrian Empire collapsed. The war that brought it down dragged on for more than two decades (626–609 BCE). Attrition finally took its toll and the army could not withstand simultaneous invasions from the Babylonians and Medes. The Assyrian state never recovered, and the mantle of power passed to the Babylonians. The Neo-Babylonian dynasty took over most of Assyria's imperial territory and based their administration on the Assyrian model. Little is known about the Babylonian army, which appears to have been very similar to its Assyrian predecessor (MacGinnis 2010). In 539 BCE, the short-lived Babylonian Empire gave way to the Persians, the first of a long line of foreign invaders into the Near East.

## Conclusion

People in the ancient world did not exercise the level of control over their environment, bodies, and daily lives that we enjoy today. Survival and the effort to secure a better future for family or clan fostered competition and opportunism, and created social hierarchies. Elites exploited weaker folk, but the best leaders aligned personal aims with the needs of the group. If the chance for gain arose, no one could safely postpone action, for passivity signaled weakness and invited enemy intervention. Under such conditions, warfare not only proved inevitable, but thrived.

Even though the state that could maintain the largest army usually prevailed, Near Eastern peoples understood that dominance was impermanent. No matter how successful a king, the gods might abandon him, and his victorious army fail. Contingency, self-interest, and opportunism thus made lasting peace impossible. Yet these same factors

sometimes helped prevent unnecessary bloodshed. Leaders who recognized no hope of victory rarely offered resistance when a stronger foe threatened. It was easier to submit, survive, and fight again another day. Hence, alliances shifted, and political expedience made loyalty transient. The various peoples of the Near East not only brought us the first wars, but the first peace treaties. They created the notion of just war and developed religious ideologies that helped both the victor and the vanquished find meaning in their experiences. Although the technologies of war have changed drastically since ancient times, the political and social realities of conflict have remained remarkably constant.

## FURTHER READING

A recent general work on Ancient Near Eastern warfare is Trimm (2017). Neumann et al. (2014) is a collection of papers devoted to aspects of ANE warfare, while Richardson (2011) discusses new trends in the military history of Mesopotamia. On Early Dynastic and Bronze Age war in Mesopotamia and Egypt, see Hamblin (2006). For warfare and diplomacy in the Bronze Age, see Podany (2012). Beal (1992) and Lorenze and Schrakamp (2011) deal with the Hittite military, while Spalinger (2005) treats ancient Egypt. Recent contributions on Neo-Assyrian warfare include Fales (2010), Fuchs (2011), Dezső (2012a,b), and Melville (2016a). On siege operations, see Eph'al (2009) and De Backer (2013). On rituals and religion in war, see Rivaroli (2015), Abrahami (2016), Kelle et al. (2014), and Ulanowski (2016). Recent works devoted to fortifications include Burke (2008), Mielke (2012), and Frederiksen et al. (2016). For chariots and cavalry, see Abrahami and Battini (2008), Veldmeijer and Ikram (2013), Archer (2010), and Drews (2008). On peace in Mesopotamia, see Foster (2007) and Asher-Greve (2014).

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PART VI

## **INHERITANCES**

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

# The Decipherment of the Ancient Near East

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*Peter T. Daniels*

The decipherment of the Ancient Near East began long before Champollion in 1822 compared the Rosetta Stone's Ptolemy with an obelisk in England's Cleopatra, or Grotefend in 1802 compared recurrent sequences of wedges with the patterns of royal names in Sassanian inscriptions, or even before Jean-Jacques Barthélemy in 1754 compared names in plain Greek with stretches of text in Palmyrene.

In ancient Mesopotamia itself, the past was wondered at and even collected. The Assyriologist R.D. Biggs described:<sup>1</sup>

the “palace museum” in Babylon, built in the time of Nebuchadnezzar. It contained some remarkable antiquities such as the famous lion of Babylon, a statue of Puzur-Ishtar, an Ur III official in Mari, Assyrian stelas and reliefs, as well as inscriptions from various areas of the city of Babylon [and from] Sippar, also a relief with a Hittite hieroglyphic inscription. Some of these items were likely taken as booty on various Babylonian raids. Interestingly, they were not presented to the gods as votive offerings, but were installed in the museum. This museum was obviously kept up since the collection was added to after the time of Nebuchadnezzar and in fact included an inscription of Nabonidus and even a stele of Darius. The collection also included some cuneiform tablets, one of which has a colophon identifying it as the property of Nebuchadnezzar. It seems likely that this museum was not only a royal cabinet of antiquities, but was also open for citizens to view.

The continual recopying and reinterpreting of ancient texts, whether the literary tradition represented by the great epics, or the scholarly tradition recorded in the great lists that were begun almost when writing itself began, is a kind of decipherment. And decipherment in a narrower sense was known as well. Examples exist of the ordinary lists of cuneiform signs (from which schoolboys learned to be scribes) with archaic forms included; to some of them a parallel column of pictorial shapes is added. Although it turns out that these pictures supposed by the ancient scribes were guesses as to the pictograms that

might have underlain the signs they used (that is, they do not match the shapes excavated from two millennia earlier), their very existence shows that at least some people were interested in and aware of the history of their writing system.

Unfortunately, even by the time of Xenophon, Mesopotamian civilization had all but disappeared. Neither he, nor Herodotus before him, nor Alexander's chroniclers after him, took any steps to inform their Greek readers about the writing or texts of the lands they were traversing. (Of course, considering the fantasies that *were* reported about Egyptian writing, this might have been for the best.) What little the worlds of Europe and Islam knew of Mesopotamia was gleaned from the Bible and the Classics. How misleading such sources could be emerges in the work of the great Renaissance polymath Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680; Godwin 2009), whose valiant efforts yielded essentially no valid findings about the Egyptian language (Stolzenberg 2013).<sup>2</sup> For a later age, the quality that could be achieved from such sources shines from every page of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1788); for the end of the age that has been our concern in this volume, a comparable work crowned the career of the abbé Barthélemy (1716–1795), that same scholar who was the first ever to decipher any ancient script.<sup>3</sup> He labored at his immense book for more than 30 years, and in 1788 there appeared the first edition (of three in his lifetime, quickly expanded to seven octavo volumes plus a large volume of plates) of *The Voyage of Young Anacharsis in Greece*, a picaresque novel, a *Bildungsroman*, detailing in four quarto volumes extending upwards of 2500 pages the travels of a fictional Scythian youth around the Greek world of the mid-fourth century BCE. An English translation came out in 1791 and kept being reprinted until 1825 (the only American edition was printed in Philadelphia in 1804, its four volumes matching those of the original French), while the French kept being brought out for more than a century. Every page bristles with footnotes referring the reader to the Greek or Latin source for every factual statement. The hero learns politics and logic straight from Aristotle. But does Anacharsis visit Mesopotamia? He must have done so, to cross into Iran, but the only passage set outside the Greek world (including Ionia on the Asia Minor coast) is a mere six pages devoted to the Persian empire (1788: 3.272–77, chap. lxi). Barthélemy mines the same Classical sources Pierre Briant was to use nearly a quarter millennium later,<sup>4</sup> but from them he constructs not a political history, but rather a description of the splendors of Persepolis and of the *paradisoi* of Persian aristocrats. Anacharsis stays at that belonging to Arsames, a satrap in the west who figures in many a historical anecdote (Briant 2002, index s.v.), but Barthélemy makes of him a sort of *ancien régime* nobleman retired to his estate and surrounded by *philosophes*. It was not the first, and far from the last, time that a writer remade the ancient world in his own image.

Barthélemy cited some of the early modern travelers' descriptions of sites in Persia, but he seems not to have known the books (1772–1778) by the Dane Carsten Niebuhr, who brought back the first drawings of inscriptions from Persepolis (in three similar but distinct scripts) that were accurate enough to be fodder for decipherment; perhaps, in his old age, he would have made progress on them himself. His long life came to an end shortly before the discovery of the Rosetta Stone held out the promise of unparalleled insight into a deceased culture, for Napoleon had invaded Egypt with an army of scholars as well as an army of soldiers (Parkinson 1999). The value of the Rosetta Stone, with inscriptions, presumably versions of the same text in Greek and two varieties of Egyptian, was recognized

immediately as the potential key to the ancient language, but it would be two decades before results were achieved. But besides the antiquities that came back to Paris, the scholars also brought reams of careful, exquisite drawings depicting the glories of the structures on the banks of the Nile.<sup>5</sup> (The soldiers did not fare so well as the scholars: the Stone itself was taken as booty within three years and has been a centerpiece of the British Museum's wonders since 1802.) Upon publication, they stimulated the imagination of a generation of artists, designers, and craftsmen, and the first quarter of the nineteenth century was awash in a style that came to be called Egyptomania. (Its mark on architecture came somewhat later, and erections like The Tombs prison and the 42nd Street Reservoir in New York City and the Washington Monument were some of its later achievements.) Champollion's decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs, announced in 1822, was nearly anti-climactic, and he died young, little acclaimed, his contribution recognized by scholars but not appreciated by the public.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, the relics from western Asia were not being neglected. A high school teacher in Göttingen, Georg Friedrich Grotefend (1775–1853), had been scrutinizing the texts published by Niebuhr. Building on Sylvestre de Sacy's decipherment of royal inscriptions of the Sassanian era (some centuries subsequent to the Achaemenid), he searched the records for patterns of characters that might be read as containing the pattern "Xerxes, great king, son of Darius, great king, son of Hystaspes" (who was not a king), the names he knew from Herodotus. He found these patterns, but he was not familiar with ancient or modern Persian languages; specialists built on his insight over the next decades, and the finishing touches were put on the Old Persian decipherment by Edward Hincks (1792–1866), a Church of Ireland clergyman (son of a Belfast professor), who simultaneously forwarded the interpretation of the other two scripts and, after several years' intensive labor, successfully read the most complicated one, which proved to record the Semitic language that would come to be called Akkadian. (His findings were regularly reported to H.C. Rawlinson in Baghdad, who incorporated them into his own publications on the great inscription at Behistun: his copying of that text was a remarkable achievement but made no contribution to the decipherment; Daniels 2008.)<sup>7</sup> There was, though, not much "Assyriomania" to parallel the earlier Egyptomania, even with the spectacular recovery of countless wall reliefs from excavations by Layard and Botha at Nineveh (Larsen 1996) that came to London, Paris, New York, and many other places and drew respectful crowds (Russell 1997).

Only later in the century, though, when Hincks became the first to recognize a biblical name, that of Omri, king of Israel, in any ancient text (Daniels 1994, p. 43), did Mesopotamia capture the public imagination. Owing to the centrality of the Bible in Western culture, anything that might be seen as illuminating the Bible text seized the public's attention; for the cuneiform civilizations, the decisive discovery was half a large cuneiform tablet bearing part of what was immediately seen to be an epic description of a universal flood. An enterprising newspaper reporter declared that he would return to the spot and dig up the other half of that tablet. Astoundingly, he did exactly that! (Frustratingly, this incredible achievement is said to have happened on the very first day of the expedition, and all else was anti-climactic.) An episode in biblical interpretation that came to be known as *Babel und Bibel*, Babylon and Bible, or "pan-Babylonianism" ensued, where everything pertaining to biblical matters was refracted through a Mesopotamian prism. The effect

was only heightened with the discovery of the “Code” of Hammurapi in 1902, with its startling, nearly word-for-word parallels with Pentateuchal injunctions. Mesopotamian hegemony was briefly interrupted by a second bout of Egyptomania, when the tomb of the boy-king Tutankhamen was discovered in 1922; uniquely, its treasures were intact, not looted in antiquity, and rumors of a “curse” seized the imagination of a credulous public and film industry.

In the middle half of the twentieth century, a quartet of archaeological discoveries promised revolutions in biblical studies, though only one captured the public imagination. First was the accidental finding of the site of Ras Shamra, ancient Ugarit, on the Syrian coast in 1929. Excavation began almost immediately, and clay tablets were found bearing texts in what had to be an alphabet like the Hebrew (though the letters comprised wedge-shaped impressions as in Mesopotamia); decipherment proceeded along three or four lines simultaneously, with several scholars producing nearly identical results in a year or so.<sup>8</sup> The local language proved to be closely related to an ancestor of Hebrew. Most of the documents were of the quotidian sort, so valuable in reconstructing a culture’s lifeways, but among them were copies of epics and other poetic texts that were far more similar to biblical compositions than there was any right to expect. Comprehension of the Hebrew Scriptures’ prosody, grammar, and mythological background were immeasurably improved.

The second and third discoveries were nearly simultaneous, but only one became a household word. In 1947, in war-torn Palestine, Bedouin explorers came across at least one cave in cliffs alongside the Dead Sea (near the site of Qumran), and in this cave scrolls had been hidden in jars nearly 2000 years before. Through wars of politics and religion, scholars studied, archaeologists prospected, and eventually thousands of fragments from nearly intact scrolls to tiny scraps with a letter or two were recovered; they proved to hold both biblical texts (the earliest yet discovered, all but identical to the readings that were standardized some eight centuries later) and sectarian writings whose interpretation continues to be hotly argued to this day. At least some explanation for the renown of the Dead Sea Scrolls may be found in the fact that Edmund Wilson’s account first appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1955, and soon became a best-selling book. The discovery of Gnostic codices at Nag Hammadi in Egypt (in the Coptic language) in 1945 could not boast a popular and eloquent narrator, on the other hand; yet these volumes are as illuminative of the development of Christianity. They represent the writings of a theology that lost out to what proved to be Orthodoxy, as the Scrolls are of the origins of both Christianity and rabbinic Judaism.

Here is where there ought to be a mention of “biblical archaeology,” an approach that in effect sought to “prove” the truth of the Bible by exploring the physical remains of ancient civilizations in the “Holy Land” and related regions. The dean of biblical archaeologists was W.F. Albright, as a writer nearly as prolific and popular as Edmund Wilson but also a combination of excavator and philologist. While archaeology is no longer carried out with such explicitly sectarian motives, with his colleagues G. Ernest Wright and Nelson Glueck and his phalanx of brilliant students, he shaped the twentieth century’s view of the Ancient Near East. His longest-lasting monument is the Anchor Bible series of commentaries, commenced in 1964; many of the originally announced cohort of contributors, adherents to the biblical archaeology approach, did not eventually write their volumes,

but many of those that did produced some of the most readable and illuminating treatments of the biblical texts.<sup>9</sup> (In later years, under the editorship of David Noel Freedman, a much wider range of approaches was welcomed into the series, and as of 2016, all but parts of a couple of books of the entire Bible had been covered, and some of the earlier, directly Albright-influenced volumes were in the course of replacement.) Perhaps the apotheosis of “pan-Ugariticism” can be seen in the Psalms volumes by Mitchell J. Dahood and in Marvin Pope’s Job and Song of Songs. One reviewer remarked that if even a quarter of Dahood’s proposals for emending the text in light of Ugaritic were accepted, biblical philology would be revolutionized; but a wag queried at an international meeting commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Ugarit’s discovery, “Ah, but which 25%?” (Young 1981, p. 190 [edited for politeness]).

The fourth of the twentieth century’s archaeological discoveries that unexpectedly illuminated biblical study was of a tablet archive at Ebla (Tell Mardikh) in Syria in 1975. Some hasty readings and some clever publicity fostered the idea that texts had been found from 2500 BCE in a direct ancestor of Hebrew. M.J. Dahood made the rounds of the cultural institutions giving public lectures during which he would let the first volume of published Ebla texts fall open purportedly at random, pick a line (the language is written in fairly standard cuneiform), and relate it to a Bible passage that had previously been difficult to interpret. After a few years, and the commendably quick publication of the tablets, sobriety set in and it was recognized that the language of Ebla is not so close to Hebrew, but is rather a variety of Akkadian that happened to be used far to the west of where it was expected to be found at the date that proved to be not quite so old as first supposed.

But Oriental studies were not to be left in peace, either to interpret the Bible or more objectively to investigate the origins of Western civilization. With the decolonialization of much of the world in the wake of World War II and largely accomplished by the 1970s, “Third World” voices that had previously been subsumed or co-opted within Euro-American scholarship began to assert themselves and be heard. No longer were the treasures and minutiae of archaeological excavations carted off wholesale to the home institutions of the scholars leading the expeditions; at most the finds were shared, and more likely they remained carefully housed in the institutions of the countries that were home to the antiquities, where visiting scholars could study them and whence they could from time to time be loaned for exhibition abroad.<sup>10</sup> (Egyptomania broke out for the third time when the “Treasures of King Tut’s Tomb” were displayed worldwide. This event had the further consequence of introducing the concept of the “blockbuster” museum show. Art history would never be the same.)

A less benign manifestation of the new intellectual freedom of the former client peoples was resentment of past generations of European intellectuals’ attitude toward “native” peoples. One objection was to the name of the field whose scope is the civilizations of Asia: “Oriental studies,” defining its object (yes, objectified) as “east” of some “objective” standard (i.e., “the West”). (Happily, the field has remained largely free of postmodern modes of scholarship, in which such punning is welcome and perhaps passes for analysis.) An early casualty was the name of the then century-old International Congress of Orientalists, which from 1986 has been the International Congress of Asian and North African Studies;<sup>11</sup> the Oriental Division of the then century-old New York Public Library

in 2002 was renamed; the century-and-a-half-old American Oriental Society has not been. The flood of criticism crested in 1978 with the publication of *Orientalism* by Edward Said (1935–2003), a Columbia University professor of literature, claiming Palestinian Arab heritage, with no discernible qualifications to speak on the topic (he evidently did not even read German, the language of a large majority of Orientalist scholarship). His more outrageous accusations received prompt refutation by the eminent English Islamist Bernard Lewis of Princeton University, at a plenary session of the American Oriental Society in 1980 and in the *New York Review of Books* (Lewis 1982). From Said's scattershot attacks, though, one caution can be salvaged. We do observe that Theodor Nöldeke, writing before the turn of the twentieth century, or even Berthold Spuler, writing at mid-century, devalued Islam.<sup>12</sup> But, aware, we can compensate for bias. It will not stain contemporary scholarship.

More pernicious is unrecognized bias, which figures doubly or triply in another well-publicized affray. Martin Bernal (1937–2013), a scholar of contemporary Chinese politics with a Classical education, tried to explain why Greeks beginning with Herodotus attributed many of the basics of their lifeways to borrowing or inspiration from Egypt, whereas modern Classicists did not. He traced the difference to the late eighteenth century invention of “race” and the infection of antisemitism in the intellectual establishment, such that the scholars who established the paradigms for the study of history were unable to conceive of African or Semitic underpinnings to Western civilization (Bernal 1986). Had he stopped with these historiographic demonstrations, he would have made a real contribution to understanding the development of the discipline; but he opted instead to demonstrate the validity of the ancient view of Greek history, focusing moreover almost entirely on Egypt. Unequipped with the requisite philological tools, he has not persuaded (Bernal 1987–2006). (Meanwhile, the search for connections to the east, more than to the south, is proceeding successfully, led, for example, by Burkert 1992.) However, in no small measure owing to the provocative title *Black Athena* insisted on (he said) by his publisher, he attracted the enthusiasm of “Afrocentric” scholars, who like Said for Asia, seek to redress the neglect and scorn that have been the lot of the civilizations of Africa, by embracing the most discredited aspects of eighteenth century “race” theory and insisting that ancient Egyptians were “black,” so that all good things came “out of Africa.” The result was a right-wing backlash that tries to deny any validity at all to cross-cultural fertilization.

Another misunderstanding of the Ancient Near East by Classicists is associated with Eric Havelock (1903–1988), formerly of the “Toronto School” that formed around Marshall McLuhan. It was Havelock’s claim that true “literacy” was not possible with a non-alphabetic script; neither biblical nor Mesopotamian “literature” deserves the label. But Havelock knew the Semitic texts only in (archaizing) translation.

A last, more recent fallacy in deciphering difficult data impinges indirectly on the Ancient Near East but may stand for many a problem of hasty judgment as well as showing how archaeological evidence can sometimes inform a philological problem. In the remote now-deserts of the Tarim Basin, in what once was called Chinese Turkestan and now comprises part of the semi-autonomous region of Xinjiang (Sinkiang), desiccated corpses (which have come to be called the “mummies of Ürümqi,” though they were not embalmed and Ürümqi is merely the location of the museum where they are housed) of a strikingly European appearance have been found. The first Western investigator to view them and some associated cave paintings leapt to the conclusion that they must represent

the ancestors of people who spoke Tokharian (an Indo-European language discovered early in the twentieth century in manuscript hoards). Only when a specialist in ancient textiles was able to study the grave goods associated with the bodies did it emerge that there were three widely separate finds: the earliest group was buried with sprigs of ephedra, the source of a psychoactive agent now believed to be the key component of the Indic/Iranian mystic beverage *soma/haoma*; the second group in time had textiles remarkably similar to those associated with Celtic burials in Europe; and the latest group's textiles showed clear affinity with the earliest group's. It may thus be tentatively suggested that the earliest of the three communities spoke an undifferentiated Indo-Iranian language (earlier even than the few tantalizing traces of Indic names in the Mitanni cuneiform materials); only the second community spoke an early form of Tokharian; and the latest group represented an Iranian-speaking community.

In this quick survey of modern attitudes toward the Ancient Near East, certain themes recur: the interpretation of ancient relics in contemporary terms; the jumping to hasty conclusions; and the importance of attention to minute detail. Decipherment is the very first task of the philologist, but it does not stop with the interpretation of a script. Everything that comes to us from the past must be deciphered, and the philologist's main occupation is making sense of texts after they have been deciphered.

## FURTHER READING

A few of the decipherments of Ancient Near Eastern scripts are sketched within the text; for fuller accounts, the best available descriptions of most of them are found in Pope (1999). For the decipherments of Palmyrene and Mesopotamian cuneiform, however, reference must be made to Daniels (1988) and (1994) respectively. Summaries will be found in Daniels (1995, 1996b, 2020); the last includes what is meant to be a full bibliography of the original publications of decipherments of ancient scripts. The so-called “paleographic tablets” are discussed in Daniels (1992).

The classic treatment of premodern understandings of Egyptian hieroglyphics is Iversen (1961 [1993]). A dense but informative summary may be found in Pope (1999, pp. 11–59).

The ever-growing literature on the reception of “the Orient” throughout the nineteenth century, particularly in European fine and decorative arts and belles lettres, cannot be gone into here.

The story about recovering the flood tablets with vim can be found in Ceram (1951, pp. 274–278). This book, once immensely popular, is rich with romantic anecdote but less than careful about factual detail; in particular its accounts of decipherments are more fanciful than anything else. A preliminary exposition, based on newly interpreted Akkadian tablets in the British Museum, of the intellectual interactions between Mesopotamian scholars and exiled Jewish intellectuals in the sixth century BCE that led to the integration of the Flood account into Hebrew sacred texts is found in Finkel (2014, esp. ch. 11).

A useful summary of the “Babel and Bible controversy” is Larsen (1995). It continues to be studied, especially in German-language literature (e.g. Johanning 1988; Lehmann 1994); a late echo, controversial in its time and still valuable for its illumination of the relation between Western and Mesopotamian conceptions of the divine, is Finkelstein (1958).

The Laws of Hammurapi should not be considered a “law code” in anything like the modern sense (Roth 1997). For a brilliant exposition of the relevance of ancient law to subsequent Western legal practice, we again turn to J.J. Finkelstein (his 1981, published posthumously, is the first two parts of his study; his 1973, the third).

Concise and extensive overviews of Ugaritology are available in Young (1981) and Watson and Wyatt (1999), respectively; a selection of texts with illuminating introduction and commentary is found in Bordreuil and Pardée (2009).

Wilson (1969) revised his Dead Sea Scrolls book several times; its popularity was rivalled by the work of a scholar rather than a journalist, Millar Burrows, whose two volumes have been reprinted as Burrows (1978). The Scrolls returned to the news decades later, as protests over the languid rate of publication grew, but all of them are now available to scholars in photographs; and, evidently in response to the protests, in scholarly editions. Complete translations, and complete texts and translations, of the non-biblical texts are available in García Martínez (1996) and García Martínez and Tigchelaar (2000) respectively; more readily available and more popularly presented are the many editions of what was originally published as Vermes (1962).

The principal introductions to the Nag Hammadi codices for the general public have been by a scholar whose dissertation dealt with one of the first published texts, beginning with Pagels (1979). The complete collection became available in English in Robinson (1977).

Two recent books offer complementary histories of biblical archaeology; Dever (2003), formerly an arch-secularist, now places his archaeology at the service of the biblical text, while Finkelstein and Silberman (2002) remain staunchly scientific. (I thank Jack M. Sasson for advice on this note.)

An astonishing achievement, all but unknown to the scholarly world, is Albright’s magisterial three-page overview of Near Eastern civilizations, from prehistory down to the Islamic Conquest, published in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1974); in the 1985 revision, it was orphaned as “The example of the Middle East” (the sole example) under the division “Civilizations” in the article “Prehistoric Peoples and Cultures” (vol. 26). Whether it has survived in the online *Britannica* seems impossible to determine using the Search function at the site.

The initial rather sensationalized presentations of the Ebla discoveries were quickly translated in competing accounts by the excavator, Paolo Matthiae (1981), and the epigrapher, Giovanni Pettinato (1981), of the Italian mission at Tell Mardikh. They had been anticipated in English by an overview produced by Berman and Weitzman (1979). Typically, the scientific reconsiderations have not received the publicity of the original biblically-oriented news headlines. The evidence that Eblaite is an outlying form of Akkadian (rather than a close relative of Hebrew) is presented by Krebernik (1996), in a volume honoring the centennial of W.F. Albright’s birth that is overall not inaccessible to the general reader.

The literature on “Orientalism” is extensive, partisan, and polemical. The key documents are gathered by Macfie (2000). From his introductions, and from his own monograph (2002), the impression is received that he wants to embrace Said’s point of view, but that the details make this impossible; Sardar (2003) is more accepting.

Lefkowitz (1996) is ostensibly a rebuttal of Afrocentric claims, but devolves into an attack on Bernal. Lefkowitz and Rogers (1996) collected attacks (some new, some

reprinted) on Bernal and his work and refused to include Bernal's responses (some published, some to be prepared), and they were collected in Bernal (2001). Daniels (1999) is a linguistic critique of aspects of Afrocentrism (unfortunately all accented letters are missing from the webpage).

Havelock's position on ancient literacy is most clearly stated in his brief, valedictory volume (1986). Echoes of his notion can still be found in discussions of the foundations of Western civilization; a sketch of an exposure of its perniciousness is attempted in Daniels (1996a, pp. 27–28).

The principal source for discussion of the problems raised by the Ürümchi materials is Mair (1998). Unfortunately, Barber (1999) was not yet available, and the significance of Barber's contribution to the 1996 conference underlying Mair's publication was not recognized at the time. Daniels (2000) reviews the question, particularly from the linguistic point of view.

## NOTES

1. In his unpublished Presidential Address to the Middle West Branch of the American Oriental Society, Madison, 1979; I am grateful to him for providing me with this paragraph from the manuscript.
2. A claim that medieval Arab scholars could read or had made progress in deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs (El Daly 2005) and in turn influenced Kircher proves to have been based on overinterpretation of certain passages in some of the Arabic writings (Eyma 2005; Daniels 2016).
3. Barthélémy's pioneering achievement exhibits many of the characteristics of a typical decipherment. The fundamental prerequisite is accurate reproductions of the enigmatic materials. Depictions of Palmyrene texts had been available for a century and a half, but, as it turned out, they bore little resemblance to the actual inscriptions and were uninterpretable. But, literally overnight, as soon as responsible engravings of paired Palmyrene and Greek inscriptions were published in London and Paris, Barthélémy was able to interpret them. The least problematic sort of decipherment involves bilingual texts, like these from Palmyra, or indeed like the Rosetta Stone, but bilinguals are not all that common among the world's inscriptions. The Greek inscriptions were seen to contain a number of proper names, and proper names can usually be expected to read fairly similarly in the unknown language as well. The Palmyrene language was known from Classical sources to be similar to a familiar language, namely Syriac (the Christian literary Aramaic language of many Near Eastern churches). After Barthélémy had identified the readings of many of the 22 Palmyrene letters, their similarity in shape to the corresponding Hebrew and Syriac letters became clear.
4. Xenophon, Diodorus Siculus, Quintus Curtius; see Briant (2002).
5. All the plates have been reproduced, much reduced, in a single compact volume (Néret 1994), not to be confused with Néret's selection of about one-fifth of these illustrations for Taschen's "Icons" series, published in 2001 under the same title.
6. Contrary to popular belief, the Rosetta Stone was not by itself the key to Egyptian hieroglyphics. It was easy enough to identify proper names in the text. "Cartouches" (ovals surrounding groups of hieroglyphs) occurred in positions corresponding to the

appearance of the name of the pharaoh Ptolemy in the Greek text, and Barthélemy had suggested years before that the cartouches in Egyptian inscriptions marked royal names, but no name *other than* Ptolemy appeared. It was thus impossible to determine which characters corresponded to which sounds in the name. The name of Cleopatra, however, was found on an obelisk that had been taken to England, and Thomas Young (1773–1829; Robinson 2006), a brilliant but intellectually undisciplined polymath, sent this identification to Champollion (1790–1832; Robinson 2012). There is sufficient overlap in the names that Champollion was able to make tentative assignments of sounds to letters. With these few starting-points, he was able to begin to apply his key insight: that the Coptic language, of contemporary Greek Christians, is a direct descendant of ancient Egyptian, so that Coptic words could provide the key to Egyptian words. The first, and conclusive, result involved another royal name. A cartouche contained what appeared to be a depiction of the sun; the letter *m*, known from Ptolemy; and an unidentified sign, twice. The Coptic word for “sun” is *re*. Champollion guessed at the reading of the final pair of signs, and identified the well-known pharaoh Ramses. This was immensely significant, because it showed that native Egyptian names like Ramses, not just Greek names like Ptolemy and Cleopatra, were written phonetically. The hieroglyphs were thus not some sort of mystical ideography, but a true writing system that recorded the sounds of the language it represented. The conceptual barrier was broken, and Champollion could use Coptic to interpret much Egyptian vocabulary. He had made considerable progress on the grammar of the language by his untimely death at the age of 41.

7. Berman and Weitzman (1979, pp. 85–108) seem to have been the first authors in nearly a century to recognize Hincks’ contribution to the decipherment of cuneiform in a popular work, but they remain under the spell of Rawlinson and his publicists (his brother was the ancient historian George Rawlinson, and his successor as Keeper of Western Asiatic Antiquities at the British Museum was E.A. Wallis Budge). They dismiss as “insinuation” Hincks’ demonstration that Rawlinson adopted some of his results without acknowledgment (Daniels 1994: 51) – with access to Rawlinson’s unpublished working manuscripts in the British Museum, they could have discovered whether his “all manner of lists” (*ibid.*) included recopyings of Hincks’ publications (Hincks’ manuscripts seem to have been discarded by his descendants in the late nineteenth century). And they overlook Hincks’ most important and most accessible publication, in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* for 1848: “It most clearly lays out the reasoning behind the assignment of values to cuneiform signs, and it shows great astuteness in working out the grammar of the unknown language we call Urartian” (Daniels 1994, p. 38f.).
8. The initial steps of the decipherment are well described by Corré (1966) and Day (2002); it was 20 more years before all the details were fully worked out (Daniels in press). In the case of Ugaritic, there were at first no bilingual texts. The location and date (fourteenth century BCE) of the finds, and the small number of different letters in the inscriptions, made reasonable the guess that the language was similar, perhaps ancestral, to Hebrew. One approach sought letters that might correspond to the single-letter prefixes and suffixes found in Hebrew and, by either contextual or statistical analysis, led to plausible identifications. Another approach took advantage of the happy accident that one of the first tablets discovered appeared to be an accounting document, and a word appeared with three signs, one repeated: XYX. It is very unusual

in a Semitic language to find the same letter in first and third position within a word, but one of the exceptions is the word for “three.” The two letters involved, *sh* and *l*, happen to be fairly frequent, so this proved a very useful entrée into the interpretation of the script.

9. Until recently, every Anchor Bible volume’s dust jacket included a list of all prospective authors, and the list was regularly updated. Since dust jackets are highly ephemeral, it will be useful to append the original list of Old Testament contributors (from a 1965 printing of Jeremiah, the second volume to be published; Apocrypha volumes were not yet contemplated). Students of Albright’s are marked with an asterisk, and italics indicate those who actually completed all or part of their original assignment: 1, Gen., *E.A. Speiser*; 4, Num., G.E. Mendenhall\*; 5, Deut., William L. Moran, S. J.\*; 6, Josh.-Judg., *G. Ernest Wright* [Josh.]\*; 7, Ruth-Esther-Song of Sol.-Lam., *E.F. Campbell, Jr.* [Ruth]\*; 8–9, Sam., F.M. Cross, Jr.\*; 12–14, Chron.-Ezra-Neh., *J.M. Myers*; 15, Job, *Marvin H. Pope*; 16–17, Pss., *Mitchell Dahood, S.J.\**; 18, Prov.-Eccles., *R.B.Y. Scott*; 19, Isa. I, H.L. Ginsberg; 20, Isa. II, *J.L. McKenzie*; 21, Jer., *John Bright\**; 22, Ezek., *Moshe Greenberg*; 23, Dan., *Louis F. Hartman*; 24, Hos.-Joel-Amos-Obad.-Jon.-Mic.-Nah.-Hab., B.W. Anderson; 25, Zeph.-Hag.-Zech.-Mal., Walter Harrelson. (I thank the late M. O’Connor for assistance with this note.)
10. For the most part, portable antiquities housed in museums were safely stored away in anticipation of the civil war in Syria of the mid-2010s, but large objects were subject to destruction or disfigurement by fanatical attackers. Looters of unguarded ancient sites financed the operations by burrowing for saleable objects that went to rapacious wealthy “collectors.” There are estimates, though, that 70% of what was sold to them were new forgeries. It must not be forgotten, moreover, that the well-publicized havoc wreaked on antiquities represented only a tiny fraction of the atrocities perpetrated on the living people and on their sacred places.
11. Actually the 30th (Mexico City 1976) and 31st (Tokyo and Kyoto 1984) congresses were the International Congress of Human Sciences in Asia and North Africa; the slightly shorter title has been used since the 32nd (Hamburg 1986).
12. The Koran “has been truly described as the most widely read book in existence. This circumstance alone is sufficient to give it an urgent claim on our attention, whether it suit our taste and fall in with our religious and philosophical views or not. ... It must be owned that the first perusal leaves on a European an impression of chaotic confusion” (Nöldeke 1883, p. 597). For Spuler’s attitude, see the closing pages of the Introduction by Jane Hathaway to Spuler (1995).

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

# Monotheism and Ancient Israelite Religion

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*S. David Sperling*

The peoples of the Ancient Near East remain a source of fascination to moderns. No one can fail to be impressed by the pyramids, the ziggurats, and the artistic monuments of ancient Egypt and western Asia. But the interest in these great ancient civilizations is antiquarian. In contrast, ancient Israel, which was never the home of a great ruling power or of monumental architecture, is the ultimate birthplace of the monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For good and ill, the stories of Abraham and not those of Gilgamesh remain sources of inspiration and guidance for moderns. As such, the recovery of ancient Israelite religion is relevant within the academy and without, and therein lies a problem.

Scholars with personal religious attachments to the Bible must always exert themselves to avoid the kinds of apologetics that they would never offer in other fields. They must resist the temptation to explain away elements in Israelite religion, child sacrifice for example, if they find them abhorrent. Contrariwise, scholars with the opposite bent must resist emphasizing the Bible's nefarious support of ideologies and institutions of which they disapprove, if such disapproval impairs understanding of what the texts meant in their time of composition and early reception.

A second problem is the paucity of primary data, a situation in stark contrast to Mesopotamia, Egypt, Ugarit, Anatolia (Turkey), and Greece, which, in addition to their literary productions, have left us temples and temple-offering lists telling us which gods were worshiped and what attention they received. These same "extra-biblical" cultures have provided a wealth of pictorial representations of their divinities, enabling us to visualize their gods the way they did. Different size temples to different gods in the same geographical area are another indication of relative importance, and these too are lacking in ancient Israel. Ancient Israel has thus far provided no undisputed pictorial representations of the Hebrew god Yahweh. Our only offering list from the biblical period comes from the fifth century Jewish temple at Elephantine in Egypt, a structure destroyed by

hostile Egyptians in antiquity. The list indicates that offerings were made to YHW/YHH (forms of Yahweh) along with the goddesses (?) Anat-Yahu and Anat-Bethel (Van Der Toorn 1992, pp. 80–81). Although we have ancient Hebrew letters, inscriptions, and artifacts, most of our information about Israelite religion comes from the Hebrew Bible, a selective anthology containing material written over a period of some 800 years but completed late in the first pre-Christian millennium. As such, the Bible's religion is not necessarily ancient Israelite religion but a later understanding. In contrast to the situation of other Ancient Near Eastern texts, we have no originals of the Bible, only copies far removed chronologically from their original authors or scribes.

The greatest problem in studying Israelite religion is the figure of the Hebrew god, the hero of the Bible absent only from the books of Esther and Song of Songs. Within the Bible the Hebrew god is depicted as creator, law-giver, provider, and director of all the events of what would later be called “nature” and “history,” biblical Hebrew having no word for either concept. At some point this Hebrew divinity came to be viewed by followers as the sole god in existence. His proper name is Yahweh, usually translated “Lord,” or “Eternal,” god of “Israel,” a small, politically insignificant people in western Asia first attested in the late second millennium BCE. Yahweh has thus far not been found in any pre-Israelite pantheons (Van Der Toorn 1999b). Yahweh was known by various names and epithets, among them Adonay, El, Eloah, Elohim, Shadday, and Elyon, some of which were originally the names of other gods absorbed into the figure of Yahweh. He came in the course of time to be simply the only “God” of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism (Van Der Toorn 1999a,b; Spronk 1999; Cross 1973, p. 44; Miller 2000, pp. 2–3; Herrmann 1999; Knauf 1999; Elnes and Miller 1999; Pardee 1999). The figure of El is the best documented of those folded into the god of Israel. In a complicated process, El, once head of a North Syrian pantheon, became so thoroughly identified with Yahweh that his separate existence was virtually unacknowledged by the Hebrew writers (Cross 1973: 44; Miller 2000, pp. 2–3; Herrmann 1999).

The name Yahweh is a scholarly reconstruction of the consonant cluster YHWH attested more than 6600 times in the Hebrew Bible, and in the Moabite Stone of the ninth century BCE. The Hebrew writing system employed to compose what were to become the books of the Hebrew Bible is primarily consonantal. The vowel points were added during the first millennium of our era because Jews had come to avoid the pronunciation of the ancient divine name, and the original vowels of YHWH are not included in the Hebrew Bible. Instead readers are directed to pronounce YHWH as though it were another less sacred name, “Adonay,” meaning “Lord.”

The authors of the Bible consistently portrayed Yahweh as a unique divinity, but differed about the extent of that uniqueness. At one pole we have full-blown Yahwistic monotheism, that is, the claim that there is only one god in existence, and that his name is Yahweh. The prophet known as “Isaiah of the Exile” or Deutero-Isaiah declared Yahweh to be the sole god in existence (Isaiah 43:10–11, 45:5–7, 14, 18, 21–2, 46:9; Wildberger 1977). For this prophet the claim that Yahweh alone is god entails the cultic corollary of Yahweh’s demand for exclusive worship. Other gods must cease to exist (Versnel 2000, p. 83). Accordingly, Yahweh demands the worship of all humanity, not just that of Israelites or Jews (Isaiah 44:6, 66:23). At the opposite pole, we find Yahweh jealous of other gods (Exodus 20:5, 34:15; Deuteronomy 5:9; Joshua 24:19), defeating other gods (Exodus

12:12; Numbers 33:4), acting as king of gods (Psalm 95:3) or god of gods (Psalm 136:2), and accepting the homage of other gods (Psalm 29:1–2, 96:4). These passages all take for granted the existence, if inferiority, of other divinities. Deuteronomy chapter 4, despite its rhetorical, monotheizing flourishes (4:35, 39), avers that Yahweh himself had allotted the depersonalized sun, moon, and stars to the gentiles as legitimate objects of worship (4:19). The gentiles could not worship Yahweh himself. For the author of Deuteronomy 4, the exclusive worship of Yahweh was both an Israelite obligation and an Israelite privilege.

Because the Bible is the work of many authors and not a systematic treatise, there are numerous disagreements about matters that are of fundamental importance to students of ancient Israelite religion. According to Genesis 4, the name of Yahweh was known to the earliest humans. In contrast, Exodus 6:3 claims that Yahweh first revealed his proper name to Moses, but not to the earlier patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who knew him only as El Shadday. Individual contributors to the biblical anthology differed on the question of whether other gods existed, or whether gentiles were to worship Yahweh. All agreed, though, that Yahweh was the sole legitimate object of Israelite worship. Israelites who worshiped other gods than Yahweh, or in addition to Yahweh, were both sinful and stupid (Jeremiah 5:19–23; 7:8–11). Despite biblical rhetoric accusing Israelites of abandoning Yahweh for other gods, it appears that it was more often the case that polytheistic Israelites viewed Yahweh as the head of an Israelite pantheon, supplementing his worship with that of others.

It is precisely that supplementary worship which is condemned in I Kings 18:21 and Jeremiah 7:9–10. Nowhere in the Hebrew Bible do we find any of the “good guys” supporting Israelite worship of Yahweh’s rivals. Whenever the biblical writers describe Israelite worship of other gods, male and female, which they do with considerable frequency (Exodus 32:7–8; Numbers 25:1–5; Judges 2:10–13; 1 Kings 11:33; 2 Kings 17:16; Jeremiah 3:6–10, 44:2–10; Ezekiel 8:5–17; 20:7–8; 27–31; Psalm 106:34–39), they characterize such worship as “backsliding,” or as deviation from the worship of Yahweh alone as demanded by the “ten words” (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13, 10:4) or decalogue, as spoken by Yahweh to Moses (Exodus 20:3–5; Deuteronomy 5:7–9; compare Hosea 13:4). Often, Israelite deviation is attributed to the potential and actual influence of the local and neighboring gentiles, and to Israelite sexual contact and intermarriage with them (Exodus 23:32–33, 34:11–16; Numbers 25:1–9, 31:14–18; Deuteronomy 12:2–3, 29–31). The view of the Old Testament that the worship of Yahweh alone was normative in Israel from the earliest days of the nation, was canonized in the New Testament (Acts 7:35–43) and held sway until challenged during the rise of modern biblical criticism in the nineteenth century.

The best known of the early modern Bible critics, the German scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), employed analytical literary criticism, called source criticism, to distinguish earlier from later writings within the Hebrew Bible. Based on his system of dating biblical texts, Wellhausen reconstructed Israelite religious development, and concluded that monotheism had evolved gradually out of polytheism, passing through a stage of monolatry, the worship of a single god at the same time that other gods are believed to exist. No humanist of the time could escape the ramifications of Darwin’s theory of evolution. Whether Wellhausen was also influenced by Hegel is another matter (Perlitt 1965). According to Wellhausen, in the earlier biblical period Yahweh was a national god, much

like Chemosh in Moab and Assur in Assyria. The fact that as a national god Yahweh claimed the allegiance of every Israelite did not entail the rejection of other gods, any more than allegiance to Assur entailed the neglect of the cults of Šamaš or Ishtar.

Wellhausen's thesis presented a problem. If Yahweh had at the outset been a god no different qualitatively from the Moabite Chemosh and the Assyrian Assur, why did monotheism never arise in Moab or Assyria? We do not have enough Moabite material to deny categorically that other gods in addition to Chemosh were worshiped in Moab. The Moabite Stone of the ninth century BCE mentions an Ashtar-Chemosh along with Chemosh. Does this indicate the merger of Chemosh with the god Ashtar, known as a defunct deity in the Ugaritic texts of the thirteenth century (Müller 1999)? With Assur, the Assyriologist Simo Parpola has argued that underneath the apparent polytheism of Assyrian religion was a unifying monotheistic notion (Parpola 2000). But even Parpola does not deny that Assyrian religion was polytheistic for all but the most sophisticated thinkers.

For Wellhausen the new direction was to be sought in the teaching of the eighth century Hebrew prophets. Only after Hosea and Amos began to interpret the political upheavals of the eighth century BCE as Yahweh's means of enforcing his demands upon Israel, demands that were primarily ethical and moral rather than cultic, did monotheism begin to emerge. As interpreted by Wellhausen, Hosea, Amos, and Isaiah shortly thereafter taught that Yahweh could move all the peoples of the earth either to punish or reward his people Israel. If so, he must be much more than a national god; he must have no rivals at all. "Ethical monotheism," though taught by succeeding prophets, took two centuries to take root among most of the populace. In Wellhausen's view, only during the Babylonian exile of the sixth century BCE did the masses of Jews, prodded by a guilty conscience, begin to realize that the prophets had been right (Zechariah 1:1–6). Both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel had fallen because of their failure to serve Yahweh exclusively. It was at that point that the demand that Yahweh alone was to be worshiped was retrojected into the laws and narratives set in earlier centuries.

Wellhausen's view was largely accepted until the 1940s when it began to be attacked by the American archaeologist William Foxwell Albright (1891–1971) and his followers, and the Israeli Yehezkel Kaufmann (1889–1963) and his mostly Jewish followers.<sup>1</sup> Wellhausen had reached his conclusions solely on the internal evidence of the Bible. Albright, in contrast, insisted that the biblical texts could be understood and dated only in the light of the Near Eastern world in which ancient Israel had emerged.

In Albright's view there was archaeological evidence that many biblical texts written centuries later than the events they portrayed had faithfully preserved ancient traditions. That being the case, the biblical claims about the roots of monotheism in the age of Moses ought to be historically credible. In his 1940 classic *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process*,<sup>2</sup> Albright broke with the evolutionary explanations of monotheistic origins in favor of a monotheistic revolution led by Moses. For him, Mosaic monotheism was "functional," rather than systematic. Nonetheless, Moses was the first Hebrew to teach the existence of one God, the creator of everything, the source of justice, who is equally powerful in the desert, and in Palestine, who has no sexuality and no mythology, who is human in form but cannot be seen by human eye and cannot be represented in any form (Albright, 1957, p. 272).

Thus, monotheism was not an evolutionary development within Israel, though the groundwork had been laid for it in the high gods of other cultures and especially in the exaltation of the solar disk, called the Aten, and the ban on all competing cults by King Akhenaten of Egypt in the fourteenth century BCE. According to Albright, “the Aten cult was ... a true monotheism” (1957, p. 221). The Egyptologist Donald Redford observes, “The Roman world might have called Akhenaten an ‘atheist,’ for what was left to Egypt was not a ‘god’ at all, but a disc in the heavens” (1984, p. 170; Foster 1995, especially p. 1760; Propp 1999 and the bibliography, 537, n. 1).

Albright thought that the Mosaic revolution proved to be a great success with the masses of the Israelite population. Of course, there were always “ignorant” or “moronic” Israelites who were attracted to polytheism (Albright 1957, p. 288). There was also the corrupting influence of the monarchy, sometimes tempted to adopt or promote gentile practices (1 Kings 11:4–8, 16:30–33; 2 Kings 16:10–11, 21:1–7). At the opposite pole stood zealots who felt the need to make Mosaic monotheism consistent by standardizing worship and eliminating vestiges of polytheistic practice and mythic language. But these zealots were reformers rather than innovators. Essentially, Albright held that Moses was a historical figure who brought a functional, if not systematic, monotheism to Israel in the thirteenth century BCE.

As noted by Mark Smith (2001, p. 150), Albright’s definition of monotheism is a composite drawn from various biblical sources of varying dates. In addition, these features do not have equal weight in regard to the question of the sole existence of Yahweh. (1) In some cultures, creation is a specialized function of lower rather than higher gods. (2) In Mesopotamian sources the deities Kittu (truth) and Mesharu (justice) are gods responsible for justice. The Egyptian goddess Ma’at and a whole host of other gods are sources of justice without being unique. In Zoroastrianism, Ahura Mazda is the source of justice, but the existence of opposition by the thoroughly evil and very powerful Angra Mainyu does not permit us to call Zoroastrianism “monotheism.” (3) As for the ban on images, its date is unclear. From the perspective of art history, Schroer (1987) argues that the anti-image tradition arose late in Israel; Mettinger believes that early absence of images is itself not determinative because we must distinguish between *de facto* absence of images, a phenomenon attested widely in West Semitic polytheistic cults, and programmatic avoidance of images, the explicit prohibition of images, which did not appear in biblical sources composed before the exilic period. Indeed, several scholars have argued that the second commandment, which prohibits images (Exodus 20:4 = Deuteronomy 5:8), is an interpolation that interrupts the natural flow between “You shall have no gods in my presence” and “You shall not bow down to them in worship” (Mettinger 1995, 1997; Hendel 1997).

Yehezkel Kaufmann went further than Albright. Kaufmann wrote his magnum opus, *The History of the Israelite Faith*, in eight volumes between 1938 and 1956, a period in which few gentile scholars could read Modern Hebrew. An abridgment of the first seven volumes, *The Religion of Israel* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), translated into English by Moshe Greenberg, appeared in 1960 and extended Kaufmann’s influence somewhat, but mostly among those Jews whose Hebrew was not fluent. The complete eighth volume was translated by Efroymson (1997). The German scholar Krapf has brought renewed attention to Kaufmann’s work (Krapf 1992); Krapf had earlier treated Kaufmann’s intellectual history (1990).

In Kaufmann's view the Mosaic revolution had thoroughly eradicated paganism from Israel in one fell swoop. Whereas the tales of the biblical patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob reflect a polytheistic background (Kaufmann 1938–56, II/1, pp. 25–32), Moses had successfully taught Israel that no other gods existed but Yahweh. Any biblical references to other gods in Israel subsequent to the Mosaic revolution should be understood as literary conceits, or petrified language emptied of mythic significance. Albright had attributed infidelity to Yahweh to morons, and other scholars had distinguished between “official” religion faithful to Yahweh alone and “popular” religion, which was polytheistic and syncretistic. But Kaufmann attempted to demonstrate that the number of morons as well as the differences between the “official” and the “popular” had been greatly exaggerated.<sup>3</sup> Kaufmann conceded that the royal courts sometimes imported foreign cults. The wives of Solomon had private chapels for their own use (1 Kings 11). King Ahab had permitted Queen Jezebel to bring the gods Baal and Asherah and their prophets into the northern capital Samaria (1 Kings 16:31–33, 18:19). But these were aberrations and no more.

Problematic for Kaufmann's thesis were the many denunciations of Israelite idolatry and polytheism in the prophetic books, as well as in the editorial comments in the biblical narratives, which give the impression that wholehearted fidelity to Yahweh was in short supply among the masses. Kaufmann's ingenious response was that biblical writers were not denouncing the real worship of other gods, which was not to be found in Israel, but the occasional superstitious resort to stick and stone fetishes. Indeed, by the eighth century BCE, Israelites had become so far removed from the worship of gods other than Yahweh that they projected their own vestigial fetishism on the gentiles, assuming the gods of the nations to be fetishes, rather than divinities with real personalities whose loves and wars were celebrated in myth and cult. In sum, Israelites could never worship the gods of the gentiles because they did not know how. According to Kaufmann, the Hebrew prophets denounced these minor lapses into superstition out of puritanical zeal for monotheism. We might compare the prophetic zeal with that of an Orthodox rabbi who equates a Jewish child's visit to a department store Santa Claus, or that child's participation in an Easter egg hunt, with his conversion to Christianity.

The prophets also needed to vindicate divine justice, an activity that theologians call “theodicy.” Israel held the land conditionally, so biblical theology taught, through a covenant with Yahweh. The primary condition of that covenant was that Israel was to serve Yahweh exclusively. Failure to do so was a breach of that covenant punishable by destruction by foreigners and expulsion of the population from the land. Since both Israelite kingdoms came to be destroyed by foreigners and both populations suffered expulsion, Kaufmann argued that the biblical writers were required to exaggerate Israelite infidelity to Yahweh, or even to invent it, in order to show that Israel had violated the covenant, and that Yahweh had justly punished them.

The “theodicy” element and the attention paid to prophetic rhetoric surely have merit, but otherwise Kaufmann's ingenious thesis is seriously flawed. First, he claims that Israel differed so fundamentally from its neighbors that Israelites told no myths about Yahweh and assumed naively that gentiles told no myths about their gods, who were therefore no more than fetishes. But Kaufmann's claim is unsustainable. Comparative study of the Bible and Near Eastern myths shows keen Israelite awareness of gentile myth as well as the use, adaptation, and transformation of mythic motifs by Hebrew writers (Cross 1973,

pp. 143–144). Kaufmann's further claims about Israelite ignorance of the religions of the gentiles are likewise flawed, while the supposed qualitative differences between Israel and its neighbors are greatly exaggerated (Smith 1952).

Indeed, newer discussions of ancient Israelite religion stimulated by inscriptions and drawings discovered at Kuntillet Ajrud in the Sinai and at Khirbet el-Qôm on the west bank of the Jordan demonstrate that Israelite worship of gods in addition to Yahweh was not completely fabricated by the authors of the Bible. These texts from the ninth to eighth centuries BCE apparently mention the goddess Asherah in close connection to Yahweh (Becking 2001; Dever 1999; Miller 2000, pp. 29–43; Wyatt 1999). The Kuntillet Ajrud text was found on a jar, and the inscription follows the epistolary genre and is probably a school exercise text (Renz and Röllig 1995–2003, I 61). More than one reading and interpretation are possible:

1. “I bless you by/commend you to Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah.”

On this interpretation “Asherah” is a proper name referring to the goddess Asherah known from the Hebrew Bible, from the Ugaritic writings of northern Syria dating from the late second millennium BCE and, apparently, from the recent excavations at Ekron (Tell Miqne), a Philistine site of the earlier first millennium BCE (Müller, 1992, pp. 15–51; Wyatt 1999).<sup>4</sup>

2. “I bless you by/commend you to/Yahweh of Samaria and his consort.”

According to this rendering, maintained by some scholars, the name of the goddess has been reduced to a common noun meaning “consort” (Hillers 1998, especially pp. 44–48).

3. “I bless you by/commend you to/Yahweh of Samaria and its *asherah*.”

As with the first two renderings, other scholars translate the last word as a noun with a possessive feminine suffix, but takes the antecedent to be the city of Samaria. In addition, *asherah* is not taken as the goddess but as the illicit cultic object *asherah*, said to have stood in Samaria according to 2 Kings 13:6, and appearing in Deuteronomy 16:21 and Judges 6:25–26, 28, 30. The connection between the goddess and the cultic object of the same name remains a matter of dispute (Emerton 1999).

4. “I bless you by/commend you to Yahweh of Samaria and to Asheratah/Ashirtah.”

In this last interpretation, scholars have opted to explain the final letter in the last word not as the feminine possessive suffix, but as an element of the name of the goddess (Zevitt 1984; Angerstorfer 1982), which seems the most likely for a number of reasons. First, it is unusual in the Semitic languages to attach a possessive suffix to a proper name. Second, the alternative form “Ashirta” is attested in the proper name Abdi-Ashirtah of the Amarna letters of the fourteenth century BCE. Third, it is common in greeting formulae of the Ancient Near East to bless an individual by one or more gods.

A very similar formula to this last was discovered in the Jewish colony of Elephantine in Egypt from the fifth century BCE:

I bless you by/commend you to YHH and to Khnub. (Porten 2003)

Khnub was an Egyptian god. According to Porten the name of the sender may indicate his non-Jewish origin. Even if Porten is correct, the formal structure is the same. The sender of the Kuntillet Ajrud letter cited here was named Amariah, indicating that his origins were from a family of worshipers of Yahweh; the *-iah* suffix is a form of Yahweh. This same interpretation that the goddess was known in Israelite venues as Ashirtah/Asheratah best suits the grave inscription from Khirbet el-Qôm on the west bank of the Jordan in what was the kingdom of Judah in the eighth century BCE. The main portion of that text reads:

Uriyah the rich. His inscription:  
Uriyah paid homage to<sup>5</sup> Yahweh,  
and out of his straits, to Asheratah.  
Save him!

(Renz and Röllig 1995–2003, I 207–211)

It is especially noteworthy that in all of the proper names in the inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qôm that contain a god's name, that name is written *-Yhw*, a short form of YHWH, an indication that all of these individuals not only worshiped Yahweh themselves but belonged to families who worshiped Yahweh over generations (Heide 2002, pp. 114–117). As a statistical sample of worship in ancient Israel, the data are insignificant. As snapshots, however, they tend to support the view best articulated by Morton Smith in his *Palestinian Parties and Politics that Shaped the Old Testament* (1971). In that book, by now a classic, Smith takes seriously the biblical portrayal of Israelite vacillation between periods of “following other gods” and periods of consistent fidelity to Yahweh. Behind that vacillation, argues Smith, is a struggle between two parties: the first, the “Yahweh-alone” party, insisted that Yahweh was the only god to be worshiped by Israelites. On the other side stood what we might call the “Yahweh-plus” party, which acknowledged the divinity of Yahweh within a larger grouping of gods.<sup>6</sup> For example, Smith observed that even Ahab and Jezebel, notorious in the Bible for their support of Baal’s cult, gave their children names with Yahweh as the divine element. The different parties struggled for power over centuries. Ultimate victory came to the “Yahweh-alone” party during the Persian period, 539–331 BCE. The grand narrative of the Old Testament was shaped by the victors who divided the kings of Israel and Judah into the “just” and the “unjust” depending on their degree of adherence to the principles of the “Yahweh-alone” party.

In contrast to Albright and Kaufmann, Smith, by examining the Yahweh-alone theology from a political standpoint, avoids any appeal to Israelite uniqueness. His thesis has the additional advantage of not having to explain the demand that Yahweh be worshiped by Israelites to the exclusion of all other gods as a retrojection. The task remains, however, to account in the first place for the monolatrous demand made in the name of Yahweh.

The demand that one god is to be worshiped even though the existence of others is not necessarily denied was not unique to the Yahweh-alone party in the ancient world. Reference has already been made to the reform of King Akhenaten, which forbade the worship of all gods but the sun-disk. Albright and Redford refer to Aten’s worship as monotheistic. Others have withheld that characterization because under the reform the

king and the royal family continued to receive the divine honors that had been accorded the earlier pharaohs. But the phenomenon is close enough to the demands for Yahweh's exclusive worship to warrant serious comparison. Mesopotamian mythology refers to the worship of a single god in times of emergency. The prayer literature of the Ancient Near East regularly employed the language of monolatry. A worshiper might approach different gods in succession, declaring that each, in turn, was the only divinity worthy of human worship. At other times worshipers would declare to the god whom they were supplicating that all the other gods were aspects or limbs of the god addressed (Sperling 1998, p. 148, n. 35–37).

The cause of the monolatrous demand in Israel is to be sought in the particular historical circumstances in which Israel arose. It is clear from the archaeological researches of the past decades, especially in the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, that the Bible's central traditions of enslavement in Egypt, exodus from Egypt, and armed conquest of the Promised Land are not historical. While no full positive consensus on the origin of Israel has emerged, there is general agreement that:

1. There is no archaeological evidence in Egyptian sources that any elements of later Israel were ever in Egypt. Likewise, the early Israelite settlements do not contain Egyptian elements in their material culture, which an Egyptian sojourn would have produced (Dever 1992, p. 546). As such we cannot speak of a historical exodus from Egypt.
2. The related tradition of Israel's journey of 40 years through the desert is likewise unsupported archaeologically. Extensive exploration of the Sinai has found no evidence of occupation during the appropriate period.
3. Israel did not arise out of a group that had escaped from Egyptian servitude. Instead, the nucleus of Israel was "derived from the local Late Bronze culture through relatively normal social processes" (Dever 1992, p. 553).
4. Israel was not a single unified ethnic group. Instead, "Israelite ethnic identity came about through the process whereby the indigenous population began to understand and identify itself as Israelite" (Thompson 1987, p. 37).
5. Whatever movement of population occurred to produce an Israelite culture was internal, probably from the lowlands eastward and northward into the highlands (Bloch-Smith and Nakhai 1999, p. 103).

The biblical traditions about enslavement, exodus, and conquest must be understood as ideologically motivated accounts usually composed centuries later than the events, real or imagined, that they report. Behind these traditions it is often possible to recover historical information, usually more relevant to the account's time of composition than to its setting. Nonetheless, when judiciously combined with the data provided by archaeology and other historical sources, a reasonable synthesis of early Israelite history and religion is possible.<sup>7</sup>

One biblical text refers to 430 years of servitude in Egypt (Exodus 12:40); Genesis 15:13 has 400. Attempts to explain the figures schematically have proved unpersuasive (Propp 1998, pp. 415–416). In contrast, the figure fits remarkably well with the chronology of the rise and decline of imperial Egyptian power in Asia (Sperling 1986, pp. 8–12; Sperling 1998, pp. 53–60). The Egyptian Empire was part of the international system of the Bronze Age in the second millennium BCE, during which the great powers extended

their dominion well beyond their borders. Among the powers, which included the Hittites, Mitanni, Assyria, and the Minoan–Mycenean civilization in the Aegean, the Egyptian New Kingdom (about 1550–1069 BCE) was the greatest. Egypt’s power extended from northern Sudan in the south and into Syria and Lebanon in the north (Kuhrt 1995, I, pp. 185–224). The New Kingdom began after King Ahmose of Egypt overthrew the Hyksos invaders in the mid-sixteenth century BCE and Egypt began to campaign extensively in western Asia. At the battle of Megiddo, Thutmose III won a decisive victory after which the local Asiatic rulers became vassals of Egypt. Though rival superpowers, first Mitanni and then the Hittite Kingdom, challenged Egyptian expansion in Asia, the Syria-Palestine coastline and the interior of Palestine remained solidly in Egyptian control. Egyptian correspondence of the fourteenth century BCE shows the heavy economic burdens of taxation and compulsory labor to which the population of Syria–Palestine was subjected (Moran 1992). Local rulers subject to the Pharaoh would round up work gangs to cultivate royal lands. Naturally, this was greatly resented by the locals who could themselves be rallied to attempt to throw off their domination by Egypt and the local Canaanite rulers who cooperated with Egypt (Moran 1992, EA 74, EA 365; Kuhrt 1995, I, pp. 324–327).

About 1200 BCE the international system collapsed in what is termed “the catastrophe.” Throughout the eastern Mediterranean, “the twelfth century BCE ushered in a dark age” in which 47 major sites were destroyed in Greece, Crete, Anatolia, Cyprus, and Syria–Palestine (Drews 1993, p. 9). In Turkey the Hittite Empire collapsed. Mass movements of population, notably the Sea Peoples, among them the Philistines, transformed the face of the Middle East. Indeed, comparison between the social and political terminology of the Bible and the Bronze Age shows an almost complete discontinuity (Rainey 1987, p. 542). Against the turbulent international background we see populations caught in the middle of fighting among rival city-states, traders who functioned poorly in the unstable conditions, debtors and dislocated peasants, and the ever-present pastoralists who were always potentially disruptive. In Syria–Palestine we witness “the destruction of the Canaanite urban culture and the withdrawal of Egypt from Canaan” (Finkelstein and Na’aman 1994: 12). By the death of Rameses III about 1153 BCE, Egypt no longer dominated Canaan, though some sites continued a bit longer under Egyptian control (Bloch-Smith and Nakhai 1999, p. 83).

Gradually new groups emerged out of the disorder, among them a group called “Israel.” Made up of locals seeking a place in the new social order, these new groups denied their connections to Canaan and gave themselves a new “national” counter-identity (Machinist 1991, 1994; Sperling 1998, pp. 41–60). They began to depict themselves as an invading group from outside the land, much like the Philistines. The Bible’s ideological claim to Israel’s religious, social, and moral distinctiveness is framed in terms of geography. The Canaanite heritage is denied by the Torah in its claims that all of Israel’s laws and institutions were given by Yahweh through Moses to the people when they wandered in the desert. Nothing good in terms of law, morality, or religion came from the land. In line with this ideological geography, the historical traditions about the subjugation of the people who became “Israel” to Egyptians ruling the land of Canaan were transformed into traditions of subjugation in Egypt proper. The withdrawal of Egypt from Canaan became the escape from the land of Egypt itself. Given that the name of the new polity was “Israel,” a name which has El as the divine element, the god El must have been the group’s patron. At an early date, however, Yahweh completely absorbed the figure of El,

and it was Yahweh who became Israel's god. Because of the circumstances of its formation, as a political coalition rather than as an ethnic group, Israel constructed its mythic consciousness out of figures that we would call "political."

The notion that Israel is linked to Yahweh by a "covenant" is central to the Torah. Mendenhall was the first biblical scholar to draw attention to the fact that the biblical notion of covenant was based on treaty formulae employed already in the second millennium BCE. In the treaties a great king bound subordinate kings to exclusive loyalty. Characteristically, divinities were called upon to bear witness to the treaty. Faithful adherence to the treaty was to be greatly rewarded while disloyalty would be punished with the severest forms of destruction (Mendenhall 1954). While subsequent scholarship has shown that several elements in Mendenhall's description require correction, there can be little doubt that his main observation was correct, namely, that the demand that Israel serve Yahweh exclusively was based on the treaty form. Ironically, Mendenhall himself saw the treaty formula as a model for monotheism: one god = one overlord. In fact, the covenant is a perfect metaphor of the religious notion of monolatry. Political treaties demanded exclusive service because there was always another great king who might be served. A Hittite king bound a minor Syrian king precisely because the minor king might serve the king of Egypt. Yahweh binds Israel because Israel might serve another god. What is of particular interest is that in biblical books of the exilic and post-exilic periods, when true monotheism emerges, the conditional covenant becomes a dead letter (Sperling 1989).

The theological construct of covenant with Yahweh mirrored the mundane fact of political union. Yahweh became, in essence, "the flag" that every Israelite saluted. Because Yahweh himself had no known prior connections to Canaanite cult and myth, exclusive loyalty to him served to strengthen the solidarity of the newly formed group. Initially an advantage, the absence of Yahweh from the local mythic traditions meant that the religious necessities served by gods of weather, agriculture, fertility, and the heavenly bodies would be unmet. In a monotheistic environment, monolatry is perfectly sensible; you worship one god because it is the only one. In contrast, restricting worship to one god when others are acknowledged to exist is difficult to uphold. In fact, ignoring powers that one knew to be potent could be dangerous, and relatively few Israelites in the early first millennium BCE took the risk. But if Morton Smith is right, there was always a minority who did.

Because the monolatrous demand as expressed in the primitive<sup>8</sup> notion of covenant was central to the formation of the Israelite polity, the call to serve Yahweh alone could resonate in times of crisis and serve as a general rallying point to encourage group solidarity (Exodus 32:25–29; I Samuel 7:1–14; I Kings 18; 2 Kings 9–10, 22–23). The crisis occasioned by the fall of the last Israelite state in 586 BCE proved decisive. Once Yahweh had proved his power by scattering his people "in a diaspora from one end of the known world to the other, what was left for him but monotheism?" (Smith 1952, p. 147).

## NOTES

1. The discussion of Albright is based on Gnuse (1997, pp. 64–66). See also Gnuse (1997, pp. 62–128) for an extensive summary of recent scholarship on monotheism. Important recent works are: Edelman (1996), Porter (2000), Van Der Toorn (1997),

Propp (1999), and Smith (1990, 2002). For general critiques of Kaufmann's work, see Hayes (1999), Greenberg (1995), Levenson (1982), and Sperling (1986, especially pp. 16–21).

2. All citations herein are from the reprint by Doubleday Anchor (1957) of the second Johns Hopkins edition of 1946.
3. The terms "popular" and "official" have not been rigorously employed by students of Israelite religion (Berlinerblau 1996, pp. 1–45, 1999).
4. For a photograph of a Philistine inscription that reads "To Asherat," see *Biblical Archaeologist* 53/4 (1990): 232.
5. This is how the verb *brk* with indirect object is used in Biblical Hebrew. See Psalm 95:6.
6. This is an oversimplification. In the ancient world one would not be an abstract monotheist or polytheist. Whereas the "Yahweh-alone party" would tend to be an identifiable group, the "Yahweh-plus" party would be more diverse.
7. In their summary of Iron Age I, Bloch-Smith and Nakhai (1999, p. 118) wrote: "Given the rather late and tendentious nature of the biblical text, it is somewhat unexpected to discover that archaeological evidence presents a similar, though not identical, picture of the events of the period." See also Dever (1998).
8. I owe the apt characterization of covenant as "primitive" to Redford (1992, p. 275).

## FURTHER READING

Gnuse (1997) is a good place to begin, supplemented by Edelman (1996), Porter (2000), Van Der Toorn (1997), Propp (1999), and Smith (1990, 2002).

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

# The Ancient Near East and Biblical Scholarship: Recently Uncovered Archives from the Cuneiform World

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Ur, Nineveh, and Babylon: these are sites in the Near East with significant archives that have been used for years as resources for biblical studies. More recently sites such as Ebla, Mari, Nuzi, Ugarit, Emar, and Alalakh have provided remarkable information for our understanding of the larger biblical world. Textual remains from these sites have been incorporated into biblical scholarship. Just as important are numerous cuneiform archives from Syria, Turkey, and Iraq and other places in the region that have been uncovered in the last generation.

Here I will attempt to trace some of the major developments for the study of the Ancient Near East and biblical scholarship roughly since the turn of the millennium. This cannot be a comprehensive survey, but a sort of set of materials for study; the reader will get the impression of the magnitude and diversity of texts that can now be used for biblical studies.

My goal will not be so much to look at comparative data, as I have done elsewhere (Chavalas 2002, 2011), but to review what is available in the new discoveries. I think it is crucial for people interested in the Bible to be aware of the resources at hand. I use the term archives loosely; we will study sites that have cuneiform texts that have been unearthed, with some found in the context of archives, and others not. We will focus on cuneiform texts, although many discoveries have been made concerning Iron Age Luwian hieroglyphic texts (Payne 2012) and alphabetic texts (Finkelstein et al. 2017). We will proceed by geographical region.

## Iran

Though Iran has been off the radar of Western scholars since 1979, there are a number of domestic and international excavations going on in Iran. Most have either not been published or are published in brief news reports. For example, in 2005 a trilingual stone inscription was found at Hegmataneh, ancient Ecbatana, a Median royal city, dated to the Achaemenid period. Also Achaemenid inscriptions have reportedly been found at Persepolis and as far north as Phanagoria in the Crimea.

The most sensational finds are the Jiroft tablets found in 2001 at Konar Sandal in south-eastern Iran, dated to the first half of the third millennium BCE. Some have seen these finds as from an Early Bronze Age culture independent of the Elamites in the west and the Indus civilization to its east. However, most see this as at best a spurious discovery (Muscarella 2001; Basello 2006; against Majidzadeh 2004).

On more solid ground are the proto-Elamite tablets from Tepe Sofalin in north central Iran (Dahl and Yousefi 2013), which show the widespread use of this heretofore undeciphered script in the early third millennium BCE. The form and content of these 12 tablets are consistent with the standard late proto-Elamite tablets from Susa. Although all of the published inscribed objects from the site are very fragmentary, they document a developed administration system far from Susa.

## Israel and Lebanon

In 1997 the Cuneiform in Canaan project was launched to publish all known cuneiform texts in the region of Israel (Horowitz et al. 2006). We now have a modern edition of texts from Taanach, Hazor, Megiddo (Goren et al. 2009) and Aphek (Goren et al. 2007), as well as isolated finds from Beth Shean, Gezer, Jericho, Hebron, Shechem, and now Jerusalem. The finds are mostly from the Late Bronze Age.

Recently archaeologists at Tel Hazor in northern Israel have found an Akkadian clay tablet from the eighteenth or seventeenth centuries BCE describing laws in the style of the Code of Hammurabi. This is the first document resembling laws that has been found in Israel; it contains laws pertaining to body parts and damages. Nearly 20 cuneiform texts have been found at Hazor, including a bilingual text, a multiplication table, legal and economic documents, and letters, some of the Late Bronze Age (Horowitz et al. 2006, pp. 65–87). Clearly Hazor was an important center of administration and learning.

One can add to this a tablet from around 1400 BCE found in a monumental building in Sidon in Lebanon. It seems to be an inventory of wooden luxury objects. Of interest is the fact that the text was produced with local clay, maybe implying that cuneiform writing was common in the region (Briquel-Chatonnet 2004).

A lexical text dated to the thirteenth century BCE from Ashkelon was discovered in 1997 (Huehnergard and van Soldt, 1999). Also a small fragment of a tablet dating to the thirteenth century BCE was found outside Jerusalem's old city walls beneath a Solomonic period tower. Horowitz argues that it is like other royal archival texts contemporary with the archive from El Amarna in Egypt (Mazar et al., 2010).

The Iron Age cuneiform material is at present a smaller corpus, and it contains no scribal texts, perhaps showing the increase in importance of the alphabet. Recently two Neo-Assyrian contracts have been found at Tel Hadid in the northern Shephelah of Israel. Na'aman and Zadok (2000, pp. 179–180) argue that cuneiform writing came back to Palestine only after the Assyrian annexation and deportations, when Assyrian administration was established in the provinces, although much appears to have been done in Aramaic. Some of the personal names on the tablets are Akkadian.

## Jordan

Though Jordan has had many productive excavations, very little writing has been found. We can assume that the city of Pella had cuneiform writing because an Amarna letter (EA 256) mentions a town Pihilu, probably Pella. Two tiny cuneiform fragments were found in Late Bronze Age II context at Pella (Khouri 1988, p. 23). Also a Neo-Babylonian cuneiform rock inscription with a sculptured relief, perhaps from the Babylonian king Nabonidus, have been found on a limestone cliff in Sela in Edom (Dalley 1997). Also in Edom, a single cuneiform tablet apparently drafted in Harran was found in 1982 at Tawilan, dated to a king Darius (Dalley 1995, pp. 67–68).

## Anatolia, Turkey

Though not as plentiful as Syria, the archival discoveries in Hittite Anatolia are just as noteworthy for providing a framework for understanding the Bible in its larger context. Besides the Old Assyrian texts from Kültepe (ancient Kanesh) and Bogazkhöy (ancient Hattusha), the oldest inscription ever found in Anatolia is from around 2250 BCE from Acem Höyük, probably ancient Purushattum (<http://tinyurl.com/y9an9psn>).

Maşat Höyük, 60 miles east of Hattusha, has yielded over 100 tablets. All are dated tentatively to the fourteenth century BCE (Hoffner 2009, pp. 91–252; van den Hout 2007, pp. 287–298; Alp 1991a,b). The site has been identified with Tapikka, a regional border town in the Middle Hittite kingdom. There are nearly 100 letters, 17 administrative texts, including lists of hostages, inventories of metals, textiles, and food, along with an oracle text. Nearly all were found in a large building, probably an administrative center.

The letters from Maşat Höyük often reflect a dangerous military situation on the north-eastern frontier of the kingdom. The enemy was the Kashka people. The letters show us a picture of the people of a Hittite provincial capital in a single generation. Unlike the letters from Hattusha written primarily in Akkadian, these were in Hittite. Their concerns were short term, covering a year or more.

Shapinuwa, modern Ortaköy, was a Hittite provincial capital in north-central Anatolia, northeast of Hattusha. It was a level and widespread settlement, unlike the citadels excavated elsewhere in Anatolia. A big building was uncovered, and over 4000 tablets were found, the largest hoard outside of Hattusha concerning the Hittite kingdom (Hoffner, 2009, pp. 252–262; Suel 1992, 2002, 2009; Unal 1998; de Martino and Suel 2015; A. Suel 2015; M. Suel 2015). Only a small portion has been translated thus far. Tablets

were scattered over a large area of the mound (Suel 2009, p. 193). At least three separate archives have been located, and tablets were damaged in a fire.

Over half these tablets are written in Hittite, mostly letters, but also religious texts, omens, and lists. About 600 texts are in Hurrian, mostly rituals. The remainder are in Akkadian, although there are also some bilingual texts in Hittite and Hurrian, Hittite and Akkadian, and even Hittite and Hattic, an indigenous language not yet understood. The letters are addressed to and from the queen or king; more than 65 officials are mentioned.

Suel argues that since so many letters address the king, this must have been his residence at least for a time. The name of the king is not mentioned; he is called “my sun,” as is typical in Hittite letters. The texts imply that western Anatolia was under Hittite authority during the Middle Hittite period (Suel 2009, p. 196). They mention vast areas outside central Anatolia, as far as Cyprus, Ugarit, and northern Syria. Though the royals involved were not named, the name of the future king Tuthaliya II was found participating in rituals.

The site of Kuşalı, ancient Sarissa, in east-central Anatolia revealed about 60 tablets and fragments mostly from the southern room of a building in the western part of the acropolis, but also from other locations in the town (Hoffner 2009, pp. 262–267, Wilhelm 1997, 2011, 2015). The finds belong to a burnt layer dated to the latter half of the thirteenth century BCE, near the end of the Hittite kingdom. Small finds along with the tablets suggest the room was used for ritual practices, both cultic and prophetic. Of special interest are oracle protocols for lot and bird oracles and cult inventories dealing with festivals, idols, and cultic supplies. There are also two festival rituals describing the celebration of the spring festival by the king in Sarissa (Wilhelm 2011, p. 106).

## Syria

Cuneiform discoveries in Syria have the potential to alter our understanding of ancient Near Eastern history and culture dramatically. The large mound of Tell Mozan, ancient Urkesh, in the Upper Khabur region near the Turkish border, was excavated beginning in 1984 (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1997, 1998; Milano 1991; Maiocchi 2011). Late third millennium BCE remains were just below the surface. Clearly aligned with the Akkadian state in southern Iraq, Urkesh was a Hurrian capital that continued to flourish after the fall of Akkad. Though documents presuming to have come from Urkesh have long been known, for example, an inscription of Tishatal, king of Urkesh, few tablets have been found during excavations. More interesting is the plethora of inscribed royal seals at the site. Hundreds of inscribed and uninscribed seal impressions were found in a workshop for the family of Tupkish, king of Urkesh and his queen Uqnitum, around 2200 BCE. Seals of the nurse and cook were also found.

Mari was a major political and cultural force in the mid-third millennium, as seen in the Ebla archives (Archi and Biga 2003), inscribed statues (Marchesi and Marchetti 2011), and documents (Charpin 1987, 1990; Horioka 2009; Westenholz 2012; Cavigneaux 2014; Sallaberger 2014.) Recent excavations have recovered 70 administrative tablets from the period, as well as another dozen from private collections. The tablets come from

storerooms in administrative buildings in a religious quarter in the Pre-Sargonic palace. Most are about agriculture, grain, and donkey-breeding.

The earliest readable texts from Syria from around 2450 BCE come from the small site of Tell Beydar, ancient Nabada, northwest of modern Hasseke. More than 210 tablets were found in a small palace. Nabada was a provincial city answering to the kingdom of Nagar, one of the major kingdoms in the region. The texts have disbursements for women and donkeys, sheep plucking and grain, along with some school tablets (Ismail et al. 1997; Milano et al. 2004; Sallaberger and Pruss 2015).

Nagar, modern Tell Brak, was excavated by Mallowan in the 1930s. He found two inscriptions of the Akkadian king Rimush, as well as some seals. The site is mentioned often in Ebla as a powerful kingdom in northern Syria, engaged in diplomatic relations and marriages with Ebla and Mari. More recent excavations found 80 tablets (Finkel 1985, 1988; Illingworth 1988; Eidem et al. 2002).

Tell Leilan in the northeastern corner of modern Syria revealed 1100 Old Babylonian texts (Eidem 2010). Known as Shekna in the late third millennium BCE, Shamshi-Adad I changed the name to Shubat-Enlil, along with Apum, apparently the name of the kingdom. Some officials known from texts from Mari and Nagar are also found at Leilan. The lower town palace had texts, about 250 sealings and envelopes, at least 200 letters and 80 fragments of at least five treaties, along with a version of the Sumerian King List. There were also about 470 administrative texts, many about wine. These date to the mid to late eighteenth century BCE.

The treaties mention a king of Leilan in alliance with a neighboring kingdom, including Assur. Treaty procedures fit into the customs of the Old Babylonian period: touching of the throat, ritual slaughter of a donkey, exchange of oaths sworn by the gods, a drinking ceremony, and the exchange of presents.

Tell Bi'a, ancient Tuttul, at the confluence of the Balikh and Euphrates Rivers, was dedicated to the regional god Dagan, well known from the Bible. The city is mentioned in Ebla texts and in Old Akkadian and Ur III texts, as well as the Mari letters. Excavators have found a series of elite tombs from the middle of the third millennium BCE, similar to the tombs from the Royal Cemetery of Ur. About 380 texts were found which were dated to the eighteenth century BCE. Though most are lists of livestock and grain, there are a few letters and even tags recording dead cattle (Krebernik 2001; Heimpel 2003).

Like Tuttul, Terqa is mentioned in the Mari texts, since it was just up the river from Mari. There was a massive wall that had undergone at least three rebuildings; the width was over 20 meters. The total number of texts is estimated at about 550, found all over the mound. Rouault (1984) published an archive from the private residence of Puzurum of over 50 administrative tablets and fragments. There is also a hodgepodge of texts from the early Old Babylonian period, ranging from agricultural work assignments to divination reports, and some personal and legal letters and school exercises.

At Tell Chagar Bazar were found over 125 texts from a few private houses and a public building (Gadd 1940). Though the ancient name is still uncertain (Talon 1997, pp. 4–7), a number of texts deal with barley and beer for the palace (Loretz 1969a,b; Snell 1983; Talon 1997).

Ancient Qatna, Tell Mishrife, was a Middle to Late Bronze Age site on the Orontes River, about a dozen miles northwest of modern Homs. It was a significant kingdom

during the Old Babylonian period. Excavated by a French team in the 1920s, the site saw renewed work in 1999 by a German and Italian team. The team found a spectacular, almost complete communal royal family tomb, replete with grave goods, many animal bones and cultic vessels, reminiscent of ancestor cults in the Ancient Near East. A Late Bronze royal archive was found with more than 70 texts in a burned royal palace (Bonacossi 2007, 2013; Richter 2005; Richter and Lange 2012). In one letter a Hittite official warned the king about a looming war. These texts can be dated to around 1340 BCE, just at the beginning of the Hittite intrusion into Syria under Suppiluliuma I.

Tell Munbaqa, ancient Ekalte, just north of Emar on the Middle Euphrates, was dug as part of a salvage project for a new dam. Ninety Late Bronze Age tablets were found in private houses. Texts include lists, a decree, and six slave sales (Mayer 2001; Beckman 2008; Torrecilla 2014).

At Ekalte about 30 women preside over adoption contracts, but in many the woman is forbidden to remarry if she gets the inheritance. These texts come from 1450–1380 BCE before the Hittite intrusion. Most personal names are West Semitic, unlike nearby Emar which has a much wider linguistic range of names and a larger number of sites mentioned in texts. Ekalte officials, called fathers, elders, or brothers, witness contracts and preside over cases. Fifteen tablets from nearby Azu, Tell Hadidi, seem contemporary with the Ekalte texts; four people are mentioned in both cities (Dornemann 1988; Torrecilla 2014, pp. 408–421.) Also, a small number of Late Bronze age tablets were found at Umm el-Marra, Tell Bazi, and Tell al-Qitar (Snell 1983–1984; Torrecilla 2014, pp. 422–425).

Harbe, Tell Chuera, between the headwaters of the Khabur and the Balikh rivers, shows territorial expansion by the Assyrians under Tukulti-Ninurta I (1244–1208 BCE). Over 100 tablets were found in an Assyrian administrative building. Local officials had to assure passage for diplomats heading west. There are also letters dealing with provisions for business travelers; it was a way station (Jacob 2009).

Durkatlimmu, Tell Sheikh Hamad, on the Lower Khabur, has letters between local officials and the Assyrian king. More than 600 tablets deal with state-run farms and animal husbandry, all from a big Middle Assyrian structure (Röllig 2008). There were 30 thirty letters (Cancik-Kirschbaum 1996). Also there is a stone stele with inscriptions dated to Adad-Nirari III (Frahm 2015a).

Tell Bderi is 15 miles south of Hasseka in the Lower Khabur. There are fragments of cylinder inscription of a ruler contemporary to Tiglath-pileser I (1115–1077 BCE) found in a cistern. There were seven copies of the text and ten inscribed baked bricks (Maul 1992; Shibata and Yamada, in press).

Tell Sabi Abyad, in the Balikh River valley in northern Syria, gives the most detailed view of the Middle Assyrian agricultural work we have. A portion of the 400 tablets has been published. Sabi Abyad was a fortified farmstead, and the archive belonged to stewards who controlled it. We learn about agricultural yield and local population from the texts. There is also a collection of verdicts and even a treaty with a nearby tribe. Also there are liver omens and hymns and prayers. Unfortunately the tablets may have been looted from where they were stored in Raqqa in the civil war (Wiggerman 2000; Akkermans and Wiggerman 2015).

Tell Shiukh Fawqani, ancient Burmarina, was a provincial Aramaean outpost. There were 170 texts from the Neo-Assyrian period under Esarhaddon; this was a bilingual archive with

Akkadian cuneiform and Aramaic script on clay tablets, a rarity in Mesopotamia. The texts are sales, loans and court texts, with lots of Aramaic personal names (Fales et al. 2005).

Tell Ahmar, ancient Til Barsip, is just south of Carchemish on the northernmost Euphrates in Syria. Twenty tablets were found in the same building level. They are dated to the early seventh century BCE and consist of loans, ration lists, and slave sales. Two clay tablets were in Aramaic, and there was a stone fragment (Dalley 1996–1997; Briquel-Chatonnet 1996–1997).

Tell Taban, ancient Tabetu, the largest mount in the Middle Khabur region, revealed more than 25 Old Babylonian texts which were burnt, perhaps indicating the city's destruction. There is a land grant, 16 letters, and scribal exercises, including a god list, the first from upper Mesopotamia. Also there were more than 150 texts from the Middle Assyrian period and many more fragments. Texts also mention a king of Terqa from the eighteenth century BCE. Tabetu kings called themselves "the king of the land of Mari," and there are commemorative royal inscriptions from the late fourteenth to the eleventh centuries BCE. Many texts are dated to the Assyrian kings, and we can assume that the Tabetu kings were subjects of Assyria (Maul 2005; Numoto 2007; Shibata 2007, 2009a,b; Yamada 2008, 2011, 2012; Numoto et al. 2013).

Tell Ajaja, ancient Shadikanni, is on the Khabur River. A Neo-Assyrian statue was illicitly excavated there in 2014. The Islamic State destroyed much of the statue. It seems to have had a description of military campaigns and of a building project (Frahm 2015b).

## Iraq

The lion's share of cuneiform tablets excavated in the past 175 years has come from Iraq. Because of the disruption of warfare in the country since 1980, discoveries have slowed, although Iraqi Kurdistan has produced interesting results (Ur 2017). In the tragic circumstances, texts smuggled to other countries have appeared in important publications. An Ur III period archive from Garshana, a town near Umma, has 1600 texts from a rural estate in an eight-year period in the Ur III kingdom (Owen and Mayr 2007; Owen 2011; Heimpel 2009). They provide details about the day-to-day work of the estate including construction of a brewery, textile and flour mills, a leather shop, and kitchens. The texts provide startling evidence of female functionaries in the Ur III state. The owner's widow became the head of the estate after her husband's death.

Also more than 350 tablets from Iraq were recovered in Jordan and were examined by an Italian team. Most dated 1400–1000 BCE, and there are letters from the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods. There were about 165 Ur III texts from a provincial city of the kingdom, and more than a thousand more have been located worldwide (Owen 2013, pp. xvii–xviii). The site has not been identified, but it may have been near Nippur (Frayne 2013, pp. 183–194). The texts describe Ur III–Iranian relations and canal work. They show the affairs of many officials and soldiers, and scribes, even a lion-keeper, as well as of royal family members. Many high officials have Semitic names, and there are contracts and letters in Akkadian (Owen 2013).

Many tablet collections have been confiscated in Amman that had originated in Sippar and Eridu in Iraq (Chiodi et al. 2007). And there are tens of thousands of unpublished tablets in the Iraq Museum (Owen 2013, p. xvii).

Perhaps the most interesting find is a collection of 200 administrative texts in Akkadian dispersed in museums and private collections regarding Jewish exiles from 572–484 BCE (Pearce and Wunsch 2014). These texts treat the lives of Jews who lived in rural areas in central Babylonia, building houses, farming, and paying taxes. One of the towns inhabited by the exiled Jews was called Al-Yaudu, “Judah-town,” where probably many of the tablets originated. It was likely near Babylon.

In spite of recent war and civil strife, archaeological excavations have been started in Iraqi Kurdistan. Tell Shemshara, ancient Shusharra, was a salvage operation in the 1950s. The texts from there show it was a small administrative center in the early eighteenth century BCE. There are 95 letters, of which 25 were sent by the king Shamshi-Adad. Another 40 administrative texts have been uncovered, as well as two tablets recently (Eidem 1992, 2014).

Another site is Bash Tapa, a small settlement 20 miles south of Erbil. Some cuneiform tablets from a Middle Assyrian building show this was a regional administrative center (Mas 2014).

Tell al-Rimah, 50 miles west of Mosul, ancient Qattara or Karana, has archives from the Old Babylonian and Middle Assyrian periods (Charpin 1987; Eidem 1989). A palace archive was found in the earlier period (Dalley 1976; Langlois 2017). A temple and a palace contained tablets, and about 170 letters were found in the palace. Some mention Zimri-Lim, a king of Mari. Perhaps most interesting is the archive of Queen Iltani, an unusual set of texts written to or by the queen. Her relation with the king was no doubt strained, where she quotes him threatening to cut her into 12 pieces, reminiscent of the story in Judges 19–20 (Dalley 1976, pp. 129–130 text 158).

The Middle Assyrian tablets show Assyrian commerce and agriculture there. They are family archives showing a private sector (Saggs 1968; Wiseman 1968; Postgate 2002).

Satu Qala, ancient Idu, on the north bank of the Lower Zab river, revealed bricks with Middle Assyrian script mentioning a number of kings (van Soldt 2008; van Soldt et al. 2013). The texts help reconstruct the order of at least five kings of Idu during the Middle Assyrian period and later. The language of the inscriptions is like that of other Middle Assyrian capitals. The Assyrian control of the town waxed and waned, and it may have been an independent state for a century, only to be retaken later.

Qasr Shemamok, ancient Kilizu, 20 miles southwest of Erbil, had Middle and Neo-Assyrian period texts. There is a foundation inscription of an Assyrian king, but the site may have been under the control of Mitanni before the Middle Assyrian state took it (Rouault and Massetti-Rouault 2013, 2016).

Bakr Awa, a site in the western foothills of the Zagros mountains, revealed a big citadel from the Early and Middle Bronze Ages. About 25 Old Babylonian texts were found there, including divination texts, a Babylonian almanac, a letter, as well as a few texts in an undetermined language. Unfortunately these texts cannot now be located in the Iraq Museum (Miglus et al. 2013; Miglus 2016).

The site of Bassetki, not far from Dohuk in northern Iraq, was occupied about 3000–1200 BCE. Middle Assyrian tablets from about 1300 BCE show there was a local temple dedicated to Adad on the site. Also archaeologists have found 93 tablets from the next century, and 60 of them were in a pot in a big building ([idw-online.de/de/news683298](http://idw-online.de/de/news683298)).

Khirbet ed-Diniya, ancient Haradum, about 60 miles southeast of Mari, was a new town founded in the eighteenth century BCE. Though small, Haradum had a town wall and was a planned urban center with a very regular layout of straight streets connecting at right angles. About 115 texts have been uncovered from the Old Babylonian period in private houses. They include letters, judicial texts, and religious texts (Joannès 1985; Joannès et al. 2006). The texts show there was a mayor who embezzled some funds. The names show a mixed population with mostly West Semitic names. The site was destroyed after little more than a century.

Mashkan Shapir, Tell Abu Duwari, is at the northernmost confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates. It was an important Old Babylonian city under the authority of neighboring Larsa (Stone and Zimansky 1992; Stone et al. 2004). The site has undergone extensive looting since 1990. There were 150 unbaked clay barrels found near the south city gate, and some had a royal Larsa king's inscription. These were foundation deposits commemorating the building of the city wall. There were also fragments of stamped mud bricks from an Ur III king.

Excavators returned to southern Iraq at Sakhariya in 2012, just four miles from the famous city of Ur (Hamdani 2012). This was the first excavation in Iraq outside Kurdistan by any foreign team in more than 20 years. The site was a marsh settlement occupied from the Ur III period to the middle of the second millennium BCE. Inscriptions and stamped bricks and inscribed clay nails show royal building work. There was a large clay platform which could have been used to support important buildings. The texts seem to date to the period of the Sealand dynasty, which is a poorly known time between the Old Babylonian and Kassite periods. The site may be Gaesh, a place where Ur III kings went annually for a ceremony to renew their kingship.

New excavations began at Tell Surghul, ancient Nigin, a third millennium BCE site in the territory of Lagash (Nadali et al. 2016; Nadali and Polcaro 2017). Texts came from the surface of the mound, and are clay foundation cones and stamped bricks of Gudea, a ruler of Lagash in the late twenty-second century BCE. They all commemorate the temple of Nanshe, the primary god of the city. But the temple itself has not been found.

Tell Khaiber lies close to the modern city of Nasiriyah and ancient Ur. The first tablets from the Sealand Dynasty excavated from a secure archaeological context were found there. This period from around 1730–1460 BCE is probably the most poorly documented in history; there were more than 200 tablets recovered. They are in Akkadian and are concerned with distribution of grain and the transfer of goods to the palace. Some are dated to the reign of the eighth king of the Sealand around 1500 BCE. A massive fortified administrative building housed the tablets, which also had school texts written in Sumerian.

## Prospect

The search for cuneiform archives, slowed but not halted by civil strife, continues. A synthesis of this material is in order, not simply to provide a larger context for the biblical world, but for the Ancient Near East for its own sake. That synthesis is beyond the scope of this study, but the prospect for scholarship is exciting.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

# Pharaonic Heritage in Modern Egypt

*Donald Malcolm Reid*

Egyptian attitudes toward pharaonic heritage since the turn of the nineteenth century were filtered through earlier Islamic, Coptic Christian, and Jewish traditions; encounters with European colonialism and the concomitant growth of scholarly Egyptology; and finally postcolonial circumstances. Two enduring cultural byproducts of Napoleon Bonaparte's militarily disastrous occupation of Egypt (1798–1801) were the discovery of the Rosetta Stone – which made possible Jean-François Champollion's decipherment of hieroglyphs – and the expedition's 20-volume *Description de l'Égypte* (Commission des Sciences et Arts d'Égypte 1809–1829). French influence in Egypt was again riding high during Napoleon III's Second Empire in the late 1850s. With Ferdinand de Lesseps's epochal Suez Canal project under way, in 1858 Sa'id Pasha (r. 1854–1863) appointed Auguste Mariette – a Frenchman – as founding director of the Egyptian Antiquities Service.

The ensuing conquest by Great Britain in 1882 left Egypt doubly colonized. The British occupied the country for 74 years (1882–1956), while the French continued to direct the Antiquities Service for a total of 94 years (1858–1952). To British proconsul Lord Cromer, who dominated Egypt from 1883 to 1907, alleged Egyptian neglect of antiquities provided simply one more justification for indefinite colonial rule: “The Egyptians are as yet [not] civilized enough to care about the preservation of their ancient monuments... We say to the Egyptians: we civilized governments care about their ancient monuments. If you pretend to be a civilized nation you ought to care for them too” (Welch Jr. 1988, pp. 84, 89, n. 55).

Where did this leave modern Egyptians with regard to their pharaonic heritage? Ulrich Haarmann's deeply researched conclusion was that “Any continuity from ancient to Islamic Egypt was irretrievably and doubly cut off, first by the adoption of Christianity in Egypt in the fourth century and then, three centuries later, by the Islamic conquest” (Haarmann 2005, p. 1). Okasha El Daly argues that Haarmann overstates the rupture

(El Daly 2005, p. 2). Down through the Islamic centuries, Egyptians variously regarded the pharaonic past as both positive and negative heritage, a complexity that persists today. In the Quran, as in the Bible, the pagan tyrant of the Exodus who persecuted the Prophet Moses and the Hebrews gave the word “pharaoh” a bad name. For some Muslims today, the blasphemous pharaoh of the Exodus still tarnishes all pre-Islamic antiquity, and denouncing a contemporary autocrat as “pharaoh” is strong abuse indeed. As in the Bible, however, Quranic and other Arabic traditions also saw Egypt as a land of plenty, wisdom, magic, or refuge. Joseph, a prophet for Muslims, rose up to become pharaoh’s trusted vizier, and Egypt offered refuge to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph on their flight from King Herod’s murderous persecution.

In the West, “Egyptomania” often serves – not entirely satisfactorily – as shorthand for non-specialist interest in ancient Egypt. The term is even more problematic for speaking of modern Egyptian enthusiasm for their ancient heritage. “Pharaonism” is used here instead, despite the drawback that because of negative connotations carrying over from the pharaoh of the Exodus, few Egyptians choose to describe themselves as “pharaonist.” “Pharaonism” and “pharaonist” are used here for convenience, and in a neutral sense.

This essay weaves together three main themes: (1) the penetration of European colonialism in tandem with the rise of Western Egyptology and its activities in Egypt; (2) Egypt’s gradual development of its own Egyptologists; and (3) persistent, but also contested, attraction to pharaonic heritage among the Egyptian public. After the brief French occupation, the following periods are used: the khedivial age (1805–1882), the colonial age (1882–1922), the semi-colonial age (1922–1952), and the postcolonial age since Nasser’s revolution in 1952.

## The Khedivial Age, 1805–1882

During the khedivial era, Egypt was an increasingly autonomous Ottoman province ruled by Muhammad (Mehmet in Turkish) Ali Pasha (r. 1805–1848) and his descendants. Commander of a body of Albanian Ottoman troops who helped evict the French, he seized power in 1805 and won the sultan’s recognition as governor of Egypt. He created a modern European-style army of peasant conscripts, built factories to equip it, and paid for it by agricultural improvements, centralizing tax collection, and establishing commercial monopolies. European officers and technicians, returnees from Egyptian study missions to Europe, and graduates of new professional schools manned his military and bureaucracy. After conquests in western Arabia and northern Sudan and fighting nationalist rebellion in Greece, in the 1830s he broke with Istanbul and invaded greater Syria and Anatolia. Although European intervention eventually forced him to relinquish his extra-African conquests and slash the size of his army, he salvaged hereditary rights, and his dynasty ruled Egypt down to 1952.

In addition to Quranic and Biblical lore, nineteenth-century Egypt inherited a range of folk beliefs and practices relating to antiquities. Before the Islamic conquest, early Christians had defaced pharaonic images as pagan and converted temples and tombs into churches. On the other hand, images of Isis nursing Horus paved the way for icons of Mary and baby Jesus, and the hieroglyphic sign for “life” – the *ankh* – was adopted as a

form of the Christian cross, a usage revived in modern times. Pharaonic ruins were variously seen as a source of wonder; a magical resource for women seeking fertility; and a mine for nutrient-rich fertilizer, blocks for building or burning in lime kilns, precious metals and gem treasures, and eventually for antiquities to sell to tourists.

Although a temple or two recorded in the *Description de l'Égypte* disappeared to build Muhammad Ali's new factories, he soon realized the value of antiquities as diplomatic gifts to covetous Europeans and ordered his officials to assist consuls, travelers, and Egyptologists such as Henry Salt, Bernardino Drovetti, Giovanni Belzoni, Champollion, and Richard Lepsius in collecting antiquities. The museums of Turin, Paris, London, and Berlin soon acquired impressive Egyptian collections. Muhammad Ali's most famous gifts were the obelisks now standing in the Place de la Concorde, Paris, and at the Embankment on the Thames in London.

Western fascination with ancient Egypt drew heavily on biblical and classical sources; as with modern Egyptians, this included negative heritage, which was especially associated with the Exodus. By the late nineteenth century, Egypt was increasingly hailed – along with Mesopotamia and Israel – as fundamental to the pre-Greek and pre-Roman origins of “our own” European or Western civilization. Perceptions that modern Egyptians were indifferent or hostile to pagan antiquities became a justification for Westerners to appropriate pharaonic heritage for themselves.

As Champollion had earlier urged, in 1835 Muhammad Ali decreed inspections of Upper Egyptian sites and the assembly of an antiquities collection supervised by Rifaa al-Tahtawi, director of Cairo's School of Languages. After studying Islamic sciences at al-Azhar, al-Tahtawi had encountered European thought in Paris in the 1820s while serving as chaplain to Muhammad Ali's student missions. He came to embrace antiquities as Egypt's precious heritage. His book on his Paris years even questioned Muhammad Ali's gift of an obelisk to France: “In my opinion, since Egypt has undertaken to adopt civilization on the model of European countries, it would be better to preserve the ornaments and works which their ancestors have left them” (Reid 2002, pp. 54–55).

Al-Tahtawi's royal collection later fell into neglect, and in 1854 Sa'id Pasha presented its remnants to Archduke Maximilian of Austria. Only four years later, however, Sa'id appointed Auguste Mariette to found the Egyptian Antiquities Service. Mariette's vigorous excavations gathered showpieces for the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, which Khedive Ismail (r. 1863–1879) inaugurated in the Cairo suburb of Bulaq in 1863 (David 1994; Reid 2002, pp. 99–107).

In 1868, al-Tahtawi, drawing on Mariette as well as Arabic sources, published in Arabic a pioneering history of Egypt from the pharaohs to the Islamic conquest. A year later, Ismail's Minister of Education Ali Mubarak, later author of a topographical encyclopedia (*al-Khitat al-Tawfiqiyya*) that included careful descriptions of pharaonic sites, founded a school to teach Egyptology to Egyptians under the direction of German Egyptologist Heinrich Brugsch. However, the school soon foundered on the opposition of Mariette, who feared encroachment on his domain (Reid 2002, pp. 109–112, 116–118, 146–148, 179–181).

As early as 1829, Muhammad Ali's official journal *al-Waqai al-Misriyya* chose a pyramid for its masthead symbol. In 1876, *al-Ahram*, which survives today as Egypt's leading newspaper, also seized on “the Pyramids” for its name and symbol; the masthead also

initially included the Sphinx. Although *al-Abram* was a private venture by Lebanese Christian immigrants, the state drove home official approval of these as national symbols by depicting a pyramid and the Sphinx on every regular postage stamp from 1867 to 1914 (Reid 2002, pp. 55, 118–119).

Viewed from the provinces and from below, archaeology and associated tourism brought new opportunities for employment but were also intrusive and destructive of local customs and economies. To many villagers, archaeology meant unpaid forced labor (*corrée*) for European consul-collectors and later for Mariette's Antiquities Service. Archaeologists evicted villagers from homes atop the temples of Luxor and Edfu; similar evictions and boundary disputes between Cairo antiquities authorities and villagers have continued ever since.

## The Colonial Era, 1882–1922

Khedive Ismail's indebtedness to European creditors opened the door to the colonial intrusion that culminated in his deposition, the proto-nationalist revolt of Ahmad Urabi, and British conquest in 1882. Although Egypt remained nominally Ottoman until 1914, British agent and consul-general Sir Evelyn Baring (the Earl of Cromer from 1892) and later Lord Kitchener ran the show. In archaeology, Mariette's successor Gaston Maspero stood out as director-general of Antiquities (1881–1886, 1899–1914). Maspero also founded what became the Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire (IFAO), giving French scholars a second in-country base for Egyptian archaeology. Among the British, W.M.F. Petrie excelled in field archaeology. Ludwig Borchardt brought German Egyptology back into the field in the 1890s, and Americans George Reisner, James Henry Breasted, and Theodore Davis soon followed. Jason Thompson entitled volume 2 of his history of Egyptology *The Golden Age: 1881–1914* (Thompson 2015). The discipline did indeed flourish during this colonial era, but this was no golden age for either Egyptians or Egyptian Egyptology.

During these colonial decades, Europeans of various nationalities founded in Egypt the Comité de Conservation des Monuments de l'Art Arabe (1881), the Museum of Arab (now Islamic) Art (1884), and the Greco-Roman Museum (1892). Only Marcus Simaika's Coptic Museum (1908) had an Egyptian rather than a European founder. Each of these institutions developed its own European and Egyptian constituencies, but none ever came close to the lure, attendance, and resources of the pharaonic-centered Egyptian Museum.

Egyptian Egyptology began in earnest with Ahmad Kamal, a graduate of Brugsch's School of Egyptology. Kamal had to struggle all his life both to win recognition in the colonial Antiquities Service and to persuade his compatriots of the vital importance of their pharaonic heritage to their campaign for independence and revival. Colonial resistance twice thwarted his attempts to reestablish a school to teach Egyptology to Egyptians (Reid 2002, pp. 201–204, 211–212).

When future writer and journalist Salama Musa toured Europe in 1907, he was embarrassed that he could not answer questions about ancient Egypt. He accused the British of excluding pharaonic Egypt from Egyptian school curricula for fear of encouraging nationalist resistance to their rule. He went home, read up on the subject, and signed up for a

Thomas Cook antiquities tour of Upper Egypt (Musa 1961, p. 50). Mustafa Kamil, who founded the National Party in 1907, hailed Egypt as the first great civilized state and the progenitor of all others. His bronze statue in Mustafa Kamil Square demands the nation's rights as he draws strength from a sphinx by his side (Gershoni and Jankowski 2004, pp. 187–190). National Party students in Europe named their clubs Sphinx societies. Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, a founder of the rival Umma Party, also emphasized pharaonism, lamenting “that we do not know as much about the stature of our fatherland and its glory as tourists do!” (Reid 2002, p. 210).

## The Semi-colonial Era, 1922–1952

The national uprising of 1919 shocked the British into unilaterally declaring Egypt independent in 1922, but with so many qualifications that the next 30 years may be described as “semi-colonial.” Saad Zaghlul’s Wafd Party continued the fight for independence, while King Fuad (r. 1917–1936) and King Faruq (1936–1952) did their best to establish palace autocracy.

The discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb in the same year as Britain’s declaration of Egyptian independence brought pharaonic heritage and politics together more closely than ever before or since. For Britons, Howard Carter’s and Lord Carnarvon’s sensational find came as a welcome relief from economic and political troubles and fears of imperial decline; for Egyptians, Tutankhamun came as a ringing affirmation of ancestral glory to spur on their struggle for full independence and revival. Had the discovery come ten years earlier – as in the case of the bust of Queen Nefertiti still in Berlin – Tutankhamun’s treasures might be scattered among the British Museum, Carnarvon’s castle Highclere, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the Cairo Museum. After fierce disputes over press coverage of the find, visitors’ access to the tomb, and ownership of its contents, Egyptians discovered to their delight that they had won enough independence to keep the entire find as the glory of Cairo’s Egyptian Museum (Reid 2015a, pp. 51–79).

In the ensuing flush of pharaonism, Ahmad Kamal’s dream of a school to teach Egyptology to Egyptians finally came true in 1924. The program became a department in the state-run Egyptian University opened in 1925 and later evolved into Cairo University’s Faculty of Archeology. Had he not died a few months before, Kamal would have been its founding director. Instead, an émigré Russian, a British, and a German Egyptologist successively directed it until 1939. In 1928 the first class of BA Egyptologists graduated and began working their way up in the Antiquities Service (Reid 2015a, pp. 117–121).

Despite the disputes over Tutankhamun and uncertainties over the share of finds excavators could take home, foreign expeditions flourished into the early 1930s. French Egyptologists mostly worked through the Antiquities Service or IFAO. Petrie fled Egypt’s more assertive nationalism to dig in “Egypt over the Border” – Britain’s new Palestine mandate, but the Egypt Exploration Society dug at Borchardt’s pre-war concession at Akhenaton’s capital at Tell el Amarna. Egypt’s demand that Berlin return the bust of Nefertiti blocked new German excavations until Borchardt retired in 1929. Sidestepping the Nefertiti dispute, his successor at the reorganized German Archaeological Institute, Hermann Junker, enabled German fieldwork to flourish again until 1939. The Metropolitan

Museum of Art (Herbert Winlock) and George Reisner resumed their pre-war work at Deir El Bahri and Giza respectively, and the University of Michigan excavated the Greco-Roman town of Karanis. Breasted's Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago launched its long-term epigraphic expedition at Medinat Habu (Reid 2015a, pp. 81–101).

Unsettled by archaeological politics and squeezed by the depression, British and American fieldwork – except for the Oriental Institute's epigraphic expedition – wound down in the mid-1930s. World War II soon put an end to German, Italian, and nearly all French excavations as well. Foreign expeditions would not return in force until the Nubian campaign of the 1960s (Reid 2015a, pp. 291–294).

Meanwhile, “pharaonism” swept the Egyptian public in the 1920s. Two iconic pharaonist works conceived even before the Tutankhamun discovery romanticized the fellahin and represented the nation as a woman. “Egypt is the mother of the world,” says an old Arabic proverb. Muhammad Nagi’s painting *The Revival of Egypt* or *The Procession of Isis* showed the goddess parading amidst a throng of peasants (Reid 2015a, pp. 44–45). In 1924, it was enshrined in the new parliament, which had a 24-column neo-pharaonic lobby. Mahmud Mukhtar’s monumental granite sculpture, also called *The Revival (or Awakening) of Egypt* (*Nahdat Misr*), was placed before Cairo’s then gateway to the world – its railway station. It depicted a sphinx stretching to stand up and a peasant woman lifting her veil (see Figure 27.1) (Gershoni and Jankowski 2004, pp. 27–140).

All three main political contenders of the 1920s – King Fuad, Zaghlul’s Wafd Party, and Lutfi al-Sayyid’s Liberal Constitutionalists – embraced pharaonic symbols. Fuad’s pharaonic-themed postage stamps included a set with Thoth – the god of wisdom, writing, and scribes – inscribing the king’s name in hieroglyphs. In 1930 Tutankhamun appeared on the one-pound banknote. Upon Zaghlul’s death in 1927, a neo-pharaonic design won out over a traditional mosque-tomb for the mausoleum of the national hero (Coury 1992). As with Mukhtar’s *Revival*, the mausoleum’s pink granite from Aswan revived a popular pharaonic medium little used in Islamic times. Transferring the Antiquities Service in 1929 from the Ministry of Public Works to that of Education suggested that antiquities were not merely ruins for engineers to uncover and shore up, but living heritage for teachers to impress upon their students. Schools wrote the pharaohs into textbooks and organized trips to the Pyramids and sometimes even Upper Egypt.

Egypt rushed to acquire its own archaeologists. Unable to obtain an Antiquities Service post upon graduating from Ahmad Kamal’s pre-war Egyptology school, Selim Hassan had had to fall back on teaching general history and textbook writing. In the wake of Tutankhamun, the government rushed him and two contemporaries off to Europe for graduate studies in Egyptology. Beginning in 1928, the yearly crop of home-grown BA Egyptology graduates slowly enlarged the pool of professionals who – like tourist guides, hotel staff, boatmen, and souvenir peddlers – had a vested practical stake in ancient Egypt.

Upon returning from Paris, Hassan and his contemporary Sami Gabra, who had also studied in Liverpool, soon left the Antiquities Service for the Egyptian University. Eager to emulate the research emphasis of its Western models, the University funded *three* major excavations despite the Great Depression: Selim Hassan at the Pyramids of Giza, Sami Gabra at the Late Period and Greco-Roman cemetery at Tuna El Gebal, and prehistorian Mustafa Amer at El Maadi. Not only that: the University elevated Egyptology to a graduate-level program and opened an Islamic archaeology section under Briton K.A.C.



**Figure 27.1** Mahmud Mukhtar's statue *Nahdat Misr* (The Revival or Awakening of Egypt), 1928, Cairo. Pink granite from Aswan. Photo: D. Reid.

Creswell (Reid 2015a, pp. 187–190, 265–269). Soon the Arabic press was cheering Selim Hassan's and Sami Gabra's discoveries.

In 1933 Hermann Junker added directorship of the Egyptian University's Institute of Archeology to his directorship of the German Archaeological Institute. This placed him well to influence the next generation: four Egyptians obtained Egyptology PhDs from Germany or Austria in the 1930s, including Selim Hassan from the University of Vienna under Junker (Reid 2015a, p. 271).

Sami Gabra flourished comfortably in the semi-colonial milieu of the day, but Selim Hassan turned confrontational. When Pierre Lacau retired from direction of the Antiquities Service in 1936, Hassan challenged France's monopoly on the post. The ensuing compromise pleased no one: the Abbé Étienne Drioton of the Louvre became director general and Hassan assistant director. Each fought to force the other out. Teenage King Faruq latched onto the fatherly Drioton as his archaeological mentor, and in September 1939 British ambassador Sir Miles Lampson joined those two to force Hassan into retirement on corruption charges. With Selim Hassan sidelined from public life and Junker's forced

departure from the University that year, Sami Gabra became chair of the University department and dean of the Egyptian profession until 1952 (Reid 2015a, pp. 278–291, 335–336).

Beyond Egyptological circles, the pharaonist landmarks of the 1930s – Saad Zaghlul's tomb, Mukhtar's monumental Alexandria and Cairo statues of Zaghlul, and Tawfiq al-Hakim's novel *Return of the Spirit* – were belated extensions of the pharaonist enthusiasm of the 1920s. *Return of the Spirit* (1933) deployed the resurrection of Osiris from the Book of the Dead as a metaphor for Egypt's “awakening” in 1919 with Zaghlul's triumphant return from exile. Al-Hakim's French archaeologist lectures a skeptical British irrigation engineer on the fellahin's unconsciously inherited ancient wisdom, despite centuries of invasion and foreign rule (al-Hakim 1990).

Islamism and Arabism challenged pharaonism and territorial Egyptian nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s (Gershoni and Jankowski 1995). No subsequent archaeological discovery came close to the excitement aroused by Tutankhamun. Literary leaders of “the generation of 1919” – Muhammad Husayn Haykal, Mahmud al-Aqqad, and Taha Hussein – turned to writing exemplary biographies of the Prophet Muhammad and the early caliphs. Among the youth, Ahmad Husayn's Young Egypt Party started out in 1933 extolling the pharaohs but in 1940 changed its name to the Islamic Nationalist Party. The Muslim Brothers, founded in 1928 by 21-year-old primary school teacher Hasan al-Banna, grew into a mass movement that survived his assassination in 1949 and intermittent repression ever since. In one passage, al-Banna starts out sounding conciliatory on the pharaohs: “There is nothing in any of this preventing us from being interested in the ancient history of Egypt. ... We welcome ancient Egypt as a history containing glory, science and learning.” But then he turns sharply, presaging the later extremism of Sayyid Qutb's prison writing under Nasser: “But we resist with all our strength ... the program that seeks to recreate [ancient] Egypt after God gave Egypt the teaching of Islam ... and rescued her from the filth of paganism, the rubbish of polytheism, and the habits of the Jahiliyya” (Colla 2007, p. 248).

Arab nationalism, whether mixed with Islam or more secular, was attractive too. In the early 1930s, majorities at a debate at the Egyptian University and of respondents to a magazine poll declared Egypt essentially Arab rather than pharaonic (Gershoni and Jankowski 1995, p. 28). Cairo's Arabic Language Academy, founded in 1932, championed classical Arabic as a unifying force for all Arabs and denounced promotion of Arabic vernaculars as an imperialist plot to divide and rule. In 1936, the Palestinian revolt against the British mandate and Zionist colonization drew Egypt more deeply into Arab politics. In 1945, the new League of Arab States chose Cairo as its headquarters and an Egyptian as secretary-general.

Nevertheless, the retreat of pharaonism after the 1920s was not the rout that is often assumed. Schoolboy Gamal Abdel Nasser thrilled to al-Hakim's pharaonist *Return of the Spirit*. Young King Faruq enthusiastically visited excavations, collected antiquities, continued pharaonic themes on postage stamps, and erected a neo-pharaonic rest house by the Great Pyramid. At a time of lean antiquities budgets and few foreign expeditions, Drioton adroitly channeled this passion into palace-funded “royal excavations” at Saqqara and Helwan. In 1949, Faruq inaugurated the Museum of Egyptian Civilization, which countered the fragmentation of history implied by separate pharaonic, Greco-Roman,

Arab-Islamic, and Coptic museums. However, Egypt's defeat in the 1948 war with Israel overshadowed the new museum's opening in 1949, and then the 1952 revolution quickly made its section glorifying the reigning dynasty and especially the "Hall of King Fuad and King Faruq" obsolete (Reid 2015a, pp. 296–298; 346–351).

Naguib Mahfouz set his first three novels (1939–1944) in ancient Egypt (Stock 2009; Colla 2007, pp. 234–272). Mahfouz was ten when Tutankhamun's tomb was discovered and recalled chanting "Tutankhamun is our father" at schoolboy demonstrations. Though his mother was illiterate, she plied him with folk tales and visits to the Egyptian Museum, the Pyramids, and venerable mosques and churches. He majored in philosophy at the Egyptian University but audited courses in Egyptology. His novel *Thebes at War* (Mahfouz 2003) celebrated Egypt's liberation at the dawn of the New Kingdom from light-skinned northern invaders – the Hyksos. Apparently targeting both contemporary British occupiers and the Turco-Circassian aristocracy, including the family of King Faruq, Mahfouz associated light skin, blond hair, and blue eyes with treachery and vice, and the dark complexions of Egyptian peasants with virtue. Ironically, future Islamist radical Sayyid Qutb commended *Thebes at War* to young readers for its attack on "rapacious foreigners" who had occupied Egypt "from the Shepherd Kings [Hyksos], to the Romans, to the Arabs, to the European Turks." Egyptian peasants, agreed Qutb, were "nobler and with longer lineages than all of them" (Stock 2009, p. 206).

Early Muslim writers had assumed that Copts retained knowledge about pharaonic Egypt. Coptic scriptures and liturgy, after all, preserved the last stage of the ancient Egyptian language and eventually facilitated Champollion's decipherment of hieroglyphs. By the turn of the twentieth century, some Copts were drawn to Western assertions, often couched in racialist idiom, that they were the truest "sons of the Pharaohs" (Leeder 1918). Claudius Labib (1868–1918), who ran the press at the Coptic Patriarchate and taught Coptic and some ancient Egyptian, gave his children pharaonic names and insisted that they speak Coptic – a language as dead as Latin in the West – at home. His son Pahor Claudius Labib followed him into Egyptology and Coptology and became director of the Coptic Museum. Copts were only about 6–10% of the modern population, but over 40% of Egyptology graduates from the Egyptian (later Fuad I, now Cairo) University between 1928 and 1950 were Copts (Reid 2015a, pp. 202, 217–218).

Salama Musa, Naguib Mahfouz's literary mentor and a Copt, claimed that in the wake of the 1919 Revolution, independence, and Tutankhamun's tomb, both Muslims and Christians were giving their children pharaonic names: Ramsis, Isis, Khufu, and Ahmus (Musa 1935, pp. 4–5). He named his own son Khufu. In 1947, Musa endorsed an unsuccessful attempt to establish a Coptic-run Pharaonic Bank.

As of 1950, each of Egypt's three state universities had chosen a pre-Islamic symbol for its official seal. In the 1920s the Egyptian University (Cairo) had chosen the scribal god of wisdom Thoth. Faruq I University (Alexandria), founded in 1942, opted for the Hellenistic Pharos Lighthouse of the Ptolemies. Ibrahim Pasha University (soon to be Ain Shams), inaugurated in 1950, chose the obelisk of Heliopolis (ancient On), with two flanking falcons representing Horus (Reid 2015a, p. 326). Egyptian universities have proliferated since, as have programs in both pharaonic and Islamic archaeology. Conservation programs have also been added, in recognition that heritage requires continuous tending, technical expertise, and financial investment.

Nevertheless, pharaonism seemed at a low ebb from the end of World War II to the 1952 revolution. Western archaeological expeditions had not rebounded as they had after World War I, and headline-making discoveries were few. Sidelined from excavating, doing museum work, or teaching, Selim Hassan worked at home on *Excavations at Giza* in English for specialists (Hassan 1932–1960), and his 16-volume *Misr al-Qadima* [Ancient Egypt] in Arabic for his countrymen (Hassan 1940–1960).

In 1945, Naguib Mahfouz abandoned pharaonic settings in his fiction for the modern ones that would eventually win him the Nobel Prize. Sayyid Qutb was beginning his spiritual migration from relative secularism to the Muslim Brotherhood, and eventually on to Islamist extremism and death on Nasser's gallows. In 1947 the magazine *al-Hilal* posed a shocking question to cultural leaders and artists: "Should we destroy the sculpture [Mukhtar's] *The Revival of Egypt?*" No one took the question literally, but many thought the statue's pharaonism no longer adequately represented Egypt's spirit; some suggested demoting it from its public square to a museum (Gershoni and Jankowski 1995, pp. 115–119).

## The Postcolonial Era: Nasser and After

The Free Officers' July 1952 revolution soon swept away King Faruq, the monarchy, the 1923 constitution, and the old parties and landed elite. Nasser is remembered for his pan-Arab nationalism after the Suez War, which decisively ended the semi-colonial era in 1956. This obscures, however, remembering his initial pharaonism and Egyptian territorial patriotism. King Faruq's portrait had briefly displaced Tutankhamun on the one-pound bank-note in 1950, but the pharaoh reclaimed the spot in May 1952, as though anticipating the revolution two months later (Reid 2015a, pp. 360–361). Unlike the Islamist revolutionaries of Iran in 1979, Nasser had no scores to settle with the pre-Islamic past. Perhaps this was partly because old regime politicians in Egypt never embraced pharaonism as extravagantly as the Pahlavi shahs glorified ancient Iran.

Drioton's departure along with his patron King Faruq ended 94 years of French colonization of the Antiquities Service. Geographer and prehistoric archaeologist Mustafa Amer became the first Egyptian to direct the Antiquities Service (later successively the Egyptian Antiquities Organization, Supreme Council of Antiquities, and Ministry of Antiquities). Selim Hassan came back into official favor as a senior Egyptological authority.

Back in 1923, King Fuad had discarded the Ottoman–Islamic numismatic tradition of non-figurative calligraphy and followed the European example in putting his own image on coins. In 1954, the new regime chose the Sphinx as the national symbol to replace Fuad's son Faruq on coins. Two years later, the addition of the winged sundisk with flanking cobras on the reverse of some coins made them doubly pharaonic.

Also in 1954, three discoveries by Egyptian archaeologists gave a timely boost to national pride: Kamal El Mallakh discovered two boats of Khufu's by the Great Pyramid, Zakariya Ghoneim opened the unfinished step pyramid of Djoser's successor Sekhemkhet at Saqqara, and Labib Habachi found a stele at Karnak recounting Kamose's campaign against the Hyksos. Nasser visited both the Khufu boat and the Sekhemkhet pyramid to emphasize that at last Egyptians were making their own discoveries about their pharaonic ancestors.

In 1955, a colossus of Ramesses II from Memphis was re-erected before the Cairo railway station, and the square and boulevard leading into it were renamed for the great pharaoh. This displaced Mukhtar's *Revival of Egypt*, which was moved to the boulevard leading to Cairo University. The significance of the switch remains speculative, but in any case, one pharaonist symbol had replaced another at Cairo's gateway station (Gershoni and Jankowski 2004, pp. 123–127).

A 1957 postage stamp set catches Nasser's post-Suez transition to the pan-Arabism hitherto mainly promoted by Syrian and Iraqi Baathists. The set's title, "Egypt, Tomb of Aggressors," is aggressively Egyptocentric, but pharaonism is already fading. Only one stamp out of five celebrates a pharaonic victory – that over the Hyksos, "Avaris 1580 BC." In contrast, three stamps commemorate medieval Islamic victories – two against the Crusaders (including Saladin's victory: "Hitteen 1187 AD") and the Egypt-based Mamluks' defeat of the Mongols: "Ain Galout 1260 AD." Nasser's "victory" (in fact diplomatic, not military) in the Suez War concludes the set. The year after these stamps came out, unification with Syria in the short-lived United Arab Republic erased the very name of Egypt, which became "the Southern Province" of the UAR. On coins, the eagle of Saladin – read as a pan-Arab symbol – replaced the Sphinx in 1960. Like the heroic Saladin, Nasser ruled both Egypt and Syria, if only briefly (Reid 2015a, pp. 362–367).

Yet despite the pan-Arabist tide of the 1960s, the Aswan High Dam and UNESCO's salvage campaign guaranteed that pharaonic heritage did not simply fade into the background. Winning a round in the Cold War, the Soviet Union armed Egypt and helped build the dam after the United States withdrew its initial offer. The dam meant flood control, long-term water storage for perennial irrigation, and electricity for industrialization. The Soviets left the archaeological salvage campaign, however, to the United States and others. The world paid scant attention to the 100 000 Egyptian and Sudanese Nubians who lost their flooded homeland to Lake Nasser, but Ramesses II's rescued temple at Abu Simbel became an international icon. It was advertised on Egypt's one-pound banknote continuously from 1967 on. Egypt rewarded the US and several other countries with the gift of small temples and favorable concessions for later excavations outside Nubia.

In control of their own antiquities at last, Egyptians soon realized the benefits of lending them for exhibition abroad: raising money for the Nubian campaign and later for other cultural projects, advertising Egypt's past glory, and recruiting tourists. In 1961, the first of the real crowd-pleasers – Tutankhamun exhibits – opened a multi-year tour of the US, Canada, and Japan. Blockbuster Tutankhamun exhibits in Paris in 1967 and London in 1972 implicitly declared that Egypt and its erstwhile colonizers had put the colonial era behind them. After a lull, Tutankhamun exhibits lent abroad have been touring non-stop since 2004 (Reid 2015b).

Another postcolonial development was ending the legal export of Egyptian antiquities and attempting to retrieve illegally exported ones. In the 1950s, a "Museum of Stolen Things" in the Cairo Citadel began displaying antiquities seized from smugglers. In 1983, an Egyptian law banned the export of all antiquities. The return of cultural treasures was becoming an issue worldwide. Zahi Hawass, secretary-general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities (2002–2011), established a Department for the Repatriation of Stolen Antiquities and pursued claims on such icons as the bust of Nefertiti in Berlin and the Rosetta Stone in the British Museum, as well as on recently

smuggled items (Ikram 2011). Periodic exhibits in the Egyptian Museum highlight recovered items. The breakdown of order during the 2011 revolution led to looting from Cairo's Egyptian Museum, other museums and antiquities warehouses, and archaeological sites throughout the country.

For over a century and a half, archaeology and tourism in Alexandria, Cairo, Luxor, and Aswan have presented rich opportunities for guides, guards, donkey boys, felucca sailors, carriage and taxi drivers, archaeological laborers, hotel owners and staff, and peddlers of real, fake, and replica antiquities. The town of Luxor and villages such as Qurna (across the Nile from Luxor), Mit Rahina, and Nazlat al-Samman (by the Giza Pyramids) would have very different histories without antiquities and tourism. The Upper Egyptian town of Quft, where Petrie first recruited laborers in the 1890s, exported several generations of skilled excavators who dug throughout Egypt and beyond.

The regional and personal benefits and costs of archaeology and tourism, however, were very uneven. Tensions between Cairo authorities – whether colonial or Egyptian – and villagers are perennial. In the 1940s, inhabitants of Qurna sabotaged a project to move them from hillside homes amidst the Tombs of the Nobles down to a utopian New Qurna, which architect Hassan Fathy had designed in the agricultural plain (Mitchell 2002; van der Spek 2001). Smoldering tensions flared again in 2007, when authorities began bulldozing houses in an enforced transfer of Qurna villagers to a new settlement.

Anwar al-Sadat (1970–1981) abandoned Nasser's pan-Arabism for Islamism on one hand and Egyptian territorial nationalism on the other. He released surviving Muslim Brothers from jail and allowed their movement to rebuild. Sadat's switch in 1972 to the falcon of Quraysh (the tribe of the Prophet Muhammad) on Egyptian coins fitted this Islamic turn. Making peace with Israel and switching from Soviet to American alliance, however, put Egyptian national interests first and alienated Islamists, pan-Arabists, and Palestinians alike. The Islamist extremists who assassinated the self-styled "Believer President" in 1981 proclaimed "We have killed Pharaoh!"

Sadat's stolid successor Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011) cracked down on violent extremists while tolerating Muslim Brothers and other Islamists willing to work within the system. He also continued Sadat's Egypt-first policies and appealed to pharaonic heritage. "The Pharaohs" was adopted as the name for Egypt's football team in international competitions. Egyptian banknotes with a pharaonic monument on one side and an Islamic one on the other reaffirmed the official embrace of both heritages. Reverting to numismatic pharaonism, the coin set of 1984 displayed the Pyramids. The reverse is balanced, however, by Ottoman style Arabic calligraphy – a *tughra* reading *Jumhuriyat Misr al-Arabiya* (Arab Republic of Egypt). Later coins also displayed Islamic symbols – an antique mosque lamp and the Citadel's Mosque of Muhammad Ali (Reid 2015a, pp. 366–367). Gerard Coudougnan's *Nos Ancêtres les Pharaons* follows the vicissitudes of the treatment of pharaonic history in pre-collegiate textbooks (Coudougnan 1988). The much-anticipated Grand Egyptian Museum near the Giza Pyramids demonstrated a major commitment to pharaonic heritage, but the choice of neo-pharaonic style for the Supreme Constitutional Court on the corniche in Maadi may be more telling, for it is a purely Egyptian institution not designed with foreign tourists or archaeologists in mind.

In the early Mubarak years, Naguib Mahfouz returned to the pharaonic settings he had left behind nearly 40 years before. *Before the Throne* imagines Thutmose III, Ramesses II,

Saad Zaghlul, Nasser, Sadat, and other Egyptian rulers being judged before the underworld court of Osiris on how well they served Egypt. Mahfouz's *Akhenaten: Dweller in Truth* is a well-researched reflection on the enigmatic pharaoh whose proto-monotheism and artistic and political revolution continue to fascinate Egyptians and foreigners alike (Mahfouz 1998, 2009; Stock 2009, pp. 246–306).

The street art of the 2011 revolution that overthrew Mubarak contained some striking pharaonic references. Although Islamists managed to elect Muslim Brother Muhammad Morsi president in 2012, his tenure was too contested and brief to make clear how a Brotherhood regime would have dealt with pharaonic heritage. Egypt has escaped such iconoclastic extremes as the Taliban's dynamiting of Afghanistan's Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001, or ISIS's smashing of monuments at Palmyra in Syria and Nimrud in Iraq in 2015. In 1997 Islamist extremists massacred 62 tourists at the Temple of Hatshepsut. Tourists – and the government that failed to protect them – were the target, not the antiquities. The presumed association of antiquities sites with pagan idolatry, however, probably contributes to choosing them as venues for such attacks on tourists (Meskell 2005).

The cover illustration of an Arabic book by exiled Islamist scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi perhaps unintentionally suggests the tenacity of the pharaonic heritage. The title proclaims: "The Sharia of Islam: valid for every time and place." The cover illustration's curving global horizon shows the Kaaba representing Mecca, the Eiffel Tower, Italy's Leaning Tower of Pisa, the UK's Big Ben, and skyscrapers in the US. But what was chosen to represent Egypt visually on the cover of this stridently Islamist work? Not a mosque such as al-Azhar or another Islamic symbol, but the Pyramids (al-Qaradawi 1997)!

Many Egyptians downplay any feeling of contradiction and embrace all of their country's long past. Islam, Arabism, and pharaonism are mutually exclusive only in the uncompromising worlds of ideal types or extremist ideologues. Juxtaposition, compartmentalization, balancing, and syncretism all offer ways of accommodating multiple heritages and identities.

Since 1967, most Egyptian banknotes have conveyed a powerful official statement by displaying a pharaonic antiquity on one side and an Islamic one on the other. Experimenting with a mix of pharaonic and Islamic antiquities on the banknotes dates back to colonial times. Saad Zaghlul, a graduate of the Islamic university of al-Azhar but a relatively secular politician, lies in a neo-pharaonic mausoleum. Nasser, a rather secular pragmatist who embraced pan-Arabism, is buried in a neo-Mamluk mosque-tomb. Anwar El Sadat, a promoter of Islamism but victim of Islamist assassins shouting "We have killed Pharaoh!" became the first ruler since pharaonic times to lie beneath a pyramid. The names inscribed on this pyramid-shaped monument to the Unknown Soldier, however, are in Kufic-style Arabic/Islamic calligraphy.

The currently outlawed Muslim Brotherhood still commands significant support, and violent Islamists periodically shock with attacks on Copts, tourists, and symbols of state authority. Yet the falcon god Horus endures as the protective symbol of EgyptAir, and Egypt's football team in international competitions is still "the Pharaohs." These reflect official decisions, of course, but would the government in this football-mad country dare call its team "the Pharaohs" if this were the anathema to much of the public that some extremists would like to make it?

Perhaps the last word may be left to Naguib Mahfouz, who concludes by asserting as fact an aspiration that still moves many Egyptians who reflect on their variegated heritage and complex identities:

My mother was an illiterate woman who could neither read nor write; nevertheless, I considered her a repository of folk culture. She adored Sayyidna Husayn and would visit [his mosque] regularly...

The strange thing is that my mother was also a regular visitor to the Egyptian Museum where she liked to spend most of the time in the Mummy Hall. I can find no explanation for this: her passion for Al-Husayn and Islamic historical monuments should have made the statues of the pharaohs repugnant to her. And she would visit Coptic monuments with the same zeal, especially Mar Guirgis Convent, considering the whole matter a form of baraka [blessing]. She was such a frequent visitor that a friendship developed between her and the nuns, who loved her very much...

In truth, I was influenced by this beautiful tolerance; Egyptians have never been sectarian, and this is the true spirit of Islam.

(Reid 2015a, pp. 367–368)

## FURTHER READING

Brief accounts by Egyptian specialists of their compatriots' attitudes toward pharaonic heritage include Haikal (2003), Hassan (2007), and Hawass (2003, pp. 242–253). Ikram (2011), by an Egyptologist who is not Egyptian, is also useful. Jill Kamil's biography of Labib Habachi and Wafaa El Saddik's autobiography thoroughly explore the perspectives of two Egyptian Egyptologists of different generations (Kamil 2007; El Saddik 2017). For medieval Muslim views on pharaonic heritage, see El Daly (2005). Reid (2002, 2015a) and Colla (2007) offer detailed histories of modern Egyptian attitudes toward pharaonic heritage. Thompson (2015–2017) is an insightful recent history of Egyptology.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

# Conclusions

*Daniel C. Snell*

Look at your watch or the nearest clock. Why 60 minutes, 60 seconds, 12 hours? Tradition, of course, but it is a tradition based on a sexagesimal, or base 60 system. Three hundred sixty degrees in a circle, also base 60. The advantage is that there are more possible divisions than in a base 10 system, more manipulations we can put numbers through. And yet it is a bit counterintuitive for human beings with our 10 fingers and our 20 digits in all.

The system derives from ancient Mesopotamia, southern Iraq, where the earliest tablets we can make any sense of use a base 60 system, and where, as mathematics developed, this system was elaborated. When astrologers wanted to measure the heavens, they naturally applied the base 60 units, and though they did not originate the zodiac of 12 regions, they definitely were the first people we know of systematically to study the sky. This was because they thought it was portentous for human events in ways we no longer admit, but we have taken on their systems of measurement and not the Egyptian base 10 system, which proved cumbersome.

Base 60 means that 1 may stand for 1 or 60, depending on where it sits in the series of numbers. And there are signs for tens, and 100 seems to be an important number too, though it must be written as  $60 + 40$ . We cannot be sure how these matters struck the Greeks and Romans when they came to the area, but we know they did since there is a translation of a Mesopotamian astronomy text in Greek found in Egypt. And Ptolemy, who systematized astronomy in his day (150 CE), said he had astronomical observations before him from Babylon going back to 747 BCE.

Though many other cultures produced calendars, ways of naming the months and seasons, the Mesopotamian calendar continues to exert influence. Egyptian influences include the 24-hour day.

Here I cannot mention everything that might derive from the cultures we have been studying, and very frequently we do not know the mechanism of transmission from the Ancient Near East to the world of late antiquity and on to us. But I have systematically

reviewed the encyclopedic summaries of Egypt and Mesopotamia, the *Reallexikon der Ägyptologie* and the *Reallexikon der Assyriologie*, with a view to what appears to be handed down. A problem is that these summary works were published some time ago, and more examples doubtless exist. I organize my observations according to admittedly arbitrary categories of endeavor, starting with mathematics and calendars above.

These cultures had disappeared from historical consciousness with the changes in writing systems and the proliferation of legends by Greek and Roman visitors. There were stories, there were books, but direct knowledge was not available to these later ancients. The most poignant example may be Xenophon's visit to Assyria, northern Iraq, merely a couple of centuries after its fall; he saw only ruins, and the locals could not tell him about the cities and cultures whose remains he saw (*The Persian Expedition*, Book III, Chapter 4).

## Health and Death

There were medical schools in Egypt from the New Kingdom on, some of which had libraries for the students. These “houses of life” may not have generated defined degrees, and yet they educated medical practitioners. And medical practitioners are found throughout Egyptian history. Surgery too is reflected in Egyptian materials from 1600 BCE. Other schools for scribes were known too.

Embalming practices are seen as early as the first Dynasty in Egypt. Circumcision, a widespread practice, is first attested in sixth Dynasty Egypt.

Pyramids as burial sites and centers for cults of the dead are an Egyptian invention later reproduced in Nubia, and still marveled at by visitors.

## Water

Aqueducts were developed in Assyria. The perfection of irrigation systems from slow-moving rivers was achieved in Mesopotamia. Egypt too adapted to its annual floods to preserve and spread the life-giving water.

## Bureaucracy

Bureaucrats are probably as old as surpluses that needed managing, but they were certainly present in earliest Mesopotamia and Egypt and were involved in developing writing systems to keep track of those surpluses. Archives are to be found in their earliest forms in greater Mesopotamia.

Though controversial, the existence of the museum in the sense of a collection of ancient objects from various places was first found in Mesopotamia; whether such collections were for propaganda purposes (“Look at what I conquered”) or perhaps for display (to whom?) remains unclear.

Libraries may be hard to define precisely by their uses, but there were certainly “houses of book rolls” in Egypt and similar collections in many periods in Mesopotamia.

Libraries that existed not only for the personal use of scholars but also for officials originated in Mesopotamia.

Banks, institutions that handle other people's money, perhaps are seen in early Mesopotamia. It may be that the Late Babylonian examples are actually not quite institutions that manage other people's money with a view to increasing investments, but rather real estate management companies.

## War

Siege engines of various types were used by Mesopotamian armies from early times.

## Transport

The wheel was probably invented somewhere in Central Asia, but we first see it in depictions of carts in Mesopotamia. It may seem odd that a riverine society used wheels, but there are lots of places in southern Iraq that are not touched by rivers and canals, and for moving bulky items the wheel is very helpful. The importance of this device can be appreciated by contrasting the history of Western Asia and North Africa with the New World societies, which may have been equally complex but were constrained by how far people could carry agricultural goods without eating them all up on the way.

## Royal Power

The idea that the king can pardon people is clear in the Old Babylonian period. This is connected with ideas about sovereignty and links probably to notions about kings having a religious sanction and obligation, an idea widespread in the Ancient Near East. In Egypt the king may have been thought of as the officiant in every temple, though his delegates, the priests, could stand in for him.

It was in Mesopotamia that the practice developed of paying officials with temporary grants of land, not necessarily involving the exploiters having any judicial authority over farm workers. We do not use the term feudalism for this practice because it is laden with images from the European Middle Ages. But it was an important mechanism also in Egypt for easily paying for the services of government workers.

The development of professional emissaries from kings to other kings, probably first merely as diplomatic messengers, is attested in the Ancient Near East. Later they were more or less permanent representatives of foreign powers, what we would call diplomats.

## Freedom

The value of freedom for people in general, and not just for slaves who had been declared free by their masters, was stressed first in Mesopotamian sources. Egyptians too valued the liberty of movement that lies at the base of political and personal freedom.

We first see in Mesopotamia the idea of writing down laws, norms that were considered good for the society even if they might not be enforced everywhere.

## The State

The state, the complex of organizational ideas that allowed a societal continuity beyond the life of an individual ruler, arose first in Mesopotamia and at almost the same time in Egypt. Independently it appeared elsewhere, and yet many of the concerns of large-scale organization, including the question of empire, first were raised in Mesopotamia. We find treaties between states, first attested in southern Iraq, as people attempted to regulate connections with other states. Egypt later also developed written mechanisms for formalizing relations between states.

The city, however defined, showed up in Mesopotamia and began to suck in residents, in spite of its probable relatively high mortality rates; the problems faced by the city were not to change for millennia. These problems were how to feed, how to keep clean, and how to govern face-to-face groups and then larger entities.

## Sex Workers

The bordello, a place where professional sex workers concentrate their work, is attested first in Mesopotamia.

## Money

Though coinage only developed late, in Anatolia, modern Turkey, around 625 BCE, the use of silver and other goods as standards of value, for storage of wealth, and for payments was elaborated in Mesopotamia and to a lesser extent in Egypt. Payments in kind continued in both areas. This is a multi-money system developed first in the Ancient Near East.

The idea of going surety, of assuming responsibility for someone else's debt, a basic feature of complex economies, began in Mesopotamia, and was found also in Egypt. This was a way of sharing creditworthiness and allowing poorer colleagues to amass some wealth or at least to pay their bills.

## Religion

Anthropomorphism of gods is important for the development of ideas about gods. By anthropomorphism we mean seeing gods as having human personalities, with preferences and whims, loves and hates. The existence of an extensive mythology, meaning stories about the gods and sometimes their connections to humans, is a corollary of having polytheistic gods with personalities. The various purposes and audiences of texts that seem to us mythological cannot always be determined.

Apotropaic amulets and talismans are first attested in Mesopotamia; they were thought to keep demons and misfortune away.

The idea of the evil eye, that some people are endowed with eyes that inflict evil without their intention, is seen earliest in Mesopotamia.

The figure of Dumuzi, a Mesopotamian god of fertility and youth, arose in southern Iraq and persists in the month name for July, Tammuz, in some modern Middle Eastern languages.

Lists of gods may have been compiled for pious and also for administrative reasons. People may have felt the fear that some god had been omitted and might visit her or his fury upon people. But the lists also tend toward a systematization, eventually even a syncretism, or self-conscious combining of gods and their characteristics, which was a mark of sophisticated polytheistic speculation.

A contribution to later culture was the idea of the sacred marriage, in which a ruler had sexual intercourse with a priestess to increase the land's fertility. The problem with the sacred marriage is that though literature is fairly clear it was at least an idea, its use in practice seems fleeting and unimportant.

Prophecy is probably a broad phenomenon that arises whenever uncertainty about the future requires speculation, and yet it is first attested in Mesopotamia. The more familiar forms of prophecy seen in the Hebrew Bible may have affinities to foretellings in Western Mesopotamia, but the phenomenon was not limited to the west and also appears in Egypt.

Theodicy, the attempt to explain how the gods worked and why it appeared that injustice might prevail in the world, like other philosophical questions, was first addressed in Mesopotamia. The tale of the Eloquent Peasant from Egypt questions not the justice of the gods but of bureaucrats and rulers from as early as the 9th or 10th Dynasty (2160 BCE).

The figure of the phoenix, a bird that regenerates itself, is known from Old Kingdom Egypt and thereafter.

## Monotheism

Monotheism, which seems so central to much of Western culture, derives from these times and places. A necessary precursor to this simplifying idea is the existence of polytheisms with gods with distinct personalities and wills of their own. The implications of monotheism allow for an understanding of the natural world to develop that is not bedecked with myriad demons and malevolent forces impossible to control or even sometimes to address. The issue of theodicy leads to ideas about the benevolence of God, "the merciful and munificent," as the Muslims say, asserted by the great religions.

Judgment after death is an Egyptian idea clear already in the fifth dynasty, though the artistic depictions of it come much later. It is one of the few Egyptian religious ideas which traveled well and was adopted elsewhere.

## Nationalism

Something akin to national feeling is detectable in Egypt first, where its isolation probably led to it, though there are traces later, especially in Israel after the Exile of 586 BCE.

## Scribal Culture

The most important single gift from the past in the Ancient Near East is certainly the alphabet, which derived from the simplified writing systems that proliferated in the second millennium BCE. The early inscriptions found in the Sinai Peninsula from the second millennium represent experiments with simpler writing systems that led to the first millennium's alphabetic systems. The mechanism for this was what has been called the *abjad*, that is, a writing system that represents only the sounds of consonants, and not the vowels that might link them. This process may have been a long and complex one, but it started on the coast of the Ancient Near East. It was shared from the Phoenicians to the Greeks perhaps around 800 BCE, and as the system moved, it was adapted, diffused, and misunderstood to adapt it for new languages and new social contexts; this eventually got to Latin-speaking areas which preserved a system in which I now write and you now read with comparative ease. But of course it lacks grace and beauty and no longer shows us exactly what it means through its form, as the earliest writings did.

## Literature and Poetry

Historical writing itself, that is, society's rendering account of its past, deriving doubtless from the needs of officials and kings for self-justification, is first seen in Mesopotamia.

Acrostics are first attested in Assyrian and Late Babylonian sources. Such forms of organizing poetic speech were dependent on having the words in writing, since oral expression would not perceive its patterns.

Legends of abandoned children becoming great leaders are first attested in the Sargon story in Assyria.

Dialogue itself began in oral discussion, but its formalization in writing is first seen in Mesopotamia. The goal was to show erudition, not necessarily actually to inform. Egyptian literature too reflects discussions.

Archiasm, the production of new material on ancient models, is noted early in Egypt but also occurs in Mesopotamia. It is usually used to increase the credibility of the new material.

Letter writing may be connected with sending messengers; it is assumed to have existed in Egypt from a very early period.

Parody is perhaps first seen in the ironic imitation of texts in Egypt of the Middle Kingdom. Satire is definitely attested too.

## Scholarly Texts

The existence of glosses on texts and eventually full-blown commentaries indicates the existence and growth of scholarly examination of texts, perhaps first in Mesopotamia.

Grammatical texts meant to expound Sumerian language show a consciousness of the need for analysis of language, even though, from our point of view, the analyses were not always correct or useful.

Literary catalogs bespeak a self-consciousness of canons of texts that ought to be studied. Further, the proliferation of series of texts grouped together by theme or contents seems to begin in the middle of the second millennium BCE and continues through the end of the use of cuneiform. This reveals a systematizing self-consciousness trying to organize the literature. Egyptian compilations also show scribes' efforts to bring together similar material in ways that would be useful for retrieving information.

The proliferation of royal inscriptions may show the boasting of kings, but it also marks the birth of propaganda. Though it is not always clear who was supposed to read these things, sometimes it is obvious that political axes were being ground, and kings were appealing to influential elites to continue to support them.

King lists and chronicles show a concern for chronology and allow for the beginnings of political history.

## Dictionaries

Lexical lists foreshadow and then encapsulate the compiling of dictionaries, at first only as lists of signs that scribes should know, but later as a beginning towards an encyclopedic approach to knowledge. If we can list it, we can perhaps understand it.

## The Person

The concept of the person and self-consciousness of personhood can arguably be found in Egypt at an early period. The idea that you only live once was seen first in the Ancient Near East, and this is linked with the ideas that the bad things that happen to you may be a punishment for past acts. Only with the late idea of possible resurrection, really only in the Book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible, did the implications of this view get undermined.

Biography begins in Egypt, initially as part of the burial needs of deceased persons. The genre is not early found in Mesopotamia, though it did arise in the late second millennium.

## Music

A variety of wind instruments is found in Egypt from the Early Dynastic Period to the end of records. Musical notation, though poorly understood, is first attested in a Hurrian text from the Syrian coastal city of Ugarit around 1200 BCE. This is an interesting development, and we may assume that most musical instruction was by mouth and by ear person-to-person, but the need to write down such instruction may show that it was seen as a vanishing art or a unique contribution that ought to be preserved. Or perhaps this was merely an esoteric text with an esoteric score attached to it which some scribe sought to memorialize.

## Astronomy

Understanding of astronomy as a systematic science developed in Mesopotamia, as one may see through the exposition of the so-called fixed stars. Less developed was the Egyptian experience with astronomy until the Hellenistic period.

## Mathematics, Chemistry

The development of a sophisticated mathematics especially in the area of what would be called algebra by the Arabs (“the forcing,” that is, forcing equality on both sides of an equation) is clear in Mesopotamia in several periods; noteworthy is the early deployment of examples of the so-called Pythagorean theorem on the characteristics of a right triangle.

Chemistry and alchemy seem to have been practiced in Egypt, and its name may even derive from the word for Egypt, *Km*, “black (land),” although that is far from clear.

## Other Legacies

Many other elements have been touched on in chapters here, and we should remember the importance of some of these elements to our societies. One element that we stressed earlier which still seems important is the idea of representative local government. Its flourishing goes a considerable way to explaining why societies did not collapse when central authorities did. This resilience is a key factor in the continuation of these long-lived communities, and it should not be underemphasized in our own day. We may understand the term representative here quite broadly, for there may not have been actual elections going on, but there seems to have been a series of consensus-building exercises that allowed local worthies to make decisions in times that otherwise looked chaotic.

In the realm of agriculture, we cannot overemphasize the usefulness of pottery or of the grains and vegetables and animals that were domesticated in the Near East. Although other crops domesticated elsewhere are important now, these useful domesticates continue to be central to the diets of human beings.

Inheritance can be a tricky thing. Do the heirs appreciate everything that comes down? Have we learned how to manage the environment which the ancients began exploiting? Have we sensed how to establish the justice for which they strove? Have we advanced the technology they invented in ways beneficial to our fellow beings and to our planet? In short, are we worthy heirs?

Here is not, I think, the place to dwell upon our inadequacies, but rather to affirm that the ancients’ achievements are worth remembering and worth celebrating, especially if they allow us to look at ourselves more clearly.

## What Scholars Do

As we approach some of these legacies, we are in the midst of a transition in how we do research. Until the closing of the Akkadian dictionaries, much research involved mere retrieval of examples and marshalling of generalities, depending to a large extent on the compilations of earlier scholars, which had been preserved for a long time on index cards. The dictionaries allow easier access to particular words and the institutions they reflect. In Sumerian and in Egyptian, online projects parallel and extend these breakthroughs.

A generation of scholars has made efforts to put texts online so that they may be accessed widely and searched systematically. This development will make retrieval unproblematic, but it does not solve basic problems of how we perceive the ancient world. These developments are a subset of the effort for the so-called digital humanities. This work, however, has so far not yielded really new insights into the past.

But in the future it will be possible quickly and easily to compile or recompile ancient categories of texts, and yet the issues of questioning the assembled material continue. And the imponderables, including what text groups may have meant to different ancient thinkers, will become more acute.

My own work was definitely rooted in the index-card era. Traditionally the “Yale dissertation” consisted of a collection of a new group of texts and then some small effort to inquire of that group how it might reflect society and literature of its period. The change will be that the collection will be almost automatic, and the exploitation of the texts will demand a much larger effort.

We may bid farewell to the index cards, and yet the historical questions may be seen more clearly, especially to imaginative researchers. We may also confess that imagination has in the past been less practiced than in other fields of history.

The future thus looks to reveal ancients’ perceptions and understandings with more clarity than before. And the need for imaginative scholars will not be less, though the initial barrier of mastering computer programs may impede us old types from fully engaging in newer research. But that is our problem, not the problem of the digital natives who will arise and be intrigued by the important questions of our field. Let the coming generations think boldly about these legacies, and let our cultures never again forget the achievements of the Ancient Near East.

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