A COMPANION TO THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Edited by

Daniel C. Snell

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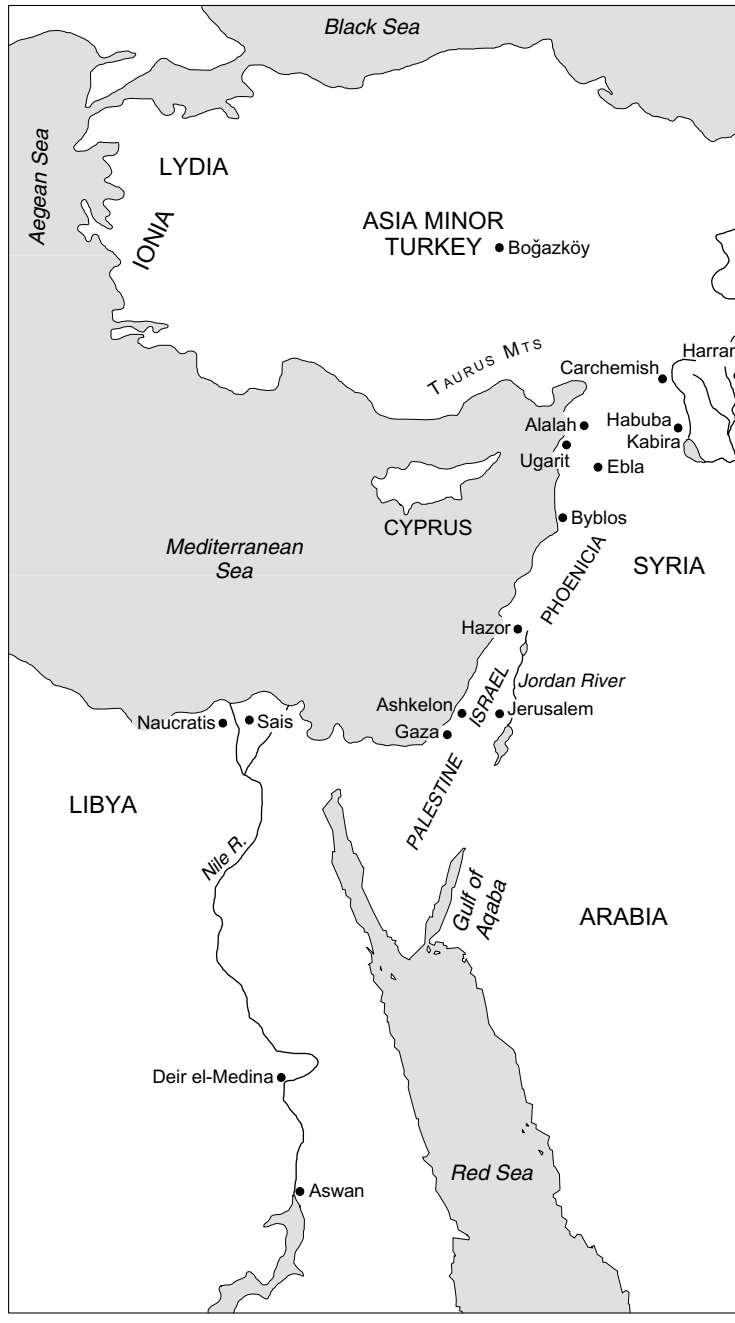
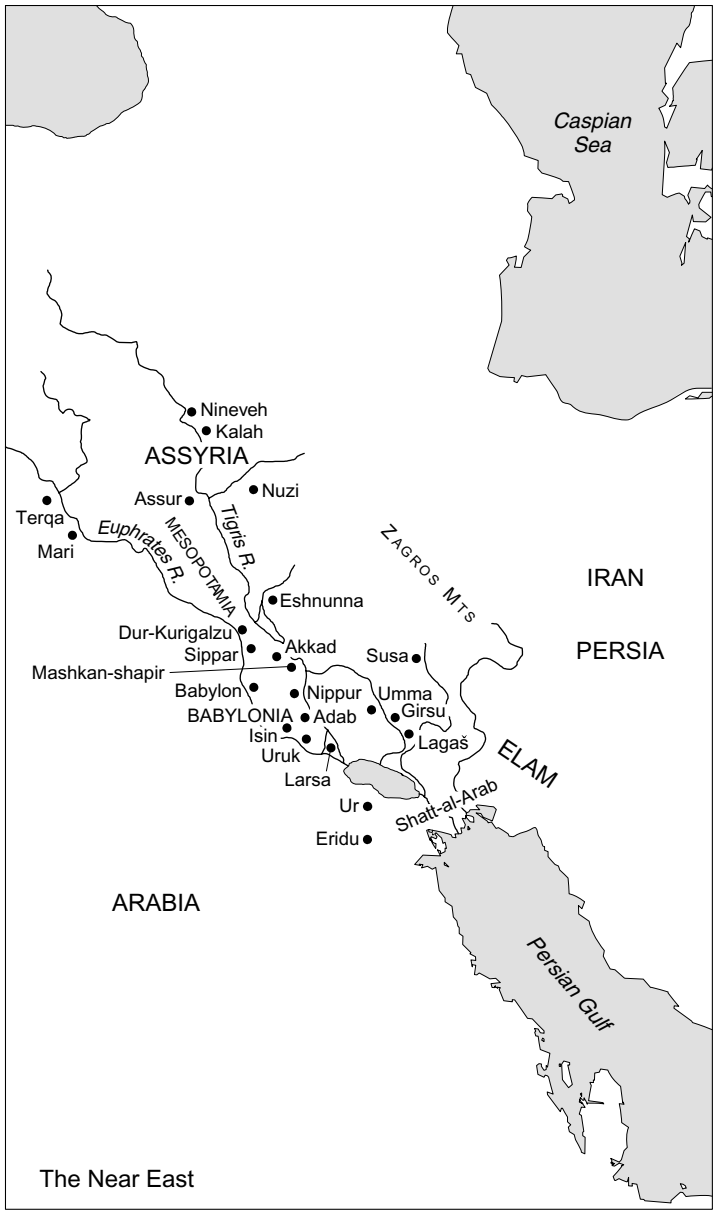


Map 0.1 The Near East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The Near East

Introduction

Daniel C. Snell

These essays stand alone and need no introduction, but it seems wise to clarify issues at the beginning in the form of responses to questions.

What is the Ancient Near East?

The term refers to the ancient area now called the Middle East in the languages of the area and of Europe; we mean the modern countries of Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. The term Near East refers to proximity to Europe and is therefore Eurocentric; Western Asia would be preferable, and some of our essays use that term, but that phrase is not widely understood, and so we have kept to the old terminology.

Is Egypt included?

With the growth of studies of Mesopotamia, ancient Iraq and Syria, we are so specialized that the discipline does not necessarily include Egypt, and there are many fine introductory books on Egypt. Nonetheless we believe that many if not most introductory courses to the Ancient Near East do include Egypt, and that the general public definitely feels Egypt is part of the Ancient Near East. Hence we have included treatment of ancient Egypt where possible. In fact we have slighted it in contrast to the lands further to the east, and most of the experts writing here were trained in Mesopotamian studies, not Egyptian. A longer project would have resulted in a more balanced view, but I felt it was important to acknowledge the very close links between Egypt and the rest of the Ancient Near East, even if full justice could not be done to both sides.

Is the work a companion to a particular textbook?

Not really. It was commissioned by Blackwell, which was in the process of publishing Van De Mieroop's *A History of the Ancient Near East* (2004), but that book was

published after several essays had been completed, and the authors here have not necessarily reacted to it in their pieces. While we certainly conceived these essays as an amplification of a political history of the Ancient Near East, we hope that it will be found to be useful by undergraduates and beginning graduate students regardless of what else they may be reading.

What chronology will be used here?

Chronology, the study of the time periods, especially the absolute dates, from the Ancient Near East, is undergoing rethinking now, and we have decided not to impose uniformity in how authors deployed it. Most have resorted to the Middle Chronology, now perhaps in the course of being discredited. But this has been the standard chronology for many years, and if it is wrong by a hundred and more years, it at least affords comparison with other works. When we now pick up historical works on the Ancient Near East from the beginning of the twentieth century, we find ourselves somewhat disoriented by the suggested chronology, and yet one can make sense of what the authors then believed. We beg the indulgence of future readers and can assert that given what we now know, the chronology presented here is a responsible one that will allow the reader to understand at least the relative chronology of events. The chronology used is summarized in J. A. Brinkman's appendix to Oppenheim 1977 for Mesopotamia and Baines and Malek 2000: 36–37 for Egypt.

All the authors have striven, I believe, to present their field in a way that will be accessible to persons without previous exposure to it and in a way that will be useful to scholars fifty years hence. That is a high ambition, and only time will judge whether our efforts really bore the fruit for which we hoped. But I recall with pleasure the response of one of the essayists on seeing the range of topics proposed here; the scholar wrote, "To answer broad and stimulating questions like these is the reason most of us got into the field to begin with." We hope these essays will be as stimulating as the questions that provoked them, and that students and scholars will for a time at least begin here when they seek the ancient and modern meaning of the Ancient Near East.

PART I

The Shape of the Ancient Near East

CHAPTER ONE

Historical Overview

Mario Liverani

Unity and Diversity

The history of the Ancient Near Eastern civilizations is very long: its time-span 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 to 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 which 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 in demographic growth – all these factors 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 the enlargement in the scale of the political units, the improvement of the technologies of production (and also of destruction), the 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 is 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 socio-political 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 around 1:25 in comparison to 1:5 outside the river valleys. The result of the central management was that only 1/3 of the crop covered the expenditures of seed for the next year, rations for workmen and animals, and 2/3 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 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 (l 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.