The Age of Opportunity: Social and Political Transitions in Mid-Second Millennium BC Mesopotamia

In this brief essay I consider aspects of the conference papers on the "transition to Mittani". The papers have discussed the history of periods and places before the formation of the Mittani state (including Ebla, the Old Assyrian period, Shemshāra and Leilan and Mari) and roughly contemporaneous material from Hittite archives and from Alalakh and other Levantine sites. There were also discussions of environment and subsistence patterns and about pastoral nomads and archaeological data, especially changes in settlement patterns. The organizers asked the participants to focus on the interrelations among local politics ("constituent space"), regional interconnections ("confederate space"), and imperial strategies ("conquered space").

This sense of place is in recent years a regular subject of inquiry, certainly among archaeologists. For these and many other authors, including geographers and historians, landscapes are constructs of the mind as well as physical and measurable entities. Landscapes are ways of seeing that are projected onto the land and express cultural attitudes. Furthermore, politics operates through space, according to Adam T. Smith (2003), in which space reproduces structures and/or constrains agents.2 History is where events occurred as well as when they occurred, and landscapes are constant reminders of history. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, of course, the hero tells his audience that if they doubt his story, they have only to look upon the walls of Uruk to see its verification. Landscapes of the past are also created by historians.

The cartography of political landscapes is mainly approached in this volume by those papers (and in some histories of Mesopotamia) that portray the transition to Mittani rule as the aftermath of a crisis in which landscapes change utterly. This is in particular reference to the end of the Old Babylonian period in Mesopotamia and the long period between the end of the Old Assyrian period and the resumption of centralized political systems in the Middle Assyrian period (under Assuruballit) and the Mittani state. This is often referred to as a "dark age" (since we have no documents from Assyria for several hundred years). In Babylonia the term dark age is now less apt, for reasons to be discussed below. In this paper I wonder about the usefulness of the term dark age, as well as summarizing the presented

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E.g. Ashmore – Knapp 1999; van Dyke 2008; Smith 2003; Johnson 2007 and Yoffee 2007.

² Soja 2000.

evidence of the papers on the origin of the Mittani state. How is the everyday exercise of power altered by political collapse and the rise of new political systems? How would a nonroyal, non-elite citizen of Mesopotamia have viewed and interpreted the crises of their states?

Whereas the perspective of non-elites in Mesopotamia is notoriously difficult to comprehend, historians usually avoid the presumption that all is center and the periphery is not only little apparent but also insignificant. Sometimes, however, this goal is forgotten since the data themselves report overwhelmingly the perspective of those in power, and historians come to identify with their ancient informants. For example, Dominique Charpin presented an excellent paper recently in a conference in honor of Mario Liverani. It was titled "the flight of slaves as a major social problem in Mari", and in it the author carefully assembled dozens of cases in which the crown had to confront the flight of slaves from control of Mari officials. However, reversing this royalist perspective, one might have said, basing interpretation on the same data that were presented, that the flight of slaves was a major opportunity for the enslaved to seek better lives. This analysis of "opportunity" leads to the title of my brief essay for this volume and to a concise look at the phenomena of collapse of the Old Assyrian and Old Babylonian states. If there was a transition to Mittani (and to Kassite) state(s), what was there a collapse from?

The history of the end of the Old Assyrian state of Šamšī-Adad and his sons needs only brief retelling, and Jesper Eidem's paper (see above p.137–146, with appropriate references to scholars of the Mari archives) tells it: Šamšī-Adad was "brilliant", but his regime was "desperately chaotic" with barely a "semblance of cohesion" and "lacked any real legitimacy ... The almost immediate collapse of the kingdom following the death of Šamšī-Adad seems to support this impression of extreme vulnerability." If the old city-state of Assur's political system and socio-economic structure (reported by Cécile Michel, see p. 111–136) was irrevocably altered by the usurper's imperial ambitions, the demise of the empire reduced "Assyria" and the "Kingdom of the North" to their rural base.

This set the stage for new political and social opportunities, as Eva von Dassow and Eidem (see p. 11–32 and p. 137–146) report. Šamšī-Adad's adventures to the East across the Tigris and into the Zagros met a number of political units, some of them, like "Turukkum", with Hurrian names of states, cities, and kings. Hurrian statelets fought with their neighbors, especially Gutians, and with Kassites who were consolidating into political units themselves to the south and east. These conflicts led to migrations, according to Eidem, to the East into the Khabur region where other Hurrians (as well as other people, non-Hurrians) lived (in relatively small sites, according to Rafał Koliński (see p. 179–212), in a mixture that also included nomads, according to Diederik Meijer, see p. 163–178). The migration of East

^{3 &}quot;Un problem social majeur: le fuite dans le Proche-Orient (Xxe–XVIIe siècles av. J.-C.)." The conference, "Antico Oriente: Nonsolostoria" took place in Rome, 20–21 April 2009.

⁴ See above, p. 138.

Hurrians into the area gave a selective advantage to Hurrian political leaders and was the major impetus for the formation of a Mittani state. Eidem suggested at the conference that it may have been the proximity of East Hurrians, who lived in Urmia Basin, to Indo-European speakers, who were just to the north of this area, which accounted for the Indo-European names and terms at Alalakh and in Boğazköy. Stefano de Martino (see p. 61–74) presents a thorough review of the Hittites' contacts with Hurrians.

It remains to say a few words about the so-called collapse of the Old Babylonian state and the opportunities for new political confederations to emerge in Babylonia and which had contacts eventually with Mittani along with new opportunities for local social mobility.

In 1505 BC the last king of the dynasty of Hammurabi (its sixth king) was defeated by a marauding Hittite force. Since – until recently – no documents after the collapse of the dynasty were found until around 1420 BC,5 this period of time has been called a dark age: "The lack of centralized power [in Babylonia] led to discontinuation of administrative and scribal practices as the levels of economic and cultural activities decreased. Texts were only sparingly written and we have thus no data with which to work. We enter into a 'Dark Age'."6

Now, the 175 years of textual silence become severely reduced if the date of 1505 BC, according to the middle chronology, becomes 1531 BC in the short chronology - about 111 years, and even more if the ultra-short chronology's date for the fall of Babylon, 1499 BC, is accepted – about 79 years. In the time of roughly the late 16th – early 15th century BC there appears the first reference to "Mittani", around 1490 BC, in an Egyptian text. In Hittite sources the references to Hurrians in northern Mesopotamia are earlier, around 1550 BC (de Martino, see p. 61–74). The dark age is also the time of kings of Hana at Terga who ruled at the time of the last OB king and thereafter.8 The most recent evidence of what was happening in the dark age in Babylonia is provided by Stephanie Dalley9 who has published texts of Sealand Dynasty kings who ruled in southern Babylonia (according to Dalley) from 1550-1480 BC. For the sake of argument, although Dalley does not use the short chronology, these years would be from 1486–1416 BC in the short chronology – with the date of the fall of Babylon at 1531 BC. In sum, the dark age is not as dark as it used to be.

If the dark age is supposed to be a collapse of centralized power in Babylonia to a time of "decrease" in economic and cultural activities, what kind of centralized power collapsed and why?

For some the Old Babylonian period is the "Amorite period". This is so-called, apparently, because the names of most of the kings of Babylonia are in the Amorite language, as are names of many Babylonian citizens, there are Amorite terms, mainly from Mari

- Podany 2002; Brinkman 1976.
- 6 Van De Mieroop 2007, 122.
- 7 Gasche et al. 1998a and b.
- 8 Podany 2002; Rouault 2004.
- 9 Dalley 2009 and 2010.
- 10 E.g. Charpin 2004.

archives, and there are many names of Amorite sub-groups (sometimes called "tribes"). Nevertheless, there is just as obviously no indication of an Amorite horde descending in Mesopotamia, no leader of all Amorites – indeed Amorite princes fought mainly with other Amorite princes, making alliances, claiming solidarity with kin-group leaders – and Amorites adopted Akkadian and Sumerian names and practices. There are precious few indications of an Amorite belief system or customs (especially few outside of Syria), and there is not a single document written in the Amorite language. If one keeps in mind the orientation of the conference on "cultural space", one may argue that Amorites were trying hard to be good Mesopotamians, copying Sumerian and Akkadian texts in scribal schools, worshipping Mesopotamian gods, being citizens of Mesopotamian city-states and battling, in the venerable Mesopotamian way, other city-states.

As is well known, the political system erected by King Hammurabi, which included all of middle and southern Babylonia, and the reaches of the Euphrates as far as Mari and Terga, and the Diyala, lasted about 12 years. These include the last 4 years of Hammurabi's reign and first 8 years of his son and successor. In the 8th year of Samsu-iluna a rebellion in the south broke out and by the end of that king's reign, the south was lost. Apparently, kings of Sealand Dynasty," heirs to Sumerian traditions, if the names of the kings are any indication, ruled from rural outposts, since several of the southern cities were abandoned, at least for a short time. Soon, Sealand Dynasty kings ruled from cities, perhaps secondary capitals in the Lagash-Girsu region.

During the reign of the last kings of Babylon, although some military campaigns were launched, for example in the region of Terqa, but also in the south, the power of the kings was fragile.¹² In cities, local "headmen" authorized the hire of workers on crown estates,¹³ and autonomous military cadres established bases in the rural hinterlands.¹⁴ Some of these cadres were Kassites, who alternately lived in Babylonian cities, were mercenaries for Babylonian kings, and were disruptive forces for the weakened kings of Babylon. When the Hittite army marched on Babylon, they did not face much opposition. As Sealand Dynasty kings were ruling in southern Babylonia, Kassites were organizing a new political power base in northern Babylonia.

To conclude this synopsis of history in the middle of the second millennium BC, we can view the transition to Mittani rule as part of new state building in northern Mesopotamia, as well as the transition to Kassite rule in Babylonia. Sealand kings were ruling in southern Mesopotamia, successfully fending off sporadic campaigns from kings in Babylon, who ruled only a small area around Babylon itself, about the same territory as had been established by Sumula'el of Babylon. Eventually, Kassite rulers were able to incorporate the

- II Dalley 2010.
- 12 Van Koppen 2004; Richardson 2005.
- 13 Yoffee 1977; Stol 1976.
- 14 Van Koppen 2004; Richardson 2005.

south in their own state. In the north the small states, whose political systems were in part led by elders, councils, and mayors (von Dassow, see above p. 11–32), were subsumed under Mittanian and Assyrian leaders. This picture of contested space is not so much that of a dark age as it is an age of opportunity.

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