Area Review

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Recent Trends in the Study of Ancient Near Eastern History: Some Reflections

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Reality struck scholars of the ancient Near East hard when in mid-April 2003 news of the looting of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad hit the airwaves. Not that many of them had ever set foot in the building – for decades ideological prejudices, wars, sanctions, and other obstacles had stopped most European and American scholars of the antiquity of Iraq from visiting the country. But the news showed the blatant ignorance or indifference of those who had planned the country's invasion and at the same time exposed how scholarship had failed to make an impact on the perceptions of the past held by political leaders in the USA, Great Britain, and beyond. Even the media realized the absurdity of US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's question whether it was "possible that there were that many vases in the whole country?" (April 11, 2003), and various specialists who had spent their careers in the shelter of the less-commonly-taught subjects at elite universities were suddenly asked to step into the spotlight and explain the importance of their subject. Historians stressed how ancient Mesopotamia was the land of "firsts" –first writing, first cities, first laws, etc.– while archaeologists remarked on the amazing richness of Iraq's cultural heritage and pointed out how its entire territory was filled with ancient remains. The latter became more poignant with the news of extensive looting of archaeological sites to feed the voracious appetite of the antiquities market. While this trade was termed illicit by UNESCO convention since 1970, many countries tacitly tolerated it to satisfy rich and influential collectors. Ironically the Iraq Museum's looting triggered a stricter enforcement of the law and customs agents in the USA at least became more attentive to the smugglers and financers of the trade.

I start this essay recalling what happened a decade ago to point out the complex relationship between the study of the history of the ancient Near East and present-day events in that region and how this situation shapes the field in a way Greco-Roman historians relying on a long humanist tradition could scarcely imagine. Ancient Near Eastern history is a relatively young field, less than two

hundred years old, and ever since its beginning depended on access to the modern Middle East for its progress. Its outlines are still very much affected by new archaeological finds and contemporary affairs determine where these take place. When the revolution of 1979 closed off Iran to western scholars and the subsequent war with Iraq also made that country more or less off limits, archaeologists shifted their focus to Syria. The discoveries they made there forced serious reconsiderations of the early history of writing and urbanism in the Near East. Archaeological finds in a single site can force a rewriting of history. This was perhaps most dramatically shown when in the 1970s excavations at Ebla in western Syria, which started before the Iranian revolution, unearthed a large state archive and library from the mid-third millennium BCE. Ideas about the geopolitical situation of the ancient Near East in the third millennium had to be revised, as well as those on the use of writing outside Babylonia. A region previously thought to be illiterate now showed close intellectual contacts with Babylonia, and it became clear that scribes in both regions wrote out exact copies of the same ancient scholarly material. My aim is not to de-emphasize the contributions archaeology makes to Greco-Roman history but to place the importance of new discoveries in perspective. For example, the 1973 find of the Vindolanda tablets in northern England, while important for the reconstruction of military life at the Roman frontiers, did not force a reassessment of the use of writing in the Empire. The intensification of archaeological research in Syria (although that has been suddenly disrupted because of the ongoing civil war there) has also affected ideas on the origins of urban society in the ancient Near East. While scholars for long saw the focus of developments in southern Mesopotamia, culminating in the mid-fourth millennium especially around Uruk, the world's "first city" (Liverani 2006), the discovery of large and complex settlements in northern Syria has convinced some that certain inhabitants of that region experienced urban life even earlier (Oates et al. 2007).

Although ancient Near East historians have always engaged with material culture to a great extent, their reliance on ancient texts remains fundamental and newly discovered manuscripts, be it in the drawers of a museum or at an archaeological site, as well as a better understanding of previously known ones constantly change the interpretation of historical situations. An example of the latter is the breakthrough in translation of the so-called Hittite hieroglyphic inscriptions rendering the Luwian language, written mostly from ca. 1300 to 700 BCE, that is, during the last century of the Hittite empire and in the Neo-Hittite kingdoms of early Iron Age northern Syria. While known since the early twentieth century, a good comprehension of the texts written in this script and language was only accomplished at the end of the century (Çambel 1999, Hawkins 2000) and progress continues to be made. The improved understanding showed how the Hittite

state's territories in southern Anatolia and northern Syria were quite independent from the capital in the north, Hattusha, and survived the crisis of 1200 much better than the political center (Bryce 2012). It also drew attention to a previously rather obscure component of the multi-lingual Hittite Empire, the Luwians, now seen by some to have been one of the most prominent population groups in that state.

The appearance of new texts is often problematic when it is the result of looting and the antiquities trade. With the introduction of economic sanctions against Iraq in the early 1990s and the collapse of that country's infrastructure, the destruction of archaeological sites increased enormously and markets in the USA, Europe, and East Asia became flooded with new materials of unspecified origin. The ongoing civil war in Syria and the reported looting of archaeological sites there will probably result in a new influx of cuneiform tablets and other objects from that country as well. Manuscripts looted from Iraq show, for example, economic activity in southern Babylonia between the late eighteenth and the fifteenth centuries BCE when previously the region was considered more or less abandoned (Dalley 2009, Van Lerberghe and Voet 2009). They bring some clarity in the so-called Dark Age of the mid-second millennium BCE and will force a revision of the end of Hammurabi of Babylon's dynasty. The absence of a secure provenance for looted documents has damaged their historical value irreversibly, but as new archaeological exploration is almost impossible in the entire Middle East today such texts will be the only ones inspiring radical revision for the near future, as established museum collections have been mostly scrutinized for major surprises. Obviously, in other fields of ancient history new texts can create a breakthrough or prompt revisions –as the controversy around the alleged mention of Jesus' wife in a fourth century Demotic papyrus shows (*New York Times*, September 18, 2012)– but the adjustments made are mostly less radical.

There is thus an intimate connection between philology and history, which affects the practices and presentation of ancient Near Eastern history. On the one hand historical analyses regularly appear in what are primarily text editions. For example, the re-edition of the royal correspondence of Babylonian kings of the twenty-first century includes a radical reinterpretation of the role of Syrian nomads in the overthrow of their dynasty around 2000 BCE (Michalowski, *Correspondence* 2011). On the other hand, studies that present themselves as historical analyses habitually include philological editions of primary sources (e.g., Kleber 2008). This practice can impede communication between specialists on the ancient Near East and scholars of other periods of history. Because of the relatively small community of ancient Near East historians there are fewer syntheses of their scholarship than for other areas of ancient history and they have been less successful at passing on their new insights to a broader readership. The unfortunate effect is that when

generalizing studies of topics in ancient history or world history appear, the information presented on the ancient Near East is often outdated.

The trauma of the war in Iraq may have had an impact on a less materialistic level, of course, and could have encouraged students of the country's past to ask new questions or address old ones differently. Such effects are more difficult to measure, as they are private and even subconscious. Yet, it is no surprise that the cruelty of the Iraq invasion, its justification, and the manipulation of its portrayal to the invaders' home audiences raised questions about how the Assyrians, most notorious for their militarism and brutality in ancient Near Eastern history, dealt with similar issues (Bahrani 2008). That book forces us to see war not as an activity on the fringes of a society's other practices and beliefs, but as fully part of the "civilization" that initiates it. We need to understand it within the context of attitudes towards the body, ritual practices, communications with the gods, and other behavior. Remarkably, the discipline of ancient Near Eastern history has otherwise failed to acknowledge recent events in Iraq in an explicit way, with few exceptions. One archaeologist's call to reconsider the practices of the discipline, more concerned with the presentation of excavation results than with intellectual approaches (Matthews 2003), was totally ignored, as far as I can see. A delightful survey of Iraq's cultural history from the earliest times to the coming of Islam (Foster and Foster 2009) ends with a discussion of how this heritage is under threat of systematic destruction. The approach has its dangers, as concerns about the present may color the depiction of the past to such an extent that it is no longer academically credible. A study of torture in the Achaemenid Empire that openly admits it wants to establish parallels with American misconduct at Abu Ghraib (Lincoln 2007) has been criticized for drawing on the full register of Orientalist stereotypes about ancient Persia to make its case (Colburn 2011). At times the damage is more apparent than real: the title of a volume on *Regime Change in the Ancient Near East and Egypt* (Crawford ed. 2007) may give the impression that it aims to present political development there as an unchanging pattern of usurpation from Sargon of Agade in the twenty-third century BCE to Saddam Hussein in the twentieth century CE. All but one of the papers included ignore recent history and seem unaffected by it, however. The sole exception "Regime change in Iraq from the Mongols to the present" readily admits it is a piece of high vulgarization (Sluglett 2007).

While academic researchers mostly tried to avoid engaging with present-day events, the museum world reacted in a radically different way. The three European institutions with the largest ancient Near East collections, the British Museum, the Louvre, and Berlin's Pergamon Museum, co-organized a blockbuster exhibition on Babylon, each giving it a distinctive character, as is clear from the catalogues published, which are the basis of my discussion here. The titles of the exhibits are

alike: in Berlin and London, "Babylon: Myth and Reality," and in Paris, "Babylon Yesterday and Today," and they clearly announce the intent not to limit the presentation to the archaeological past. While it is hard to imagine that the trigger for this effort was not the invasion of Iraq and more importantly the subsequent use of archaeological sites as military bases, especially the occupation of Babylon by US and Polish forces, this aspect is certainly not emphasized. Instead the three different stories of Babylon from antiquity to modern times end in the twentieth century, making only brief references to the twenty-first century, if any at all.

The British Museum's exhibit and catalogue (Finkel and Seymour, eds. 2008) were the most modest in size. Throughout the curators juxtapose ancient Babylon to modern representations of it, heavily colored through a Biblical lens, giving much attention, for example, to Belshazzar's Feast and the Fall of Babylon. The final chapter describes the current state of the site of Babylon, a tragedy John Curtis, the then keeper of the Department of the Middle East at the British Museum, did much to publicize in the British press. He discusses those events together with Saddam Hussein's use of the site for propaganda purposes as if they were comparable actions. The German exhibit and catalogue were much larger, the former occupying the entire Pergamon Museum, the latter two substantial volumes. Those distinguish between *Babylon: Wahrheit* (Marzahn and Schauerte, eds. 2008) and *Babylon: Mythos* (Wullen and Schauerte, eds. 2008), which were also separate in the exhibit. While the *Truth* section, as in London, reviews European exploration of the site –acknowledging Iraqi work, which the British Museum omitted– its focus is much more on the ancient world. The *Myth* section goes all out giving examples of European and American –but no Middle Eastern– representations of the tower, Semiramis, Sin City, the mad Nebuchadnezzar, and so on. At times the selection seems a bit far-fetched as when an image of Hitler on all fours is connected to Nebuchadnezzar via William Blake. The Iraq war does not receive a mention. In Paris the approach was again somewhat different and there is a sizeable one-volume catalogue that surveys in chronological sequence first the ancient remains of Babylon and its history into the Parthian era, and second "external" traditions about the city and what it represented. The second part is divided between ancient and Medieval accounts including Middle Eastern Hebrew, Arabic, and Persian ones, and modern ones, that is those of sixteenth through nineteenth century Europe with a special discussion of D. W. Griffith's twentieth century American movie, *Intolerance*. Only in the survey of archaeological research on the site, which acknowledges Iraqi and Italian work, does the Iraq war come up.

The museum directors and curators in these three institutions seem to have realized that they had insights to offer on a war that dominated the day's news. For a century or more they had conscientiously displayed remains from ancient

Iraq, but now there was occasion to bring them out in all their glory and stress how they had always had a special place in the historical memory of the Euro-American world, mostly negative indeed as it was the Whore of Babylon rather than an appreciative image that had dominated. Yet, the real trigger for the exhibitions, the ongoing conflict in which the site of Babylon was just one victim, could be addressed only obliquely, ironically most plainly in the country whose government was most complicit in the war. I do not want to sound too critical of these three government-supported institutions whose curators at least had the courage to try to address ignorance of the type Donald Rumsfeld displayed, although there were missed opportunities (cf. Bohrer 2009). Explicitly acknowledging that past and present are connected was an important step.

Contemporary history may also have inspired recent scholarship in much less apparent ways and perhaps encouraged a reassessing of the greatness of rulers of the past. Ancient Near Eastern history often still is a triumphal account of the deeds of great men, even if these deeds involved war, murder, treachery, and other violent acts. The ancient kings have not escaped criticism before. There is a now well-established practice of interpreting the written and visual messages of Mesopotamian rulers as pieces of propaganda (Finkelstein 1979, Larsen ed. 1979, Oppenheim 1979), but the negative portrayals of Near Eastern rulers seem to have become much stronger recently. While the twenty-first century BCE King Shulgi of Ur was previously mocked for his claim that he ran one hundred miles in one day (Finkelstein 1979: 68–69) –a feat in line with Mao's 1966 swim in the Yangtze River– today the literature he commissioned is compared to that in praise of Joseph Stalin (Vacín 2013). King Hammurabi's of Babylon famous laws, often regarded the finest expression of early humanity's search for justice, are now considered a propagandistic attempt to make military occupation palatable to a disgruntled population (Yoffee 2005: 109). Likewise, the positive Biblical and Classical image of the Persian Cyrus the Great was deconstructed to show a ruthless and brutal empire builder (Kuhrt 2007). The labeling of ancient Mesopotamian writings as propaganda can be too facile, as if that answers all questions about the texts, and there can be insufficient attention to how they are embedded in wider social and cultural practices and how they function on other levels as well (Bahrani 2008), but behind the analysis of these and other rulers' writings there lies a concern about their value as sources on historical events. Do the hymns praising King Shulgi tell us anything about his actions in life?

Historians of the ancient Near East are frequently confronted with a situation where the only or most eloquent textual sources are clearly of a literary character and are preserved in manuscripts much later than the episodes they depict (cf. Liverani 2011, Michalowski, "Early Mesopotamia," 2011). One of the most fascinating aspects of the Mesopotamians' interactions with the past is how the

memory of certain individuals and events remained vivid and at the center of a creative process for many centuries. Most notable in this respect was the northern Babylonian dynasty of Akkad from the twenty-fourth through twenty-third centuries BCE whose pre-eminent members –Sargon and his grandson Naram-Sin– unified Babylonia and engaged in military campaigns throughout the Near East. They publicized these deeds in their royal inscriptions but more importantly later generations continued to write about them in ever more glorifying terms. By the eighth century BCE Sargon's empire was said to stretch across the known world and he was associated with the only survivor of the flood, Utnapishtim. He became a mythological figure whose powers surpassed the limits of time and place (Van de Mieroop 2012). The later sources on Sargon and literary sources in general are appealing because of their narrative character –they are works of literature after all– which is the format western tradition prefers for its historical accounts. But how useful are they for our reconstruction of the historical situations they depict? In 1998 the International Association of Assyriologists, scholars of cuneiform writings, devoted its annual meeting to the question of historiography and the published proceedings show how divided opinions are on this matter (Abusch et al., eds. 2001). One author, borrowing terminology from Biblical studies, speaks of minimalist-pessimist and maximalist-optimist schools. As a maximalist he argues that literary writings contain a historical kernel that can be uncovered through careful analysis and that they are more important for the study of the period they depict than for the history of their presumed time of composition (Hallo 2001). Others suggest a variety of critical stances: from a middle course that seeks to elicit useful information by considering "other kinds of historical data" (Potts 2001: 407) to a radical rejection of the practice to historicize literature (Cooper 2001). The temptation remains strong, however, especially when the literary accounts address an era otherwise poorly documented –the study of Rome's early history faces the same challenges. We should look at the accounts of the ancient Mesopotamians for more than just the building blocks of an *histoire événementielle*, however. They provide a rich record of these peoples' perceptions of their own past. Because of the rich millennia-long record that enables us to follow the depiction of historical figures and the manipulation of texts over the centuries this is an extremely fertile area of research as we try to unravel how successive generations of ancient scribes adapted works to suit their own circumstances.

Of course, it is not only the genre of an ancient source and its chronological relationship to the events it describes that needs analysis. Source criticism remains one of the most important and difficult tasks of historical research, especially when dealing with cultures whose remains are relatively scarce and derive from cultural backgrounds alien to the modern interpreter. More and more

scholars of the ancient Near East have become sensitive to the impact of the linguistic turn in history – here the works of Mario Liverani over several decades have been most influential (a selection is available in Liverani 2004). The reading of ancient Mesopotamian kings' celebratory accounts –in the past often seen as goldmines for historical "facts"– has become much more sophisticated recently. For example, an analysis of third and early second millennium claims by Babylonian kings of military successes ingeniously exposed that these were presumptive statements about desired control over the inhabitants of interstitial zones rather than evidence of territorial expansion of the kind modern nation states pursue (Richardson 2012).

The question how general trends in the discipline of history have stimulated change in the study of the ancient Near East is not so easy to answer, as such influences are rarely explicitly acknowledged. Various developments can be noted, however, and seem to parallel what happened in other fields of history as well. The first is a negative one, the diminished attention to issues of gender. In the 1990s books and articles devoted to women's history were frequent, a trend perhaps given official recognition when in 2001 the International Association of Assyriologists made it the subject of its annual meeting (Parpola and Whiting, eds. 2002). These mostly reflected first wave feminism and aimed at finding women in the Near Eastern past, with only a few exceptions approaching gender as a social and representational concept (Bahrani 2001, Nissinen 1998). After 2001 the number of publications radically decreased. The periodical *Nin: Journal of Gender Studies in Antiquity* that focused on the ancient Near East had a short lifespan with only four issues from 2000 to 2004. A volume resulting from a 2006 conference discussing gender in the ancient Near East from the Neolithic to the Iron Age is mostly inspired by archaeological theory (Bolger ed. 2008), and historians seem to have turned their attention elsewhere.

One popular approach in historical research today that seems extremely relevant to the ancient Near East unfortunately also is receiving little consideration: environmental history. After all, "Ancient Mesopotamia, all unknowing, begat, global warming" as Simon Schama quipped (Schama 1995: 13) and control over the natural environment was a precondition for all that happened in its southern half. In the 1950s and 1960s archaeologists, especially under the directorship of Robert McC. Adams, were able to survey the Iraqi countryside on foot and made enormous progress in understanding the development of cities and irrigation systems, but such work became impossible later on (cf. Adams 2012) –another example of the impact of today's events on ancient Near Eastern research. Satellite imagery, no longer restricted to military purposes, provides new ways to study settlement patterns, canalization, and so on, and important revisions of the standard account of early urbanism in southern Iraq are in the air,

focusing on drainage rather than irrigation. People sought refuge from rising sea levels on raised ridges within the marshes, whose resources they readily exploited (Pournelle 2007 and 2013). There seems to be a great amount of potential in the area of environmental history combining information from archaeology, satellite technology, and ancient texts. A return to fieldwork in Iraq would certainly be very helpful in this area.

Two developments in the field of ancient Near Eastern history seem notable, one in full swing, the other newly emerging. In the last two decades there has been a great revival of the study of Mesopotamian intellectual history, which flourished in the early twentieth century but lost out to socio-economic concerns in the latter part of that century. Whether or not this is related to the general growing popularity of intellectual history in general is hard to say, but it may not be mere coincidence. Much of the recent research on the ancient Near East is very text oriented with editions or re-editions of Mesopotamian scholarly and scientific writings. Part of this work is the result of welcome projects that aim at the full publication of materials excavated many decades ago (Maul ed. 2007), and there is a broad effort to provide up-to-date editions of massive ancient corpora, especially of divinatory and medical treatises (e.g. Böck 2000, Freedman 1998 and 2006, Heeßel 2000, Koch(-Westenholz) 2000 and 2005, Verderame 2002). In parallel there has been substantial progress in the understanding of ancient Mesopotamian lexicography (e.g., Veldhuis 2004), hermeneutics (e.g., Frahm 2011), astronomy (e.g., Brown 2000, Rochberg 2004), divination (e.g., Annus, ed. 2010), mathematics (e.g., Friberg 2007, Robson 2008), and medicine (e.g., Geller 2010). Let me take hermeneutics as an example, based on a recent detailed collection and examination of all the preserved evidence (Frahm 2011). There survive some eight hundred and sixty cuneiform tablets from the eighth to the second centuries BCE that contain scholia on a wide variety of Assyrian and Babylonian writings and these manuscripts were preserved separately from the works they interpreted. They comment on works of literature, ritual texts, all forms of omens, legal, and lexical texts. They were kept in royal and temple libraries as well as in those of scholarly families both in Assyria and Babylonia and successive political regimes –Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Seleucid, and Parthian– supported the institutions that produced this type of scholarship. 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. The work on these commentaries was based on a written scholarly tradition and what was

called "from the mouth of the scholar," and its methods and intellectual foundations can be compared to what we see in other branches of ancient learning, such as lexicography. An analysis of this material is crucial for our understanding of ancient intellectual history, and other studies of other areas of Mesopotamian scholarship promise similar results. The relevant corpus of ancient writings is huge and many compositions are still not fully accessible, nor have all the new insights been integrated in a comprehensive understanding of intellectual history, so much is left to be done.

The second development relates to the discipline of world history, very much in fashion in the USA today and gaining strength elsewhere. Multiculturalism and economic globalization together triggered a deconstruction of the Eurocentric view of history that saw the torch of civilization passed on from ancient Mesopotamia to the Greco-Roman world and from there to modern western Europe and the USA. World history provides a set of opportunities but also challenges to ancient Near East historians that few specialists in that field seem to have recognized. It takes a big picture approach that uses eras of thousands of years and continents as geographical units. It sees the Roman Empire as just a moment in the stage of history from the end of the last ice age when settled life became possible to the early modern period when maritime innovations enabled individuals to reach every part of the globe. Geographically Europe no longer exists as a continent in this approach, so a focus on the Aegean Sea and its shores, for example, seems myopic. In such an expansive methodology the ancient Near East gains special prominence because it is a world of "firsts." The origins of agriculture, cities, writing, states, empires, and many other elements of civilization are studied there both because the earliest evidence derives from the ancient Near East and because it is relatively well-studied. Thus every textbook of world history will start the discussion of the origins of writing with the development of Sumerian cuneiform in southern Mesopotamia before it mentions Egyptian, Indus Valley, Chinese, and Mesoamerican scripts, and this leading position also appears in world historical books with popular appeal outside the classroom (e.g., Diamond 1997). This gives a responsibility to ancient Near East scholars to make sure that the information accessible to world historians is up-to-date, a challenge not always met.

The world historical approach also questions the parameters of what constitutes ancient history. The traditional view that this means Greco-Roman history still dominates by far, and to give examples of it is pointing out the obvious. The attitude is fraying at the edges, however. In the USA at least, job announcements for "ancient historians" regularly include an expectation to teach Egypt and the Near East as well, and elsewhere too scholars of the Greco-Roman world demand that their colleagues broaden their perspectives, well-aware that this is a minority

opinion. Thus in the recent *A Companion to Ancient History* John North of University College, London wrote: "My ideal (I admit not shared with many) would see history departments everywhere accepting the need to cover all periods from the early Near Eastern civilizations onwards as an essential part of their discipline" (North 1997: 97). "The 45th Deutscher Historikertag" was devoted to contacts between east and west in antiquity and held a special meeting on "Alter Geschichte und Alter Orient" in which the separation between the ancient Near East and Greece and Rome was contested (Rollinger et al., eds. 2007). This approach asks for a change in attitude from Greco-Roman historians, which I leave to specialists in that field to address (cf. Wiesehöfer 2007), but also from ancient Near East scholars. They need not only master their empirical evidence and the traditional methods of analysis but also be aware of the questions scholars of other disciplines would like to see addressed. Some projects with the express intent to compare the ancient Near East to other cultures exist, such as "'Imperium' and 'Officium' Comparative Studies in Ancient Bureaucracy and Officialdom" at the University of Vienna (cf. Reinfandt and Tost, eds. 2012), and there is much room for expansion in that area. In the ancient Near Eastern material Greco-Roman historians can find vast amounts of data that provide new angles of approach to many of the questions they ask. This situation is not limited to socio-economic history but probably most striking there. Tens of thousands of relevant records from the entire history of the ancient Near East exist that offer a detail on transactions and administrative practices unavailable in Greco-Roman sources outside Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt. Studies of the ancient economy, society, imperialism, and other subjects should consider these materials from cultures not only close in time but also with similar ecological conditions and in contact with the Mediterranean world.

The merging of ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman histories has a danger to it, however. When the focus is too strongly on how the east inspired the west it may seem that the ancient Near East counts solely *because* it influenced Greece and Rome. The attitude recreates a Hegelian teleology of history in which the ancient Near East's function is that of the cradle of civilization, reaching maturity in Classical Greece. Consequently this history finds value only within a European narrative as a source of inspiration during Greece's Archaic Period. Questioning the boundaries of Near Eastern history itself may help in this respect. Chronologically all textbooks of ancient Near Eastern history, my own included (Van de Mieroop 2007), end sometime in the last centuries of the first millennium BCE, with Alexander the Great or somewhat later. (Joannès 2004 surveys Mesopotamia from the Assyrian to the Parthian eras but purely on the basis of cuneiform sources). The only real exception is a recent book with a focus on Iraq, which takes the narrative to the Islamic conquest of that country (Foster and Foster

2009). The reasons for the traditional boundary are philological rather than historical: the languages of the primary sources change and Classicists take over from Assyriologists as the specialists of their analysis (Van de Mieroop 1997). But one could easily see a sequence of empires from Assyrian and Persian to Seleucid and take this further to Parthian and Sassanid and even Abbasid, which can help in the understanding of each one of them, as was shown for the Seleucid Empire years ago (Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993). The burgeoning interest in Late Antiquity in the Middle East also forces us to see the fluidity of boundaries, with the coming of Islam no longer considered a wiping the slate clean and an entirely new beginning. All these contexts – within world history, within ancient history, and within Middle Eastern history– can only enrich the study of the ancient Near East itself as well as the broader frameworks in which it is considered. There is much that the ancient Near East can contribute to historical scholarship and in order to accomplish this in full both students of its history and that of other cultures need to work together.

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