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"Beyond Babylon": Closing Remarks

I am the last speaker to address you and I am asked to offer a few remarks as our symposium is closing. I cannot presume that you have heard all the presentations of colleagues brought from far and wide, so, rather than commenting on material that you may have missed—which at any rate includes many topics beyond my depth—I am electing to interpret my commission as the other side of keynoting. That is, instead of rehearsing or decorating the subjects that you have heard, I will offer two parting shots. Because introspection in matters that interest us intellectually can be good for the soul, I will first situate this splendid occasion within a tradition of discussions about the past. To do so, I conjure up a fictitious symposium on the second millennium B.C. that could have taken place a century or so ago at the Metropolitan Museum. It was a far smaller space then, though no less distinguished for its pedagogic efforts. This adventure of mine will not be entirely fictional because I have drawn inspiration from the miniaturized pages of the Sears and Roebuck's American printing of the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, distributed in 1915–16. Any challenge you have about my facts should be taken up with its editors.

A Century Ago

It is stunning what one century does to a field of study, in terms of discoveries and knowledge, but even more stunning is what a century does to the vision that gives coherence to what is discovered. By 1908 of our uncommon era, there were two, maybe three, foci to our inspection of the ancient Near East: Egypt, Babylon, and the Aegean. By then, the discoveries of Heinrich Schliemann at Mycenae and the Troad were a generation old. Sir Arthur Evans had just found a trove of tablets at Knossos, but their decipherment was nowhere nearing. While these discoveries sharpened our sense of the Aegean as a partner in the construction of a second millennium B.C. Mediterranean civilization, linkages between the two worlds were still haphazard.

By 1908, however, we had known how to read Egyptian and Akkadian for decades. From the monuments and documents recovered in Egypt, including the Amarna tablets, we could be fairly certain about the empire Egypt built in its Dynasty 18. Hugo Winckler had recovered archives at Boğazköy (today's Boğazkale) in 1906, so we knew where to locate the home of the Hittites, Egypt's formidable foe, even if it would take another decade to read the texts with any comprehension.

Ubiquitous Hebrews

Lots of attention was also paid to the Canaanites, as much because their home was to be the Promised Land as because they bridged the space between the Hittites and the Egyptians. Ironically, there was then much conviction about them and their culture since, apart from a few political letters they sent the pharaohs, we had almost nothing of their writings. This gave us license to define them from the pages of the Hebrew Bible, where they were painted luridly as foes of decency and of the one true faith.

If the Hebrews are entirely missing from today's exhibition, they would have been heavily featured in 1908, and their story linked to the mention of Hapirus in the Amarna correspondence. In fact, in those days, there was also general agreement with Josephus that the Hyksos domination a couple of centuries earlier gave the Hebrews a second millennium B.C. presence in Egypt. Then, as now, the Sea Peoples and the havoc they created conveniently brought the second millennium B.C. to a screeching halt.

Absent Hammurabi

As we move to the east, in 1908 Hammurabi of Babylon would have escaped a second millennium B.C. focus, because in those days scholars had him living hundreds of years earlier (about 2350 B.C.). In contrast, the merchants of Cappadocian Kanesh had been placed three centuries later (and in some calculations even later), almost within grasp of the Egyptian Dynasty 18. Still, Hammurabi's impact was pervasive, and cultures away from Babylon were judged on whether or not they had absorbed the legal codification that Hammurabi eternalized on a basalt stele that Jacques de Morgan had found in 1901 at Susa (in Khuzestan, Iran) (fig. 1). The literature of the time heavily discussed the Amorites because they appeared in many documents of the era. Frequently cited was a certain Abi-ramu, whose name readily conjured the presence of the patriarch Ab-ram, just before he morphed into Abraham.[1]

Such a conjunction might seem trivial today, but at the turn of that century, similar tidbits provoked one of the most vitriolic and nakedly anti-Semitic diatribes ever staged in our field. A learned Assyriologist, Friedrich Delitzsch, who died in 1922 on the day of this symposium, forced the issue on whether Babylon—Babel—was a truer intellectual ancestor than Bibel—the Bible. The arguments were mostly specious and often incongruous; nevertheless, armed with misdiagnosed readings of such texts as the Gilgamesh and Babylonian creation epics, Delitzsch's contrast between Babel and Bibel was meant to establish a pedigree for Europeans that leapfrogged any meaningful dependence on Hebraic ideals.[2]

Fig. 1. The Law Code of Hammurabi, excavated at Susa during the 1901–2 season by the Délégation Scientifique Française en Perse

Paradigms for History

Had you attended our convocation of a century ago, your sense of how the past had unfolded might have been controlled by two powerful paradigms. One consciously retrojected a quixotic vision of Semitic hordes periodically spilling out from the heart of Arabia, overwhelming prevailing cultures, and imposing new perceptions: Akkadians, Canaanites, Amorites, Arameans, maybe the Hebrews, certainly the Arab tribes. This paradigm, in fact, was not fully shelved until the documents from third millennium B.C. Ebla made it clear that most ethnic groups mentioned in later records had been there at least from the dawn of history. And as to those entities not yet reported at Ebla, I would not be shocked if they showed up at another contemporaneous site, perhaps at Tell Beydar.

The other paradigm, however, had a more insidious inspiration, as it was modeled on the forceful control Europe then had over most of the globe. In 1908, those of us who lived in the west could be confident that providence was shaping our destiny and that our capacity to dominate was the consequence of natural selection. In the process, we believed ourselves to be custodians of the past, heirs to the best among preceding cultures. We were the benben capstone of a pyramid, with all previous cultures forming its base. Our museums became their shrines, and we treated their remains with such benevolence and reverence that we could not imagine them resenting our hospitality. In displaying the artifacts, curators of those days frequently accentuated a vision that worked well for the west: the triumph of the better-organized over those thought to lack the will to succeed. Just as museums gloried in the "Splendor that was Greece" and the "Power that was Rome," they found Majesty in Egypt, Wonder in Babylon, Might in Assyria, and Grandeur in Persia. The better collections of those days did not need to import the tools to preach these lessons, as they were stocked with exactly the sort of evidence taken from Assyria and Egypt that would reinforce the conceit.

"Beyond Babylon" Today

The difference that a century makes cannot be better illustrated than by the exhibition that has brought us all here today. The two World Wars shattered the conviction that Europe and America were arenas in which manifest destiny could unfold. Administrative control of the world by the west shrank, but it was replaced by global display of economic and cultural influence. As our own second millennium came to an end, a broader appreciation of the nonmilitary achievements of ancient cultures enriched our vision of the past. The accent would be on ethnic integrity, but also on cultural integration. Decipherment gave the Hittites their voice, and with it we accessed their particular take on mythology, law, and historiography. Hurrian culture became more sharply edged, thanks to discoveries at Nuzi, Alalakh, and now also at Urkesh.

While spectacular archaeological discoveries continue to be made yearly in our own days—think of Ebla, Emar, Tell Beydar, and Qatna—it was a string of successes achieved between the two World Wars that invited us to shift our attention from empire building to achievements that were regional and contacts that were international. Ugarit on the Mediterranean fleshed out the Canaanites, who, not surprisingly, turned out to be hardly less (or more) moral than the Hebrews who condemned them. Sailing on ships that could carry twice the tonnage of Columbus's *Santa Maria*, Canaanite merchants developed commercial, cultural, and artistic bridges by ferrying the kind of cargo recovered from the Uluburun ship. True, the Hebrews risked losing their footprint on the second millennium B.C., but the instinct that the great James Henry Breasted had about the Amarna period toward the end of that period was being vindicated. For him, the age was characterized by internationalism in our sense of the term, a system for interconnection in which nations with appreciable ethnic differences interacted with one another politically, culturally, economically, maybe even theologically, because none could afford not to.

The Middle Euphrates Valley in the Middle Bronze Age

It is in our appreciation of the late Middle Bronze Age Euphrates, however, that we have gained the most. Hammurabi became centuries younger than when we met him in 1908, occupying now a slot in the eighteenth century B.C. We may also say that, in all but the public media, new material about him has made Hammurabi lose some of the sheen he had as a great jurist and as an empire maker. In contrast, we also learned much more about the Amorite tribes. Settled over stretches of western Asia, including Mesopotamia, Syria, Canaan, and maybe also Palestine, Amorites were forming an urbanizing society truly international in scope. True, they fought among one another with delight and abandon; but they also shared cultural traits, theological convictions, and maybe even language. This observation brings me back to the exhibition we are all enjoying today and, with it, to the second, and much briefer, parting shot I promised you above.

I estimate that about two thirds of the displays in the "Beyond Babylon" exhibition are devoted to the Late Bronze Age, as well as about the same percentage of pages in the splendid catalogue about it. This is perfectly reasonable, given the luck of the archaeologist's spade and the incredibly rich material produced by the Egyptian empire and its contemporaneous powers. Yet the very loquacious written records from the first half of the second millennium B.C. display a western Asia with all the hallmarks of the incipient political and cultural internationalism that is now of so much interest to us. If I may focus on the extensive archives recovered from eighteenth century B.C. Mari, you will find there all the necessary elements for a globalized culture.

The Amorites

Aside from the unity of language, spoken in a variety of dialects, there was also a koine in taste and expectations among the Amorites, with hordes of artisans, physicians, musicians, diviners, acrobats, cooks, and animal trainers shuttling their expertise to all quarters, either because they were free to do so or because their patrons dispatched them there. Merchants, too, moved about to distribute their wares, during war no less than during peace. True, they could be mercilessly taxed, detained, or even roughed up; yet even the least civilized local ruler recognized the advantages they brought, not least among them the trafficking of captured soldiers. The biggest contributors to these undertakings were rulers. In those days, western Asia was a Serengeti Plain, where predators operated in packs and their preys feared striking out on their own. Many kings had control over their thrones so tenuously that survival meant finding the right sponsor and evading the wrong one.

In these circumstances, everyone relied on a large retinue of diplomats and messengers. A midlevel king such as Zimri-Lim of Mari had an army of fewer than five thousand men; but when he traveled eastward, aside from 140 cup-bearers, he took along 100 delegates (*ša šipirātim*) and 64 couriers (*lāsimum*), a remarkably large contingent.[3] Such men were charged with carrying messages as well as delivering princesses to prospective vassals or allies. They also circulated the type of gifts that might well have ended up in the display cases of the "Beyond Babylon" exhibition, including textiles, jewelry, statuary, weaponry, luxury vessels, and other compact and transportable artifacts.

Gifts and Commerce

Interestingly, the motivation behind this exchange was not commerce in our sense, and certainly not greed in their sense; rather, it was a gauge of their own standing among their contemporaries. Egos were easily ruffled when a gift received was deemed of lesser value than one sent. What if others heard about such an unequal exchange, would it not invite

contempt and scorn?[4] Multiply the gift giving to include the families of rulers, their gods, important officials, and envoys, and you will realize how productive protocol could be as an engine for manufacturing goods. In the Mari of Zimri-Lim, a whole army of artisans was kept busy creating such artifacts, often enough, I am sorry to say, melting down or dismembering what had been received in order to create what was to go.

Not surprisingly, this exchange of goods could be used as a weapon, for in our records we often meet with folks with the attitude of aggressive potlatchers. Let us imagine you were one of the minor rulers of the times. One day, the envoy of the neighboring bully might knock at your gate, bringing you a throne or a palanquin with the emblem of his master stamped on it. He might also bring you a ceremonial garment, and a fancy wig. You were expected to sit on that throne in a public setting and wear the robe and the wig, for all to see how much of a flunky you have become to that gracious bully. You would not dare send these gifts back, not only because you know yourself incapable of matching such ostentation, but also because armies would be at your gate, come springtime.

Or perhaps: if a neighbor with interest in land you owned wished to bankrupt you, he would raise the ante by sending you a gift so far beyond your capacity to reciprocate that only by bartering your towns could you raise adequate funds. We have one very sad note from Ibal-Addu of Ashlakka, in which he begs his overlord not to convey presents because failure to respond in kind would bring him dishonor, shame, and soon dethronement as well.[5] He complains that even visiting messengers were dismissing his gifts as too paltry for honorable acceptance. As you might imagine, his days were numbered.

Lessons

I have told you all this, not just because I needed to allude to my beloved Mari archives; but also to suggest that each generation of scholars draws on its own cultural experiences to form a vision with which to make intelligible the ancient Near Eastern past. The throne I had you accept in abject servitude a couple of paragraphs ago was actually sent by Hammurabi of Babylon to Atamrum of Andariq.[6] Had it been in our possession in 1908, this throne would have made a fine icon for Babylonian empire building and expansion of power.

Today, we might first use mineral analysis to determine the origin of its raw material. We might then study its shape, decoration, and artistry to trace the aesthetic traditions that streamed into its construction and speculate on the trading channels it traversed to reach its destination. However, the intellectual and emotional investments that it demanded, from those who ordered the throne's fabrication to those who in full humiliation felt forced to sit on it, remain largely beyond our grasp, perhaps because such a trajectory has yet to capture our full interest.

We continue to forge new perspectives, urged on by concerns that change with succeeding generations. I have the greatest hope that, a century from now, when we all meet in this very hall, we will look back at the great exhibition of 2008 and recall that, thanks to the effort of Dr. Aruz, her staff, and many other colleagues, we had already begun to frame such subject matters.

1. Among many examples, I cite Sayce 1905, p. 250.
2. A good overview is in Larsen 1995.
3. Text number M.5696, cited in Charpin 2008, p. 243.
4. A classic example is the letter from king Ishkhi-Addu of Qatna, a town well represented in our exhibition, to the brother of his son-in-law, then ruling in Mari; ARM 5:20 (Durand 1997–2000, vol. 1, pp. 403–5, doc. no. 256):

   > This matter ought not be discussed; yet I must say it now and vent my feelings. You are the great king. When you placed a request with me for 2 horses, I indeed had them conveyed to you. But you, you sent me (just) 20 pounds of tin. Without doubt, when you sent this paltry amount of tin, you had no desire to have honorable discourse with me. Had you planned sending nothing at all—By the god of my father!—I could have been angry!
   >
   > Among us in Qatna, the value of such horses is 600 shekels [= 10 pounds] of silver. But you sent me just 20 pounds of tin! What would anyone hearing this say? Would he not mock us?
   >
   > This house is your house. What is lacking in your house that a brother cannot fulfill the need of his equal? Had you not planned to send me any tin, I should not have been in the least upset over it. Are you not the great king? Why have you done this? This house is your house!

5. ARM 28:49 (Kupper 1998, pp. 73–74). Here is the jeremiad in full:

   > Today, I am famished and do not live in a home. This past year, I strengthened the fortifications; but due to bad luck, whatever I fortified the torrents carried off. In the future, whenever I meet my lord, there will be no gifts with which to approach my lord. If it suits my lord, he should not give my servant any gifts. Just now, I have had to borrow 2 shekels to give to my lord's messengers. But they did not accept it, saying, "too little."

6. ARM 26:372, ll. 48–57 (Charpin 1988, pp. 179–82). The relevant segment of a letter sent by a Mari diplomat reads as follows:

   > Atamrum wrote as follows to Hammurabi: "Shu-Eshtar and Marduk-Mushallim, servants of my 'father' (Hammurabi), arrived here and brought to me my father's message. I was very attentive to what my father wrote to me. I was very pleased when I saw what my father conveyed to me through these messengers: garments, a formal garb, a wig, a throne, and (other objects). I put on the garments and the garb, I sat on the throne that my father sent me, and I am praying continuously for my father. About the tablet with terms of the oath that my father sent me: no additional gods or terms are necessary. And I do not *desire* to add any more gods or words. On this tablet this is what is now stipulated: 'Be hostile to my enemy be at peace with my allies.'"

   Hammurabi sent another vassal, Asqur-Addu of Karana, a throne, garments, a formal garb, and a curved sword. The last was held only on ceremonial occasions, often by deities.