Chapter II
Ancient Near and the Middle East

The Mesopotamian Civilization – An Overview

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The vast geographical area comprised in what is traditionally known as "Ancient Near and the Middle East" saw the rise of several cultural, political, social and linguistic identities, throughout time. From the middle of the 4th to the end of the 1st millennia BCE, Sumerians (in Lower Mesopotamia), Semites (in the Levantine Corridor and Upper Mesopotamia), Indo-Europeans (in Anatolia and the Iranian Plateau), amongst others, established themselves in this vast region, becoming main historical protagonists of Antiquity. The geographical characteristics of this area allowed for close contacts between all of them, which prompted the valuable transfer of knowledge processes that would imprint their mark in centuries to come. In this chapter, we will focus our attention on the Mesopotamian world, given its pivotal role in several developments, which actively contributed to these processes.

The land between the rivers – the importance of geography

The designation of the ancient civilization that developed in what is nowadays Iraq and part of Syria was attributed by ancient Greeks - Mesopotamia, the "land between the rivers" [3]. They seem to have identified the importance of the rivers as geographical elements that gave cohesion to multiple political, cultural, social and linguistic identities which were present in the territory, for millennia[4]. This external designation that is still in use today

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[3] Fenollós 2012: 32.
[4] Throughout time, the populations that inhabited Mesopotamia used several forms to identify themselves, whether referring to familiar ties and/or social, cultural and political affinities. About this topic, vd. the different contributions in Szchuman 2009, namely the one by Anne Porter, 2009:

was, therefore, a geographical one. Hence, as the ancient Greeks did, we must start by looking into the geographic characteristics of this area to understand its civilizational developments better.

First, and naturally, the Tigris and Euphrates, both of which emerge in the Anatolian Mountains, at over 2000 metres altitude. Together with their tributaries[5], they constitute a vital fluvial system for the fertility of the land, at all levels, from Upper to Lower Mesopotamia[6]. The two main rivers, with their long[7] and navigable courses, also allowed in-depth communication between regions. In the south, where the two eventually merged[8], an extremely fertile alluvial plain was formed, which in time saw the rise of the first cities and the invention of the first known writing system.

On the other hand, the climatic changes observed from 10.000 BCE onwards, after the last glaciation, allowed the softening of temperatures and an increase of rainfall and the rivers' caudal. The combination of these features allowed for the existence of an abundant autochthone fauna and flora, and deep irrigation of the soils, which thus prompted not only hunter-gathering activities but also the development of agricultural and cattle breeding practices, very early in time[9].

Alongside, the permeability of Mesopotamia natural borders contributed to a profound dynamism in the relations with direct and indirect regions. Though one can find mountain ranges and deserts[10] enclosing the land between the rivers, the fact is that these geographical accidents were continuously transposed, whether through fluvial roots or by terrestrial ones. Thus, the circulation of people, goods, and ideas was facilitated not only between Mesopotamia and direct neighbouring regions (such as Anatolia, the Iranian Plateau, and the Levantine Corridor) but also between these and more distant areas, such as the ones of Central Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean Sea. Furthermore, the contact with regions encompassed by the Arabian-Persian Gulf and even with the Indus Valley was

201-225. One also finds the use of expressions that stands for "country", such as **kalam** and *mâtu*, respectively in Sumerian and Akkadian. Fenollós 2012: 32-33; Sanmartín & Serrano 1998: 11.

[5] The main tributaries are the Diyala and the Upper and Lower Zab for the Tigris, and the Khabur and Balikh for the Euphrates.

[6] Upper and Lower Mesopotamia, the northern and southern areas, probably had their border in Antiquity in the region of ancient Babylon, where the Tigris and Euphrates come closer. Upper Mesopotamia thus encompasses the Upper and Middle Tigris and Euphrates and their tributaries, as well as the plateaus near the Taurus and the Zagros mountains. Lower Mesopotamia, in turn, encompasses the alluvial plain, displaying higher levels of fertility, when compared to the northern area. About the characterization of both regions vd. Postgate 1992 and Pollock 1999.

[7] *Circa* 2302 km for the Tigris, and 2720 km for the Euphrates

[8] *Shaat al-Arab* is the name of the river formed by the confluence of the Tigris and the Euphrates, in what is nowadays the city of al-Qurnah, which is *circa* 74 km northwest of Basra. From then on, this new fluvial course runs *circa* 200 km until it flows into the Arabian-Persian Gulf.

[9] About the neolithization processes in the Near and Middle East, vd., for instance, Cauvin (2000).

[10] The mountains of Taurus and of the Zagros delimitate Mesopotamia in the north and east, respectively, while in the west and southwest there are the Siro and Arabian deserts.

possible through coastal navigation, which is attested at least since the 5th millennium BCE[11].

Though extremely rich, when referring to natural or domesticated fauna and flora, Mesopotamia territory lacked precious stones and metals, as well as resistant woods, which encouraged trade with the abovementioned areas. The course of the main rivers and their tributaries, which allowed communications in both axes North-South and East-West, combined with the permeability of its natural borders, allowed for it to become a commercial platform, again, very early in time[12].

Hence, it comes as no surprise that these ecological and geographical characteristics appealed to the fixation of human groups and the development of their settlements throughout the territory.

The development of human settlements- from small villages to complex urbes

During the transition from the 9th to the 8th millennia BCE, several animals and plants were already domesticated and controlled by human groups present in Mesopotamia. The archaeological data shows that, throughout the 7th millennium BCE, sedentary lifestyle started to become predominant, with the edification of small villages, which carried along labour and social divisions, the development of pottery work, and the establishment of commercial routes[13].

Later, in the 6th millennium BCE, Mesopotamia saw the arrival of populations from the Zagros and the Taurus mountains, who established themselves along the riverbanks, in larger communities, thus intensifying the agricultural work and trade[14]. The archaeological studies developed in the last decades allowed to identify several Mesopotamian material cultures throughout the 6th until the 4th millennia BCE, such as the Hallaf, the 'Ubaid and the Uruk ones[15]. It is important to look closer to these last two, given its diffusion processes, intrinsically linked with the geographical aspects discussed above.

The 'Ubaid material culture originally developed in the alluvial plain, between c. 5800 and 42000 BCE. The archaeological work led in some southern sites, such as Eridu (modern Tell Abu Shahrain) and Tell el-'Oueili, identified complex features, such as the evident use of a religious/cultic architecture; a spatial configuration subordinated to the social

[11] Pollock 1991: 43. Sanmartín & Serrano (1998:127) also allude to a terrestrial route that connected the Indus Valley region with Lower Mesopotamia, through the oriental coast of the Arabian-Persian Gulf.
[12] About these commercial contacts vd. Hudson 2012.
[13] Sanmartín & Serrano 1998: 118.
[14] Bottéro 1987: 98-99.
[15] About the several material cultures in Mesopotamia vd., for instance, the different contributes in Potts *et al.* 2003, Bolger & Maguire 2010, and Steadman & Ross 2010.

hierarchization (even though the social variations were, still, on a small scale); a standardized plan of the habitation structures (with a tripartite shape) [16]; and a distinctive ceramic set, where one can find the famous "lizard-head" figurines[17].

One of its most interesting features, however, has to do with the diffusion processes it went through. Human agglomerates with 'Ubaid characteristics are identified in a broad extension of *circa* 1800 km, encompassing territories not only in Upper Mesopotamia but also in the northern areas of modern Syria, Anatolian hinterland, the Arabian Peninsula and the southwest of modern Iran. As Stein and Özbal[18] stressed, this diffusion was marked by gradual migratory movements, during the 5th millennium BCE, which gave rise to multiple transference processes between the protagonist of the 'Ubaid material culture and the populations already fixed in the areas they arrived to. However, it should be mentioned that the spatial dimension and social divisions of Upper Mesopotamian communities were not significantly different from the southern 'Ubaid ones, which shows that, throughout this long period, the diverse Mesopotamian populations made similar use of the natural resources of the territory[19].

Notwithstanding, the 'Ubaid movement implies a profound economic development in the land between the rivers, which undoubtedly was accompanied by demographic and commercial growth. These alterations were facilitated and even driven by the geographical characteristics already mentioned.

When one observes the 4th millennium BCE archaeological data, the situation changes, and cleavage between Upper and Southern Mesopotamia is easily identified. In the first half of this millennium, the communities along the banks of the Khabur and Upper Tigris and the Euphrates continued to develop at a rapid pace, which was not accompanied, for instance, by the neighbouring Levantine region. In fact, while Upper Mesopotamian settlements were developing certain urbanistic traits, "the Levante drops outs of the picture at this time as a result of a still not well-understood process of collapse that marks a clear hiatus in indigenous processes of social evolution in that area" [20]. However, from the third quarter of the 4th millennium BCE on, these early northern centres also started to decline. Instead, multiple disperse smaller agglomerates, where the agricultural work was continued alongside transhumance practices, became more predominant[21].

[16] Stein & Özbal 2006: 359.
[17] About these figurines vd. McAdam 2003.
[18] Stein & Özbal 2006: 360-361. The authors underline how the 'Ubaid artifacts found in the sites of this wide region were often modified/adapted or even abandoned, after a given period of use, which manifests gradual diffusion processes, rather than a colonization one.
[19] Algaze 2005:1-2.
[20] Algaze 2005: 2.
[21] Algaze 2005: 2-3.

On its side, during the same millennium, Lower Mesopotamia went through severe changes, with a new material culture, the Uruk one, displaying high levels of originality and complexity, when compared to previous and coeval material cultures of the Ancient Near and the Middle East[22]. Their populations took advantage of earlier patterns of production and commercial trade, as well as the exceptional natural resources and geographic characteristics of the alluvial plain, which lead them to take a leap, at all levels[23]. For instance, it was during this period that irrigation channels were first constructed, thus improving the agricultural activities and, therefore, the productivity of the land.

From *circa* 3500 BCE onwards, a consolidated surplus economy within southern agglomerates led to the development of urbanism. Smaller communities were, thus, merged into great urban centres, which displayed an extraordinary socio-economic organization, becoming not only self-sufficient but also politically autonomous. Large defensive walls were constructed to protect these *urbes* from attacks, such as the raids of nomadic populations from the Zagros mountains[24].

During the same period, and similarly, with what had happened with the 'Ubaid populations, a diffusion process began. Through the rivers, the protagonists of the Uruk material culture started to spread, erecting enclaves (in some cases *ex nihilo*, in others by penetrating the already preexisting agglomerates they came across with) throughout a large area of the Near and Middle East. But, differently from the gradual diffusion processes of 'Ubaid, the Uruk one seemed more commercial wise driven, with the enclaves being erected strategically near essential trade routes. Moreover, the archaeological data displays a rather abrupt introduction of their material culture and *modus vivendi* in the regions they arrived to[25]. The communication between these enclaves and the original southern Mesopotamian *urbes* was continuously maintained, which gave rise to intense dynamic commercial, technological and cultural fluxes, in both ways[26]. With these advances, towards the end of the 4th millennium BCE, southern *urbes* became increasable more complex, which naturally led to the consolidation of centralised political powers in each one, to the

[22] Stein & Özbal 2006: 356–370.
[23] About the relation between the geographic and ecological conditions of the alluvial plain with its early developments vd. Algaze 2008.
[24] Algaze 2005: 7-11.
[25] Stein & Özbal (2006: 336-368) designate these new enclaves as colonies, stressing how they "have the full repertoire of Uruk ceramics. These same sites also have distinctive South Mesopotamian Uruk domestic or public/ritual architecture (…). Culturally specific aspects of technological style such as brick dimensions and bricklaying patterns exactly match the practices in southern homeland. A third distinctive feature of the Uruk colonies is the presence of the full range of South Mesopotamian administrative technology such as cylinder seals, bullae, tokens, and clay tablets with numerical inscriptions used to monitor the circulation of goods".
[26] In this regard, it is interesting to note that, in a first phase, the commercial influx to southern Mesopotamia was mainly made of finished goods, namely the metal ones. Yet, rapidly the commercial agents brought to the south the technologies that allowed to work the raw materials, thus diminishing the acquisition costs. Trade, therefore, quickly evolved to a different phase. Algaze 2005: 13.

emergence of new metiers and of new elite groups, and to the transformation of the social organization, that became more intricated and hierarchized.

Simultaneously, and to answer the imperative need to register the vast amount of economic data, a true revolution of the human spirit[27] took place: the invention of the first known writing system, *circa* 3200 BCE. From pictograms that allowed to record goods, workers, payments, costs with infrastructures, and so on[28], signs that allowed to represent objects, sounds and ideas were quickly developed[29]. From the 3rd millennium BCE onwards, the cuneiform writing, as it became known given the shape of its signs, allowed the production of an extremely rich literary corpus, and the development of a new highly specialized and influential profession, the scribal one[30].

The consolidated development of urbanism and the invention of writing in Lower Mesopotamia thus constituted a turning point in the history of the land between the rivers. Northern populations soon absorbed these innovations, and new *urbes* appeared alongside the Upper riverbanks. Likewise, the cuneiform writing system of the south was adopted and adapted by northern human groups. From Mesopotamia, it was diffused throughout the Ancient Near and the Middle East in centuries to come[31]. On the other hand, this early spread and prolific use of the writing system also helped scholars to identify the linguistic and cultural matrixes present in Mesopotamia, at this time.

A hybrid civilization: the encounter between Semitic and Sumerian matrixes

From the second half of the 4th millennium BCE onwards, two main matrixes can be identified in the Mesopotamian territory, firstly through a material, architectonic and iconographic data, and secondly through written documentation: the Semitic and the Sumerian ones[32]. Their own agency alongside the close interactions between them both would leave an indelible mark in history to come.

In what concerns the origins of the Semitic matrix, linguistic studies allow to point out to the Arabian Peninsula, given that archaic Semitic languages display close parallelisms with

[27] Bottéro 2004: 15
[28] Algaze 2005: 22-23.
[29] About the development of writing vd. Bottéro 1987: 132-165. On the relation between art and writing vd. Schmandt-Besserat 2007.
[30] The scribes learned their métier in schools, the **edduba**, following complex *curricula*. About this topic vd. George 2005.
[31] The cuneiform writing system invented in Mesopotamia was used, over the centuries, by different societies, from Elam, to ancient Persia, from Hatti to Mittani, and also Ugarit (Finkel & Taylor 2015: 8).
[32] The linguistic identities of preexistent human groups, which were somehow absorbed by Semites and Sumerians, are very difficult to determined, given that "seule une poignée de vocables, et en particulier des toponymes irréductibles au sumérien et au sémitique" survived. Bottério & Kramer 1989: 28-29. Notwithstanding, the archaeological studies focused on previous material cultures that are being conducted in the last decades, allows to draw a new picture on the activities, movements and even religious and cultural aspects of these populations.

ancient Egyptian, Berber and some other idioms that preceded the Ethiopian. Hence, its original territory should have been one close to the regions where these languages evolved[33].

The Arabian Peninsula went through an intense desertification process, during the 6th millennium BC, which forced their populations to migrate in search of better living conditions. Between the 5th and the 4th millennia BCE, as Bottéro suggested[34], these human groups, predominantly nomadic, gradually started to move north, towards the Levantine Corridor, and, from there, they headed to Upper Mesopotamia, following the Euphrates course. The natural conditions of this northern area contributed to the fixation of these Semitic groups, though their preexisting nomadic lifestyle was not wholly abandoned. As we have seen, during the second half of the 4th millennium BCE, there were multiple communities in Upper Mesopotamia which combined agricultural with transhumance activities.

As for the Sumerian matrix, its autochthonous or foreign Mesopotamian origins constitutes a rather intricate question that divides scholars since the decipherment of the Sumerian language, in the late 19th century. Given that Sumerian is an isolated language, linguistic studies cannot help as they did in the Semitic case. Hence, the "Sumerian problem", as it was dubbed by Henry Frankfort (1932), continues to be analyzed and discussed from different perspectives, whether philological, archaeological or anthropological ones, to cite just a few[35].

Yet, independently of their point of origin, the protagonists of the above-mentioned developments in Lower Mesopotamia are traditionally designated as Sumerians, according to "Sumer", the designation of this region as it appears in 3rd millennium BCE written sources. In a way or another, the cultural and linguistic identity so-called Sumerian was intrinsically linked with the final phase of the Uruk material culture, whose populations, as we have seen, headed north, to establish their enclaves with commercial purposes.

There, they would find Semitic groups, "newcomers" to Mesopotamia, with their own identity and idiosyncrasies. In the transition from the 4th to the 3rd millennia BCE, these northern populations adopted urbanism, which they clearly imported from the south. It is important to note, however, that the northern Semitic *urbes* displayed, from the start, their own originality and features, adapted to their inhabitants, namely their social

[33] Bottéro 1998: 25.
[34] Idem.
[35] About a synthesis on the "Sumerian problem" vd. Ziskind 1972 and Sołtysiak 2006.

dimorphism[36]. Likewise, and as already mentioned, soon they would also adopt cuneiform, which they used to record their language.

Simultaneously, the economic growth of Lower Mesopotamian *urbes* led to an increase of the need of workforce, which impelled workers from the northern area to move south. Moreover, the nomadic lifestyle of the Semites was naturally prone to commercial activities. So, a fruitful economic relation, based firstly in this commercial and labour complementarity was developed between the two.

It is thus with the movements of these human groups that both Semitic and Sumerian matrixes came across one another, and together, during centuries, embarked in a journey marked by profound interactions that gave rise to a hybrid civilizational product. Their mythologies, ritual traditions, cosmovision, *modus vivendi*, social practices, legal regulations and lexicon were shared, mixed, combined and adapted in such a close way that it becomes almost impossible to truly isolate what is *just* Semitic or *solely* Sumerian[37]. Thus, for the very beginning, at its core, Mesopotamian civilization was the product of the encounter between these two matrixes.

In time, the Semitic populations became predominant in the land between the rivers, given that systematic migratory waves from West continued to arrive at this territory. On the contrary, the so-called Sumerian people constituted a relatively closed group, which cut ties with their origins (whatever they might have been). Without fresh blood, as Bottéro put it, they dissolved within the Semites, but their memory endured, as texts written in Sumerian continued to be copied, edited and analyzed for centuries to come[38].

The intricate political history – the clash between city-states, kingdoms and empires

The expansion of urbanism in Upper and Lower Mesopotamia, during the 3rd millennium BCE, gave rise to the formation of true city-states. The economic abundancy within the land between the rivers granted independence to each *urb*s, though the necessity to control commercial routes and to establish contacts with foreign territories led to some tensions. In fact, throughout most of this millennium, it can be identified as a highly competitive climate, especially between the southern cities, which gave rise to a latent state of war. The main goal of these conflicts, however, was not of political unification, but instead to gain economic hegemony[39]. An urban logic, where each city was political autonomous was thus the paradigm.

[36] Mari, the well-known city of Middle Euphrates is a good example of these adaptations. It was erected *ex-nihilo* in *circa* 2900 BCE, by Semitic populations. About the evolution of this *urbs,* during the 3rd millennium BCE, vd. Margueron 2004.
[37] Bottéro & Kramer 1989: 33.
[38] Bottéro 1998: 28-30.
[39] Bottéro & Kramer 1989: 34.

This situation changed in the 24th century BCE when the armies of the Semitic ruler known as Sargon of Akkad faced the forces of Lugalzagezi, the ruler of the city of Umma. They both seem to have had the same main goal, to unify the Mesopotamian territory for the first time in history. The Umma ruler had already succeeded in controlling some powerful alluvial cities, such as Lagaš and Uruk[40]. As for Sargon, though his figure is still shrouded in mystery[41], he seemed to have become preeminent in the city of Kiš, and from there, he started to spread his power, controlling the area between Upper and Lower Mesopotamia.

The military encounter was won by Sargon, who thus instituted a new era with his dynasty and new capital, Akkad, forever changing the political and military horizons of future Mesopotamians rulers. From then on, every single one tried to repeat the unification of Upper and Lower Mesopotamia (and even aimed to conquer lands beyond), to become the *šarrum*[42].

The Akkadian rulers, however, had to deal with internal tensions and external menaces, which made the maintenance of the new empire quite a challenge. The independent spirit of ancient city-states, whose economic power granted them political autonomy, was soon felt, with several rebellions taking place. Simultaneously, a new wave of Semitic

[40] A royal inscription of this sovereign attests the goal of unifying the land between the rivers, namely between lines 44-57: "and all the lands at his feet / he had placed, / and from East / to West / he had made them subject to him, / then, / from the sea, / the lower one, / along the Tigris / and the Euphrates / to the sea / the upper one, / their roads / he put in proper order for him."
CDLI p431232 https://cdli.ucla.edu/search/archival_view.php?ObjectID=P431232 [accessed September 2020].

[41] Modern academia firstly came across Sargon of Akkad in 1870, when Henri Rawlison published the translation of a tale about his origins, known as *The Legend of Sargon*, which he had found three years before, while excavating the famous library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (r. 669- *c.* 631 BCE). Given the mythical characteristics of this composition, Sargon was first thought to be a legendary figure. Later discoveries of material, iconographic and written records allowed, however, to attest his historical existence. Yet, most of the Mesopotamian sources that refer to Sargon are posterior to his reign being, therefore, prone to legendary inclusions. The fact that Akkad, his capital city, was not yet identified prevents more details on this paradigmatic Mesopotamian royal figure. Nevertheless, there are several inscriptions dated to the Akkadian period that shed some light into his deeds.
About the *Legend of Sargon* and other written documentation vd., for instance, Lewis 1980, Cooper & Heimpel 1983, and Westenholz 1997. About the Akkadian empire vd. Foster 2015.

[42] Until then, three different royal titles appeared in written documentation, **en**, **lu.gal** or **ensi,** which attest not only the political independency of the city-states but also the specific traditions of each *urbs*. After the Akkadian unification, when Sargon adopted the title *šarrum* to better suit his imperial politics, these terms were used with different symbolic meanings, as Michalowski (2008: 33) stressed: "The Sumerian terms en, lugal and énsi are seen by some to have very different symbolic histories and function; in fact, they are just different local words for "sovereign", the first one originally used in the city of Uruk, second in Ur, and the third in the city-state of Lagash. These quasi-synonyms were remodeled within the context of centralized states as part of new political and symbolic languages. Thus, in the Ur III kingdom, around 2100 BC, there was only one lugal in the world, and that was the king of Ur. In poetic language he combined both the status of en and of lugal, that is, he was characterized by "sovereignty of Ur and kingship of Uruk", and all his governors were énsi, as were all foreign rulers. Like all inventions, this one played with tradition, but it has to be understood not in evolutionary perspective, but within the contexts of a new language of empire."

populations, the Amorites, arrived north, while Zagros groups, such as the Gutians, attacked the territory. Eventually, Akkad collapse and after a short period of fragmentation, a new unification was achieved by the monarchs of the Third Dynasty of Ur (*circa* 2112-2004 BCE)[43].

The exceptional geographical and ecological characteristics that provided economic abundance and impelled dynamic contacts were likewise a factor of disruption. Each city had access to the natural resources needed to become rich and powerful and thus was capable to eventually defy the ruling dynasty of a given period. On the other hand, this richness attracted foreign populations, who took advantage of the permeability of the natural boarders to systematically penetrate in Mesopotamia, bringing instability to the unified and centralized power. Hence, these factors would actively contribute to the intricate political history of the land between the rivers. As every ruler hoped to become the next *šarrum*, elevating his city to the capital status of a strong, unified state[44], for the next two millennia Mesopotamia saw the rise and fall of several kingdoms and empires. These Mesopotamian powers not only digladiated with each other but also had to deal with the political and military aspirations of different Ancient Near and Middle Eastern potencies. Thus, until the conquest of Cyrus, the Great, in 539 BCE, and the following integration in the Achaemenid empire, Mesopotamia was marked by multiple inner and external political tensions, battles and alliances[45].

Yet, during this long time, Mesopotamia was also enriched by the development of particular internal identities, such as the Babylonian and the Assyrian ones, as well as the contributes of other external players, such as the Hittites, the Hurrians, the Elamites, the Siro-Palestinians and the Egyptians ones. As soldiers, merchants, artisans, sages, and others passed and/or fixated in the territory, their *modus vivendi*, languages, cultural, social and religious traditions were brought to the land between the rivers, increasing the dynamism of this civilization. Each particular period thus constitutes a fertile area to analyze not only political and military clashes but also multiple interactions, that changed the ancient Mediterranean world[46].

[43] About the fall of the Akkadian dynasty and the subsequent Ur III unification vd. Liverani 2014: 133-170.
[44] The royal title "King of Sumer an Akkad", which was first used by the Akkadian monarchs, and which exuded the goal of unification, was systematically used, throughout time.
[45] For a summary of the Mesopotamian and other Ancient Near and Middle Eastern political powers vd., for instance, Kuhrt 1995 and Liverani 2014.
[46] For an overview on the contributions of ancient Mesopotamia (and ancient Egypt) to the development of the Mediterranean civilization vd., for instance, Lopes & Almeida (2017).

The advent of Archaeology – From the oblivion to the rediscovery of Mesopotamia civilization

After the capture of Babylon by the Persians and the loss of its political independence (ancient Mesopotamia was integrated into the Achaemenid empire as one of its provinces), the land between the rivers was subjected to a slow process of decay. The ancient cities that had been the centre of an intense cultural and religious life – Uruk, Ur, Akkad, Nineveh, Babylon – began to collapse and were soon forgotten. Their architecture did not help. Built almost entirely in clay bricks (sun-dried or baked), the buildings that made up the architectural matrix of these cities collapsed, giving rise to the formation of extensive artificial hills, which are known today by the Arabic word *tell* or the Turkish word *tepe*. Mesopotamia succumbed to a long oblivion that would last for centuries.

It was only during the 19th century that it was resurrected, due to the work of enthusiastic explorers and archaeologists, as well as ambitious linguists. The first traces of this ancient civilization to come to light were dug up by the explorer Paul Émile Botta. The French consul in Mosul with no experience in archaeological excavations, he first decided to investigate the mounds of Nebi Yunus and Kuyunjik, in Nineveh. Villagers had told him about the inscribed bricks and artefacts unearthed in those places. But the diggings prove to be below his expectations[47]. So, he moved into a new location – Khorsabad. And the art of the ancient Assyrian empire was soon revealed. Amongst walls covered in luxuriant bas-reliefs, portraying strange figures and animals, were statues of huge winged bulls never seen before and incomparable to other known artistic canons, such as the Greek or the Egyptian. At the time, Botta believed he had found the ancient city of Nineveh, but in truth, he was excavating the capital of Assyrian monarch Sargon II, built at the end of the 8th century BCE, and called Dūr-šarrukīn (that is, "the fortress of Sargon").

These findings caused a stir in Paris and Europe, driving to a real treasure hunt amongst the leading European powers of the time. Soon after the first treasures were exhumed, in 1842, they were exported to Paris, where the first exhibition of Assyrian antiquities was to be inaugurated, at the Louvre Museum, in 1847. In the race for Mesopotamian relics, England did not want to be left behind. Hence, through its diplomat, Henry Layard started excavations in the mound of Nimrud, in 1845, and four years later in Nineveh[48]. As had happened before, the slabs and sculptures unearthed were transferred to Europe and, this time, housed at the British Museum. The excavation and the process of transfer of antiquities were closely followed by the British press, and Layard soon became a national hero. Mesopotamia had come out of the oblivion to take the limelight.

[47] The fact is that Botta did not dig very deep, concentrating on the highest and most sterile levels (Fagan 2007: 100).
[48] About the excavations of Layard, vd. Larsen 1994.

The following decades were characterized by the multiplication of excavations, both in the north and in the south of the territory of ancient Mesopotamia. Although initially, the south did not bequeath great treasures (essentially, explorers looked for the most exuberant artistic testimonies, and did not pay much attention to small artefacts or inscribed tablets), several teams worked there – Henry Rawlinson, William Loftus, John George Taylor, and Ernest de Sarzec excavated at Borsippa, Warka/Uruk, Larsa, Ur, and Telloh/Girsu[49]. But the real results came mainly through German archaeology, which, for the first time, applied scientific methods in excavations carried out in Mesopotamian soil. In this context, the work of Walter Andrae in Assur and of Robert Koldewey in Babylon stand out. It goes without saying that the physical rediscovery of this civilization was accompanied by the linguistic studies that led to the deciphering of cuneiform, an aspect which we will discuss in another chapter[50].

Many of these excavations would be interrupted with the advent of the First World War, a conflict that would forever change the geopolitical map of the Near and Middle East, with the fall of the Ottoman empire. In the post-war years, excavations continued, and some of the most important discoveries and studies of ancient Mesopotamia took place. Examples of these are the stratigraphy of Uruk (a site excavated from 1928 onwards by a German team) or the discovery of the royal tombs of Ur (excavated by Leonard Wooley from 1922 to 1932).

In recent times, the heritage of Mesopotamia suffered several attacks that, unfortunately, have resulted in irrecoverable damages. The Iraq War and more recently the destruction left by the imposition of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. This contemporary context draws our attention to the urgent necessity of implementing political and social measures able to defend this unique legacy. Mesopotamia is not the antiquity of *the other*, but *our* antiquity, the antiquity of all of us; it represents the place (alongside Egypt) where western urban roots were born, where the human need for eternalization through writing was first felt, where the astrological vision and time counting emerged[51].

[49] Matthews 2003: 8 and 10.
[50] Vd. chapter IV of this book.
[51] Interestingly, modern division of time into 60 minutes derives from the Mesopotamian sexagesimal counting system (Finkel and Taylor 2015: 93).

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