

MATERIAL WORLDS:
INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES
TO CONTACTS AND EXCHANGE
IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST



**MATERIAL WORLDS:
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IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST**

Proceedings of the Workshop
held at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World (ISAW),
New York University
7th March 2016

Edited by Arnulf Hausleiter

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Cuneiform tablet Kültepe 20a, after B. Hrozný, *Inscriptions Cunéiformes du Kultépé*, vol. I, Praha 1952, pl. cxxv
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Berlin, Spring 2023

Arnulf Hausleiter

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EXCHANGE IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST**

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF THE ANCIENT WORLD (ISAW),
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY, 7TH MARCH 2016

PROGRAM

- 10:00 **Introduction**
ARNULF HAUSLEITER, ISAW, New York University / DAI Berlin
- 10:10 **The Old Assyrian Trade as a Model of Long-Distance Interaction in the Middle Bronze Age**
GOJKO BARJAMOVIC, Harvard University
Response: LORENZO D'ALFONSO, ISAW, New York University
Chair: NANCY A. HIGHCOCK, New York University
- 11:00 Coffee Break
- 11:20 **Production of Knowledge in Contact Zones: Mari and Tigonānum in the Old Babylonian Period**
BEATE PONGRATZ-LEISTEN, ISAW, New York University
Chair and Discussant: JONATHAN VALK, ISAW, New York University
- 12:00 Lunch at ISAW
- 13:00 **The MBA/LBA Transition at Tell el-ʿAjjul in the Light of Exchange between Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean**
CELIA J. BERGOFFEN, Fashion Institute of Technology, State University of New York
- Transitions in the Material Culture of 2nd Millennium BCE in North Arabia**
MARTA LUCIANI, ISAW, New York University / University of Vienna
- Discussant: ROBERT HOMSHER, Harvard University
Chair: IRENE SOTO, ISAW, New York University
- 14:15 Break
- 14:30 **Saww: The Middle Kingdom Harbor of the Pharaohs to the Land of Punt***
KATHRYN BARD, Boston University
Chair and Discussant: LISA SALADINO HANEY, University of Pennsylvania
- 15:10 Coffee Break
- 15:30 **Middle Grounds, Contact Areas, and the Assyrian Empire. The case of the Syrian Lower Euphrates Valley, Iron II period**
MARIA GRAZIA MASETTI-ROUAULT, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes / Sorbonne, Paris
- 16:00 **Tell Jemmeh: Social Identity at a Cultural Crossroads**
ALICE HUNT, University of Athens, GA, Center of Applied Isotope Studies
Chair and discussant: ARNULF HAUSLEITER, ISAW, New York University / DAI Berlin
- 16:40 **Conclusions** (until 17:00)
- 18:00 Evening Lecture: **Qasr Shemamok – Kilizu in the Erbil Region: a Contact Area in Northern Mesopotamia? The First Four Campaigns of a French Mission (2010–2014)***
OLIVIER ROUAULT, Université de Lyon

* Not published in this volume.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Arnulf Hausleiter

Berlin

1. Cultural contacts and exchange are constituents in human behavior – ancient and modern. Within archaeology, in particular in that of the Western Asia, the topic and related phenomena have been intensively studied during the last decennia leading to a review of the cultural and economic and also physical landscapes all over the Ancient Near East. While earlier years saw an interest in the debate on economic systems or models of ‘global’ character, such as the big households in 3rd millennium BCE Mesopotamia (*oikos*) or market-oriented economies, more recently, based on context-related approaches, the discussion of the agents of trade, exchange, and pertaining administrative processes have been addressed, adding valuable information of the actual practices of the circulation of goods. Disciplinary approaches were abandoned, and the borders between “archaeology” and “texts” – for a long time the main constituents in terms of tangible material culture, if it comes to contacts and exchange – were increasingly bridged.

The nature of the data allowed, on the one hand, for the investigation and reconstruction of ‘micro-historic’ dimensions of contacts, trade and exchange; on the other hand, theoretical models from economy, social and historical studies, such as World System or network theories have equally been used to develop reconstructive scenarios for those processes connecting “distant worlds” with each other. In this context, the major exhibition “Beyond Babylon” (Aruz *et al.* 2008) of the Metropolitan Museum of Arts, forms a significant example, widening our understanding of contacts and contact zones in Western Asia and the Mediterranean as visible in the remains of all aspects of the material culture which survived over the millennia. Nevertheless, exceptional archaeological contexts for trade and exchange, such as the Ulu Burun shipwreck, continue to be rare case studies.

In the last 20 years, the scale of the cultural, geographic, socio-economic, and, at least until now, to a lesser extent political dimensions of contacts and exchange has been substantially impacted by the inception of a systematic investigation of one of the unexplored areas of Western Asia, i.e. the inner parts of the Arabian Peninsula, from where new scientific results are currently being provided on an almost daily basis.

It is in fact new archaeological evidence from the northwestern zone of Arabia, among them the results of the work of the expedition at the oasis of Taymā², which, next to the interdisciplinary *ambiente* of ISAW and its research focus on pre-modern economies, was one of the reasons for holding this workshop. The site, a human-made groundwater-fed oasis and major trading hub on the Arabian Peninsula (Hausleiter – Eichmann 2018), has usually been associated with the 1st millennium BCE long-distance overland trade of aromatics and other commodities. The transport of these goods, at that time, has been carried out with the domesticated *camelus dromedarius* on the “Incense Road” connecting South Arabia with the Eastern Mediterranean. In reality, this trade route was only a part of an overarching network covering the entire Arabian Peninsula. The fact that – in North West Arabia – the “complex Bronze Age to Neolithic trajectory that parallels many developments elsewhere in Arabia” (Magee 2014: 144) increasingly takes shape calls for a thorough review of previous explanatory paradigms and opens the space for new interpretations.

Since the Arabian Peninsula, covering approx. half of the 6 million km² large area of Western Asia, has been understood for many years as periphery or remote area, one further stimulus of this workshop was to investigate the connectedness (not only) of Arabia with the adjacent parts of the ancient Near East, by this questioning the validity of the center-periphery model which for long characterized the debate. In the meantime, it has become clear once again, that it served as one of the landbridges crucial for hominine dispersal all over the planet (Groucutt *et al.* 2021), while new archaeological and environmental data have been provided by recent interdisciplinary research projects on reconstructing climate change and human adaptation processes (Neugebauer *et al.* 2022).

One of the major factors of human activities is the fulfillment of material needs. Therefore, resources were identified, exploited, and traded. For a long time, archaeological research on exchange and cultural contact adopted a comparative perspective focusing on objects and artifacts, implying implicitly that they are invariable in function through time (Ulf 2014). However, the role of culture is increasingly understood as a highly dynamic and constantly subject to change. At the same time, the

formerly postulated connection of a close overlapping of ethnic entities and cultures has been abandoned. Presentday studies of contacts and exchange as well as cultural transfer are based on the concept of co-existing cultural worlds interacting with each other in contact zones (cf. Barjamovic 2018, 128, fig. 5). Instead of often decontextualized artifacts, the individual and its different social identities within groups through time are part of current research strands. Therefore, “the historical outcomes of exchange and borrowing between societies” (Wengrow 2010: xviii on the nature of “civilization”) are among the driving forces of holding this workshop.

The study of long-distance connections in Western Asia continues to include the study of archaeological materials (cf., recently for Eastern and Central Arabia, e.g. Laursen – al-Otaibi 2022), but also led to an augmented integration of archaeometric methods, such as, e.g., petrography, residue or isotope analyses, thus drawing attention to raw materials, resources, and environments, while at the same time adding to the tangible aspects of contacts and exchange (cf., e.g., Huber *et al.* 2022). Furthermore, the application of state-of-the-art remote sensing technologies transferred the reconstruction of trade routes on a new level (Städtler 2023), whereas the reconstruction of movement of people is currently object of analytical studies of ancient DNA; the investigation of climate change in this context aims at defining a larger framework for human agency.

2. Our workshop predominantly drew on the historical exploration of archaeological, textual, and archaeometric data. Specialists from these domains gathered at ISAW to discuss aspects of the history of contacts and exchange from various perspectives under the headlines of culture, economy, and politics. By focusing on a number of case studies from different regions and based on different types of sources, the workshop aimed at offering an overview on the topic, including most recent research, as well as instigating an interdisciplinary discourse of specific processes and contexts of different scales. Thereby, the subdivision of this book into five sections results from the geographic-historical horizons of research reaching from Western Asia to the Eastern Mediterranean and Egypt; it is probably not without coincidence, that the 2nd millennium BCE forms a culminating point in this book, since not only “the world of the Middle Bronze Age was vast and open” (Larsen 2008: 13), but both ancient and new research data of this period, amongst, other, are part of the current discussion.

The organization of the volume reflects the original program of the workshop (p. viii), of which each section saw an introduction, up to two main papers, and a response. Eleven papers are published in the present volume. Its first section deals with the Old-Assyrian trade between the city of Ashur and the area of central Anato-

lia, in particular the *kārum* at Kaneš (N. A. Highcock, G. Barjamovic, N. A. Highcock and L. D’Alfonso). Quite a different aspect, i.e. the production of knowledge in the Upper Mesopotamian contact zone, is debated in the second section (J. Valk, B. Pongratz-Leisten). While transitions and transformations from the Middle to Late Bronze Ages in the Levant and Arabia characterize the third section (C.J. Bergoffen, M. Luciani, R. Homsher). Old and Middle Kingdom Egyptian trade relations are discussed in the fourth part (L. Saladino Haney). At last, Iron Age interactions in the context of the Neo-Assyrian empire are thematized in the two contributions of the fifth section of the book (M. G. Masetti-Rouault, A. M. W. Hunt).

3. The *Introduction to the Old Assyrian Trade Session* by Nancy A. Highcock (British Museum) gives an overview of the changing research strategies of the Old Assyrian trade, characterized by the reconciliation of the cuneiform record and the archaeological material. This led to the study of “larger questions concerning issues of identity, cultural interaction, art and iconography, and the practice of day-to-day life in the settlement”. Secondly, drawn from the review of the dynamics between Assyrian merchants and the local Anatolian population, recent research “sought to rectify the power relationships of the two groups by models of cooperation and cultural hybridization”.

Gojko Barjamovic (Harvard University), on *States, Markets and Overland Trade in the Early and Middle Bronze Age*, departs from facts and figures of the “(probably) ... best documented example of a long-distance network” of the ancient world, i.e., more concrete: “750 annual donkeyloads”, then steers toward the bigger issues of “production, financing, transportation infrastructure, and consumption” by putting different datasets together. As to the socio-political setting, Old Assyrian trade, run by entrepreneurs, “was built on private initiative, but was dependent upon state support and facilitation”. By contextualizing the known regional commercial circuits within Anatolia and Assyria with the information on sources of raw materials, such as silver, copper, tin, on the one hand, and archaeological data from settlement history in the region on the other, the immense geographic dimension of trade networks, stretching from the Aegean to the Balkans, the Caucasus, Northern Syria, and Egypt becomes visible. The socio-political developments of 3rd millennium BCE Mesopotamia (after the downfall of the Ur III state), Syria (in particular the role of Ebla), Iran, and the Gulf constitute the base of these 2nd millennium BCE trade systems.

In their response *Dynamism and Scale in Western Asian Bronze Age Trade Networks*, Lorenzo D’Alfonso (ISAW/NYU) and Nancy A. Highcock (British Museum) draw attention to a number of specific cases (e.g., OB Sippar and the unbalanced archaeological record at keysites

such as e.g. Ashur) and pledge for “long-distance trade [to] be analyzed within its specific context”, otherwise, “we risk losing the specificity of the goals and demands of individual polities, and therefore, their deep reasons for their political and cultural differences”.

Jonathan Valk’s (University of Helsinki) *Reflections on the Dynamics of Cuneiform Knowledge Production in the ancient Near East* consider the transmission the cuneiform scholarly tradition over the ancient Near East as part of manifest cultural contacts. The spread of cuneiform happened through “scholars in charge of tablet houses and comparable institutions [who] are known to be itinerant, moving across the Near Eastern landscape in pursuit of appropriate opportunities”.

Consequently, the “internationalism” of late 2nd millennium BCE ancient Near East, is placed into the first part of the same millennium BCE by Beate Pongratz-Leisten (ISAW/NYU) in discussing *Production of Knowledge in Contact Zones: Mari and Tigunānum in the Old Babylonian Period*. The significance of the textually attested kingdom of Tigunānum most probably arose from its location near to the metallurgical trade routes of Upper Mesopotamia and Anatolia. While underlining the fluidity of ethnic and political borders for the spread of Babylonian knowledge in spite of the political fragmentation of early 2nd millennium BCE, the difficulties in defining borders of “cultures of knowledge” are addressed. Based on the observation that the palace of Tigunānum “is the motor of the compilation of knowledge”, she argues in favor of the primary role of institutions in the spread (italics by the present author) of knowledge, analyzing divinatory texts from the palace’s library. The political alliances of the 2nd millennium BCE saw dynamic and open networks of knowledge.

While Upper Mesopotamia, Anatolia and its neighbors are discussed largely on the grounds of textual evidence, this perspective considerably changes when approaching the Levant. Starting with *The Middle to Late Bronze Age Transition at Tell el-‘Ajjul in the Light of Exchanges between Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean* by Celia J. Bergoffen (Fashion Institute of Technology), archaeological data (pottery) as expression of cultural identity and, if found in other cultural contexts, as evidence for contacts, play an important role for historical reconstruction. In highlighting the archaeological contexts of Tell el-‘Ajjul in the frame of regional political history and the pottery record of Cypriot wares at the site, the evidence points to a continuation of trade relations with Cyprus, regardless the increasing Egyptian incursions in the region. Based on the presence of White Slip I pottery, she follows that there was a continuation of contacts at Tell el-‘Ajjul at times, when other sites had ceded to participate to the networks of exchange.

As outlined above, until very recently, evidence for Bronze Age occupation and long-distance contacts on

the Arabian Peninsula were hardly considered in the debates of Western Asiatic exchange systems (see, e.g., Liverani 1997). Based on the results of the excavations at the oasis of Qurayyah, Marta Luciani (University of Vienna), addresses *Transitions in Material Culture of the 2nd millennium BCE: The Middle Bronze to Late Bronze Age Shift seen from Northwest Arabia*. The revised dating of stratified (Standard) Qurayyah Painted Ware (SQPW, formerly ‘Midianite Pottery’) to the transition from MBA to LBA stays in the context of large walled urban oasis settlements in the region already attested to in the Early Bronze Age. MBA-LBA painted pottery from the site constitutes an adequate tool to investigate “to which extent North Arabia was part of the greater Eastern Mediterranean continuum already at this stage”. In fact, the “transition from handmade metal skeuomorphs to wheel-finished, bichrome-painted vessels” at Qurayyah is identified as phenomenon mirrored in other eastern Mediterranean pottery productions, and connected with the technological innovation of the use of the fast-turning wheel. Nonetheless belonging to the “tapestry” of the ‘bichrome era’, “every painted assemblage wove its individual identity”. In other words, previous paradigms regarding northwestern Arabia, in particular the influence of Egypt, are now replaced by a much more balanced perspectives considering all cultural spheres involved, in which “entanglement (...) must have affected both sides”, i.e. the eastern Mediterranean and Arabia.

In his response to C. J. Bergoffen and M. Luciani, Robert Homsher (San Francisco) deals with *Connections and Transformations in the Southern Levant during the 2nd Millennium with a view from Megiddo* focusing on “the degree of open connectivity as a catalyst for the indigenous development of complexity”. EBA trade connections between the Levant and Arabia (with resins and gemstones) may explain the longstanding connection between these areas, with Egypt to be added. These networks also allowed for a widespread distribution of technological innovation, as evidenced by the presence of Levantine-style statues weapons made of copper alloy at the oasis of Taymā’ at the turn of the 2nd millennium BCE. Archaeometric analyses indicate a more complex (i.e. not unidirectional pattern) of exchange regarding, e.g. the flow of metallurgical raw materials in the region. Both processes, technological innovation and the development of social complexity, in the 2nd millennium BCE, “facilitated each other as mutual forces of socio-cultural evolution”. The fundamental changes in material culture between MBA and LBA, as opposed to the manifest continuity in settlement, coincides with “socio-political reorganizations in the LB related to boundaries created by the assumed city-states (...), in turn altering the modes of ceramic productions and creating a more controlled economy”.

Similar to the discussions of cultural contacts in Western Asia, the consideration of the Red Sea trade was often limited to the Egyptian perspective. Lisa Saladino

Haney (Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Pittsburgh), in her contribution on *Power and Prestige: Egyptian Red Sea Trade During Old and Middle Kingdoms and its Place within the Royal Redistributive Network*, offers a detailed overview on the state-controlled trade of commodities over centuries which contrasts “the more entrepreneurial spirit present in some areas of the Near East in the period”. The wider scope of her contribution, however, lies in the interest to debate the cross-cultural network of differing trade mechanisms. Next to the array of written and arthistorical sources from Egypt, archaeological sites at the eastern coast of Egypt, among them Mersa Gawasis, offer precious complementary information on the infrastructural challenges of the sea-based trade as do the Red Sea conferences of the last years.

Turning towards 1st millennium BCE Syro-Mesopotamia and the Levant, two contributions raise the issue of cultural identity on the background of a dense archaeological and historical documentation. Maria Grazia Masetti-Rouault (École Pratique des Hautes Études / Université Paris Sciences et Lettres), *Middle Grounds, Contacts Areas, and the Assyrian Empire. The Case of the Syrian Lower Euphrates Valley, Iron II Period* in her historical-political analysis, applies on the Middle Euphrates a different explanatory model than in Western Syria and the Lower Euphrates, where Assyria and Babylonia occupied territories for economic reasons. The “parallel colonization” at the southwestern flank of the Assyrian empire, she proposes to read “as a more complex and ‘private’ – as opposed to ‘public’, i.e. state driven phenomenon, and as an answer to economic and social needs in the respective metropolises”. On a theoretical level, the ‘Middle Ground’ model would allow for cultural encounters and joint projects among different identities in this particular context.

Alice M. W. Hunt (University of Georgia), *Tell Jemmeh: Social Identity at a Cultural Crossroads*, in combining anthropological and material science, understands “material culture as the dynamic medium through which relationships and identities are negotiated, established and maintained”. Closer investigation of a specific bowl of 8th–7th century BCE Assyrian Palace Ware (PW), identified as “the ceramic version of the *adê* bowl” (most probably of the same ritual connected to the renewal of loyalty oath to the god, land, and king of Ashur) at Tell Jemmeh revealed considerable technological and morphological differences to PW in the homeland or the annexed territories of the Assyrian empire. Size, manufacture and especially its surface treatment with red slip – regionally attested at Samaria Ware – suggest that the community at Tell Jemmeh “values the social identity of being considered cosmopolitan, by both themselves and other cultural audiences”, thus having status as the only social value and semiotic meaning, thus transforming the Assyrian standards into own cultural reference systems.

4. While these introductory remarks aimed at offering an initial overview on the content of the volume, the contributions themselves invite the readers to specific discussion of particular contexts and research questions.

As a tentative synthesis of the workshop and the contributions of this volume, some major trends can be recognized: the geographical dimension of (mainly, but by no means exclusively) 2nd millennium BCE cultural contacts and exchange networks within Western Asia reaches far beyond the boundaries of the contact zone “Ancient Near East” as defined so far, and other systems were operating in adjacent regions (Egypt, Arabia as well as Iran, Central Asia, Africa, India and South Asia). Thus, the Western Asiatic networks are also part of larger ones. At the same time, it has become clear, that a closer look on single case studies of specific datasets of material culture is important for improving our understanding of specific dynamics (such as continuities or discontinuities in settlement/occupation) and the scale of contacts and exchange. Thereby, interdependencies of landscapes and environment, socio-economy, politics, technological innovation, public and/or private actors as related to cultural contacts can be traced, analyzed, and reconstructed on a detailed level. The density of data of 1st millennium BCE Mesopotamia contrasts the still fairly unbalanced datasets available in different regions during the Bronze Age, at the same time, offering most detailed insights into the interplay between political systems and different cultural adaptation processes. Finally, a major conclusion from the contributions is the observation that the perspectives of all participants in the complex exchange relationships and their respective cultural contextualisation are and must be increasingly being taken into account.

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