
INTRODUCTION

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THE term ‘cuneiform culture’ is not simply a synonym for the ancient Near East but the conceptual framework that provides cohesion to this volume. It is impossible to do justice to all of ancient Near Eastern culture chronologically, geographically, and linguistically, even in a book of this size. Instead, we examine it through the lens of cuneiform writing—the writing technology that is not only fundamental to a modern academic understanding of the region but which also bound the ancient inhabitants into a shared set of ways of understanding and managing their world. The title of this book, *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, therefore reflects its emphasis on cuneiform literacy and the literate segments of society, or ‘textual communities’, following Brian Stock’s definition of the latter as ‘microsocieties organized around the common understanding of a script’ (Stock 1990: 23).

The cuneiform writing system of the ancient Middle East was deeply influential in world culture. For over three millennia, until about two thousand years ago, it was the vehicle of communication from (at its greatest extent) Iran to the Mediterranean, Anatolia to Egypt (Figure 0.1). A complex script, written mostly on clay tablets by professional scribes, it was used to record actions, thoughts, and desires that fundamentally shaped the modern world, socially, politically, and intellectually. Unlike other ancient media, such as papyri, writing-boards, or leather rolls, cuneiform tablets survive in their hundreds of thousands, often excavated from the buildings in which they were created, used, or disposed of. Primary evidence of cuneiform culture thus comes from a wide variety of physical and social contexts in abundant quantities, which enables the close study of very particular times and places.

But although cuneiform is witness to one of the world’s oldest literate cultures, the academic discipline devoted to it, Assyriology, is still a relatively new and underdeveloped field at just over 150 years old. Cuneiform writing shaped the economies and societies which used it, just as its limitations and possibilities were inseparable from intellectual thought about the world. But modern cuneiformists have traditionally studied either socio-economic history or intellectual and cultural history, which themselves have been balkanized into modern categories such as ‘literature’, ‘religion’, ‘magic’, and ‘science’. Political history is a third strand which has hitherto rarely been integrated with

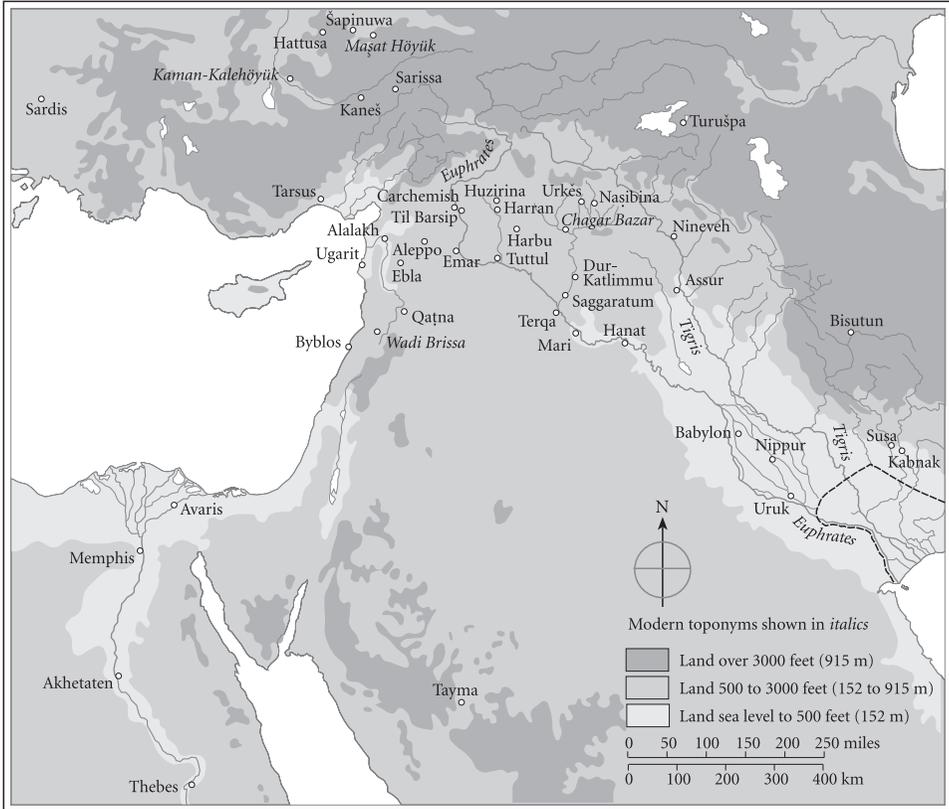


FIGURE 0.1 Map of the ancient Near East, showing the major places mentioned in this book

the study of the other two, except as an ordering and dividing principle. This division of labour has created two distinct images of the ancient Near East. Socio-economic studies produce a strangely familiar world of high finance, bureaucracy, and international law and diplomacy, while intellectual and cultural studies recreate an ancient Near East that is exotic, alien, full of sorcerers, demonic forces, and auspicious signs. Rarely are these parallel worlds superimposed on each other.

The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture draws together these hitherto disparate topics and methodologies to project a new image of the literate ancient Near East. It seeks to restore context and coherence to the study of cuneiform culture by approaching it holistically: through the social, the political, and the intellectual, by means of textual sources whose materiality is fully acknowledged. Mesopotamia's clay tablets and stone inscriptions are not just 'texts' but also material artefacts that offer much additional information about their creators, readers, users, and owners. Whenever appropriate and possible, the contributors to *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture* explore, define, and to some extent look beyond the boundaries of the written word. We hope that the book goes some way towards nuancing the depiction of the ancient Near East in both learned and popular literature.

To this end, we have commissioned chapters from a mix of scholars from across the discipline and around the Assyriological world, female and male, old hands alongside those just beginning their careers. The contributors' remit was to transcend the political, geographical, chronological, and linguistic boundaries that have been constructed by modern research over the past century or more, and to cut across conventional temporal and spatial categories. They have each risen wonderfully and good-naturedly

Table 0.1 Timeline of Cuneiform Culture

	Political history and periodization	Key people and places
Later fourth millennium	Urbanization and literacy: Uruk period, c. 3200–3000 (Uruk IV, Uruk III)	the city of Uruk the site of Jemdet Nasr
Early third millennium	City-states: Early Dynastic period, c. 3000–2350	Sumerian city of Šuruppak (Fara) Syrian city of Ebla
Later third millennium	First territorial empires: Akkadian or Sargonic dynasty, c. 2350–2200; Third Dynasty of Ur (Ur III), c. 2100–2000	king Sargon of Akkad and his daughter Enheduana, c. 2300 Gudea, city ruler of Lagaš, c. 2150 king Šulgi of Ur and his successors, c. 2100–2000
Early second millennium	Short-lived kingdoms of the Old Babylonian period (c. 2000–1600): Isin, Larsa, Mari, Ešnunna, and Babylon	king Zimri-Lim of Mari and his courtly entourage, c. 1760 king Hammurabi of Babylon, c. 1750 the scribes and students of Nippur, c. 1740 Ipiq-Aya the scribe of Sippar Ur-Utu the chief lamenter of Sippar
Later second millennium	Age of international diplomacy: Kassite or Middle Babylonian period; Middle Assyrian empire; Amarna period, c. 1400	Hittite city of Hattusa Egyptian city of Amarna Syrian city of Ugarit the Zu-Ba'la family of diviners in Emar
Early first millennium	Age of empires: Neo-Assyrian empire, c. 900–612 Neo-Babylonian empire, c. 620–540	kings Sargon, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal of Assyria and their advisors king Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon and his temple personnel
Later first millennium	End of native rule: Persian or Achaemenid period, c. 540–330 Seleucid or Hellenistic period, c. 330–125 Parthian or Arsacid period, c. 25 BC–AD 225	king Alexander the Great, c. 330 Berossos, historian of Babylon, c. 300 the priests and scholars of Uruk

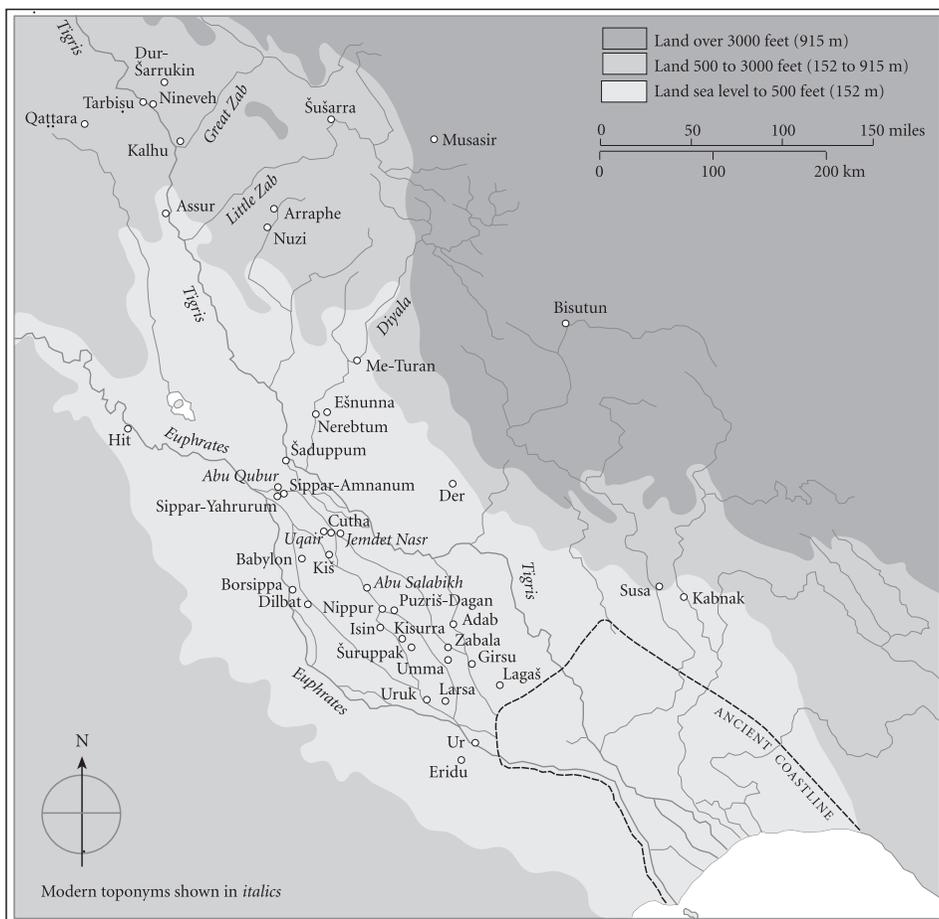


FIGURE 0.2 Map of ancient Mesopotamia, showing the major places mentioned in this book

to the challenges we set, and we are immensely grateful to all of them. They have drawn on the best scholarship of recent decades and integrated a multiplicity of fruitful approaches, highlighting open problems and helping to set agendas for subsequent research.

The resulting book is not structured by periods (see Table 0.1)¹ or places (Figures 0.1 and 0.2) but around seven themes: ‘Materiality and literacies’, ‘Individuals and communities’, ‘Experts and novices’, ‘Decisions’, ‘Interpretations’, ‘Making knowledge’, and ‘Shaping tradition’. Each of these sections encompasses a brief introduction and five chapters. While these chapters cover three thousand years of cuneiform culture from the late fourth millennium to the 2nd century BC, *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture* seeks to be exemplary rather than exhaustive, focusing on methodologies rather than on blanket coverage. Several of the authors have used a deliber-

¹ For reasons of uniformity, all dates in this volume are given in the conventional Middle Chronology, following the regnal dates established by Brinkman (1977).

ately diachronic approach (Foster, Löhnert, Lion, Robson, Steele, Taylor, Veldhuis, and Wiggermann) or selected two or more case studies from different periods to make their point (Chambon, Cohen and Kedar, Frahm, and Von Dassow), but two periods of Mesopotamia's past have very clearly emerged as the focal point of the majority of the contributions. One is the end of the third millennium to the first half of the second millennium BC, the so-called Ur III and Old Babylonian periods. During this time, an age of territorial states, Mesopotamia's political set-up was shaped by the rivalries and alliances of a mosaic of small kingdoms that periodically coalesced into much larger units, with Ur for seventy years and later Babylon for 175 years as the political centres of states controlling Mesopotamia (Brisch, Brunke, Charpin, Démare-Lafont, Huber Vulliet, van Koppen, Tanret, Tinney, and Ziegler). The second focal point is the 'Age of Empires' from the mid-8th to the late 6th century BC (Baker, Böck, Fuchs, Jursa, Koch, Radner, Rochberg, Schwemer, Waerzeggers, and Zamazalová), when the Neo-Assyrian and later the Neo-Babylonian empires dominated the political history of the Middle East. This twin emphasis is due to the exceptionally rich textual remains which document these periods from sites across Mesopotamia, most especially Assur, Babylon, Kalhu, Mari, Nineveh, Nippur, and Sippar. Three chapters deal with the very beginning of cuneiform culture in the southern city of Uruk in the late fourth millennium BC (Englund) on the one hand, and its last guardians, active in this very same city and elsewhere in Babylonia as late as the 2nd century BC (Clancier and De Breucker) on the other. Another chapter looks at 'cuneiform abroad', analysing how the Mesopotamian writing system was adapted for use in Anatolia under Hittite rule in the mid-second millennium BC (Weeden).

The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture aims to demonstrate the importance and relevance of cuneiform culture to world history by integrating the strange with the familiar. With this in mind, we chose the image for the jacket and frontispiece. It shows a composite creature, half man, half fish, known in ancient times as an *apkallu*, 'sage'. The Akkadian term is a loanword from Sumerian *abgal*, literally 'big fish'. The cover image, which is also reproduced on the frontispiece, is based on the 9th-century BC Assyrian *apkallu* carved on the stone decoration of Ninurta's temple in Kalhu, modern Nimrud (Layard 1853: pl. 6). Its creator, Tessa Rickards, brings it to life by using the colour scheme of the wall paintings adorning the 8th-century BC Assyrian palace of Til Barsip (modern Tell Ahmar). A similar fish-creature was depicted in room XXVII of the Til Barsip palace, close to the throne room, but is preserved only in fragments (Thureau-Dangin and Dunand 1936: pl. LIIIb). The Kalhu *apkallu* was certainly also painted in antiquity, perhaps in a very similar way to the artist's reconstruction. According to Mesopotamian tradition, these 'big fish' are the companions of the god of wisdom, Enki/Ea, who dwells in the depths of the sea. They regularly emerged from the sea in order to teach mankind the cornerstones of civilization, such as agriculture, kingship, justice, and writing, before the Flood ended their coexistence (see van Koppen in this volume). From the third millennium BC to the Hellenistic period (see De Breucker in this volume), the fish-creatures were seen as purveyors of wisdom and learnedness (Reiner 1961; Greenfield 1999). Scholars and priests took

their title and dressed in their image, wearing robes and hats made out of the skin of the enormous river carps that still populate the Euphrates and Tigris today. To us, these fish-creatures are icons of cuneiform culture.

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