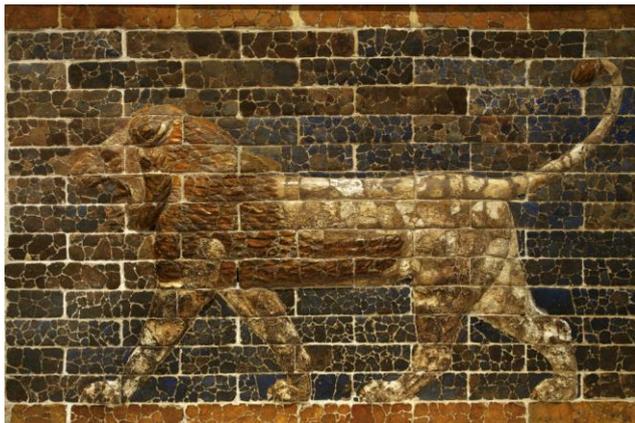


Ancient Mesopotamia: Inventing and Reinventing Our World

Blog Entry

by **James Blake Wiener**

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Three successive civilizations -- Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian -- flourished along the "Fertile Crescent" in ancient Mesopotamia for thousands of years. Renown for their creativity, dynamism, and complexity, these cultures also provide the earliest models of civilization in the West. This fall, the **Royal Ontario Museum (ROM)** in Toronto, Canada is celebrating the remarkable achievements and artistic sophistication of ancient Mesopotamia in a landmark exhibition: ***Mesopotamia: Inventing Our World***.

In this interview, James Blake Wiener of the **Ancient History Encyclopedia** speaks to Dr. Clemens Reichel, Associate Curator at the ROM, about the importance of these civilizations, and of how we can better assess and understand their legacy in modern times.

JW: Welcome to the Ancient History Encyclopedia, Dr. Clemens Reichel! I am delighted to be speaking to you, and I have the pleasure of informing you that your interview is AHE's first with an expert on the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia.

As a child, a visit to Rome sparked your interest in archaeology, and as a student, you immersed yourself in the cultures of the ancient Near East. What is it about this historic region that entralls you?



CR: My first interest, indeed, belonged to the classical world of Greece and Rome, but when I went to the university I found them too similar, too close to our own world. Taking a class in Mesopotamian archaeology was a random decision -- but I was immediately struck by their mysterious and yet curiously familiar features. Like most of us, I had heard about the Sumerians, Assyrians, and Babylonians in high school but did not associate much with them. Learning that the earliest cities were built in this area after 4000 BCE, that writing was invented there around 3000 BCE, and that many social, technological, or scientific achievements -- such as mathematics, astronomy, literature -- first occurred or were recorded there, completely fascinated me. Plus, I do love the Middle East. I love the landscape, the food, the people, and their hospitality.

JW: The ROM's *Mesopotamia* exhibition presents a striking array of artifacts and objects, which underscore the centrality of successive Near Eastern civilizations in the ancient world.

As urban evolution and complex societies are among your research interests, I was wondering if you might be able to contextualize some of the commonalities and distinguishing characteristics between Sumer, Assyria, and Babylon (Babylonia) for our audience? Moreover, should we think of these civilizations as running along a cultural and political continuum? How should we best approach this complex region and its historical polities?



CR: I must start my answer with a disclaimer: The labels "Sumer," "Assyria," and "Babylon" are popular for museum displays, but they really are not very helpful in understanding the development of civilizations in Mesopotamia. For starters, there never really was a political entity called "Sumer." Lumped together under this heading are multiple stages of social and political development between 4000 and 2000 BCE during which great strides were made -- cities and first empires emerged, and writing was invented after 3000 BCE. The political constellations during this time, however, alternated between city-states, which often were at war with each other, and large territorial empires. Moreover, the only aspect that makes this time period "Sumerian" is the fact that most texts were written in that language. Major parts of the population, however, probably spoke Akkadian -- a Semitic language that later on was written and spoken in various dialects in Babylonia and Assyria. Archaeologists, accordingly, divide the time between 4000 and 2000 BCE into five major periods that reflect the aforementioned developments, but generally avoid the term "Sumerian" to describe any of its artwork and material culture.

Babylonia and Assyria, by contrast, do represent territorial states, and they do overlap chronologically. But again, it would be misleading to talk about "monolithic" states. King Hammurabi, for example, a Babylonian ruler best known for the law code named after him, ruled between 1792 and 1750 BCE. His titles, traditions, and material culture are very close to those of the kings of Sumer and Akkad that ruled Mesopotamia before 2000 BCE. He probably would have found few if any commonalities with Nebuchadnezzar II, the Babylonian king who famously built the Ishtar Gate and the ziggurat of Babylon (well known from the biblical account as the "Tower of Babel") after 600 BCE. Between Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar was more than a millennium, during which Babylon was weak and sometimes even subordinate to its northern neighbor Assyria.

Assyria is an interesting case as well. Until about 1350 BCE, it remains a relatively minor city state but then rapidly rises to power, dominating the world between Egypt, Turkey, the Caucasus region, and Iran at its peak (c.

670 BCE). It is tempting to see a dichotomy between Babylonia as a center of learning and science and Assyria as a brutal military machine that trampled upon everyone. This view, however, ignores the fact that some of the finest artworks from Mesopotamia -- elaborate wall reliefs with extensive narratives carved in stone -- were found in Assyrian palaces. Assyria was also home to the library of King Ashurbanipal (r. 668-c. 627 BCE), which housed not only copies of many stories (such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh*) but also medical, mathematical, astronomic, or lexical texts. Without these discoveries in Assyria, ironically, we would know a lot less about Babylonia.



The answer to your question, therefore, is more complex than a simple look at commonalities and differences between these cultures. The worlds of Sumer, Babylonia, and Assyria were not static, rather each evolved distinctively during the time periods highlighted in the exhibit.

JW: This is the first time that such a collection of Mesopotamian objects has been assembled for a major show in Canada. Which pieces are the highlights, and what should museum visitors look for in particular when visiting the ROM?

CR: In addition to 173 items from the British Museum, we were fortunate to include a select number of artifacts from North American collections -- the University Museum (Philadelphia), the Oriental Institute Museum (University of Chicago), the Detroit Institute of Art, and some our own collection at the ROM. Several of them are highlights in the ROM's exhibit.

I think that every visitor who enters the exhibit will be captivated by the finds from the Royal Cemetery of Ur, which make up a major part of the "Sumer" section of the exhibit. The finds from these graves, which date between 2500-2350 BCE, provide a unique insight into the composition of a royal household -- not the least since these kings were buried with numerous members of their households, soldiers as well as palace ladies. Much of what we see there may have been custom-made for eternity: Some of the diadems and necklaces that would have been too heavy to wear probably represent flower wreaths and garlands worn in real life.



The crown jewel in this section is a little sculpture of a rearing goat. Often called "Ram in a Thicket" (in allusion to the biblical Abraham and Isaac sacrifice story), it is made of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, shell, copper, and carnelian -- a striking view. It probably was the support structure of a small table or incense burner. This piece is currently on

loan from the University Museum in Pennsylvania. In mid-October, it will be exchanged for the so-called King's Lyre, a large musical instrument from the Royal Cemetery -- exquisitely inlaid with humorous scenes of an animal banquet and topped by a golden bull's head with a large beard made of a single piece of lapis lazuli.

Other highlights include an exquisitely carved statue of the city ruler Gudea of Lagash (c. 2150-2124 BCE), dating to c. 2150 BCE (on loan from the Detroit Institute of Art), and several reliefs from Assyrian palaces showing lion hunts and battle scenes. Among the latter ones, a gigantic rendering of a battle fought in 653 BCE between the Assyrian army and the kingdom of Elam in Southwestern Iran, hardly needs to be singled out, being the largest artifact on display in this exhibit. Studying the cause of the battle, notably the fate of the enemy king who is shown several times -- thrown off his chariot, fleeing, wounded, and finally dead and about to be decapitated -- is truly intriguing.

I cannot end the list of highlights without mentioning "our" own striding terracotta lion from Babylon, a painted and glazed wall relief from the throne room façade of King Nebuchadnezzar's famous palace.



JW: One cannot deny that the inventive peoples of ancient Mesopotamia continue to shape humanity thousands of years later. From agriculture to writing, government bureaucracy to urban design, Mesopotamia is the place where human beings accomplished many feats for the first time.

Of the countless innovations to emerge from Mesopotamia, which one -- in your opinion -- is that which we know the least about?

CR: I think that many people are surprised to hear that some of the scientific achievements such as mathematics, which we often associate with the Greeks, are actually present in Mesopotamia. The Pythagorean Theorem (stating that the base of a right triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides), for example, is already found on Babylonian tablets dating to c. 1800 BCE. Interest in mathematics, however, did not come out of intellectual curiosity, but was a necessity. Following inundations of fields after floods, fields had to be sown and planted quickly. Quite often, however, field boundaries were obliterated or invisible due to sedimentation -- so mathematical formulae had to be devised to reestablish them quickly. With no "zero" in use, however, Babylonian mathematics was seriously hampered in its development.

JW: Alongside Mesopotamia at the ROM is *Catastrophe! Ten Years Later: The Looting and Destruction of Iraq's Past*. 2013 marks the tenth anniversary of the looting of Baghdad's Iraq Museum. The loss to Iraqi archaeological and cultural heritage cannot be understated as irreplaceable treasures were destroyed and over 7,000 ancient artifacts remain missing. 2003 also commences the beginning of a decade marked by the plundering of Iraq's unique archaeological sites. Simply put, the losses are incalculable.



What is the state of archaeology in Iraq at the moment, and what can we do to ensure that our ancient and cultural treasures can avoid the fate that beset those of Iraq?

CR: It was very important for us to not be indifferent to the tragic fate that had befallen Iraq's cultural heritage for more than two decades. The looting of the Iraq Museum after the Iraq War was a seminal event to which much of the world reacted with disgust and outrage. The problems, however, started more than ten years earlier with the end of the first Gulf War in 1991. Following the end of these hostilities, an economic embargo was placed on Iraq, which effectively prohibited international expeditions from working there. The no-fly zone over Southern Iraq, established to protect the local Shiite population from government repercussions, unfortunately also meant that Iraq's Department of Antiquities was unable to monitor the situation on many sites which, in light of the severe economic hardships suffered by much of Iraq's population, often fell victim to looting.

Nothing, however, could have prepared us to the extent of the looting that happened in the years after the 2003 war. Coalition forces were simply unprepared and unable to stop this destruction; as a result, archaeological sites especially in Southern Iraq have suffered irreparable damage. Many of Sumer's great cities are irretrievably lost. Artifacts, especially cuneiform texts, from these clandestine excavations, have surfaced on the antiquities market,



putting scholars into a dilemma about how to handle unprovenanced, stolen materials. Should we look at them and, by authenticating them through our studies, feed into a vicious cycle that creates further demands for artifacts, ultimately leading to more looting? Or should we refuse to look at these altogether, risking the loss of potentially unique material concerning Iraq's history and archaeology?

Does this mean the end of archaeology in Iraq? No, certainly not. Iraq is such an archaeologically rich landscape that it would simply be impossible to destroy every single site. Many of the smaller ones have escaped the attention of the looters. Moreover, on a trip to southern Iraq in May 2013 with colleagues from the U.S., I was pleased to see that several of the important sites of the south (such as Ur, Lagash, Girsu) survived more or less unscathed and nowadays are well protected again by guards. There is plenty of work waiting for us. And I believe that going back, building up a network of archaeological projects, is the best protection for sites. Local villagers will be tied in economically to these projects and therefore will have an interest in protecting the sites.

Before going back, however, we will have to address numerous issues. Security remains one of the biggest problems. At present, bringing out a big team is simply not yet feasible. Costs are another problem. Compared to Syria, where I had a project and worked until the outbreak of current hostilities in 2011, Iraq is a wealthy and hence expensive country. It would be impossible to hire the large number of people that in the past provided the

work force. Working with a handful of people on these extensive sites, however, will not produce any meaningful results. It is clear that we will have to become much more "scientific" in choosing our dig sites than we used to be.



JW: Dr. Reichel, I thank you so much for speaking with AHE. I wish you many happy adventures in research and archaeology, and I thank you for sharing your thoughts!

CR: My pleasure!

Mesopotamia: Inventing Our World and Catastrophe! Ten Years Later: The Looting and Destruction of Iraq's Past are on show at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada until January 5, 2014.