

## CHAPTER FIVE

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# Archaeology and the Ancient Near East: Methods and Limits

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Archaeology's contributions to Ancient Near Eastern history involve more than supplying the raw data – archives and monumental inscriptions – identifying ancient sites on the ground, and checking chronological outlines, all first steps toward the reconstruction of historical narratives. At the same time, historical documents from the Ancient Near East provide otherwise inaccessible information for many issues pertinent to archaeological analysis of its societies. The two fields of archaeology and history thus complement each other, but by definition examine their subjects by using different sources, and from these orient themselves toward different objectives.

This essay will touch on some aspects of the past and current relationship between archaeology or the archaeological perspective and Ancient Near Eastern history. History is defined here in terms deriving from the *Annales* school of historians in France to cover events and also instances or patterns of social and economic behavior that include mentalities, or culture, and the historian refers to the specialist whose primary sources are written (Bloch 1953; Braudel 1972). The archaeologist, in contrast, relies on the material record rather than the written one, and consults artifacts, building plans, settlement patterns, and other tangible remains of human activity for primary interpretive data. Reconstructing sequences of events and the personalities behind them remains the preserve of the historian, while issues of cultural definition and change, within a specific context and in a broader landscape, concern the archaeologist.

Historian and archaeologist together share the ambition and the need to re-create mentalities and social patterns, Braudel's second tier of historical analysis, and in this respect the two fields would appear to be closely linked. The extent to which they have formed alliances in their mutual program of resurrecting the ancient civilizations of the Near East is presented here from the archaeological side of their association.

### Archaeology's Contribution to Historical Accounts about the Ancient Near East

All general histories of the Ancient Near East refer to sites and objects in their discussions, and often include illustrations, plans, and reconstructions. These have been almost exclusively provided by excavations carried out in the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries CE, at Mesopotamian urban sites like Warka, Ur, and Babylon, Assur, and the later Assyrian capitals, and moving west, Mari, Ugarit, and the Hittite capital Hattusha. Although many of these projects are still running, and recent findings from these sites occasionally make their way into new historical accounts, they nonetheless hardly alter, reconfigure, or replace the familiar standards. No excavations begun since the 1950s have enjoyed a similar popularity among historians.

The reasons behind this conservatism are several. The most obvious is that excavations before World War II were carried out on a scale appropriate to recovering historical information. Archaeologists exposed entire cities without being encumbered by sampling techniques, subsistence strategies, micromorphology, post-depositional processes, or the statistical recording of potsherds (for these techniques, see Matthews 2003). Nor did they waste much time on occupational levels later than the period or periods that interested them as historically significant and illustrious, or on levels of occupation within a building or period. The single-minded pursuit of total site recovery for specific levels aimed at, and succeeded in, producing urban plans, placing monumental buildings within their administrative neighborhoods, and uncovering large structures in their entirety (Parrot 1953: 40). We can indeed be grateful for the accomplishments of this stage in the history of archaeological research. It revealed the layouts of cities like Babylon and Assur that are far beyond what the 10 × 10 meter, or 33-foot, trench – the largest format in current use – can ever hope to expose. By providing a preliminary framework and typology for architecture, urbanism, and art in the Ancient Near East, such projects cleared the way for later generations of excavators to concentrate on a finer-grained recovery of comparable or contrasting sites.

Secondly, a major motive behind the choice of which sites to excavate was to find direct evidence for supplementing and reconstructing history. Urban centers therefore took precedence over towns and villages, as did the excavation of their monumental buildings, the construction of which could more likely be connected to historical episodes and important figures than private houses. Since the mid-nineteenth century, when Botta's and Layard's discoveries at the Assyrian capitals of Khorsabad and Nimrud first showed that palaces could be expected to contain inscriptions on their walls and tablets inside their rooms, and that such contexts might confirm or enrich a historical outline initially drawn from the Old Testament and the Greek historian Herodotus, they became preferred targets because they seemed more informative. Once the deciphered inscriptions and tablets demonstrated the wealth of social and economic detail to be anticipated from such sources, their recovery became a driving force behind archaeological excavation. Excavators were

pressed by the need to find cuneiform tablets, as one can read in the prefaces to their reports. By the third day of the first campaign at Mari in 1933, although a statue of Sumerian type had already been found, “we were not satisfied since Paris was urging us to hurry up and discover ‘a text’” (Parrot 1974: 15).

Inscribed finds also compensated for stratigraphic complexity, recycling, or imperfect excavating, by generating of themselves the required chronological and contextual information (at Byblos, Dunand 1954: 3–7, 1968: 99–100). That the remarkable series of inscribed statues commissioned by Gudea and his relatives was discovered in a palace built and occupied about 1,800 years after their lifetimes did not affect assigning these early governors of Lagash to their correct historical place (Azarpay 1990: 97; de Genouillac 1936b: 9–10). It seems incidental that the temple in which the dedications originally stood was not recovered, and indeed most likely destroyed, by its excavator (Lloyd 1980: 159–60). The texts inscribed on the statues related, in satisfactory detail, the circumstances surrounding the temple’s construction and the name of its patron-god; and a model brick on the lap of Gudea the architect was incised with his divinely inspired temple plan. Sculptures such as these, which prompted museums throughout the world to sponsor projects in the hope of securing display-worthy artwork, also contributed to focusing excavation on royal and urban centers with historic credentials. Thus de Sarzac, the first excavator of Gudea’s temple at Telloh/ancient Girsu, could be congratulated for making the Louvre “the chief European treasure-house of early Babylonian (Sumerian) art and history” (de Genouillac 1936a: 1).<sup>1</sup>

Finally, Near Eastern projects carried out before the 1950s were conducted with small teams, large local labor forces, and seasons lasting six months or more, three conditions that favored the emergence of the big picture. The Zimri-Lim palace at Mari, for example, a 2.5 hectare, or 6 acre, complex with over 260 rooms preserved in parts to a height of 5 m, or 16 feet, was dug in only four years (twelve months of fieldwork) by a four-person staff and 230 workmen (Parrot 1953: 28–9, 1974: 19–20). De Morgan, digging at Susa before World War I, considered 1,000 to 1,500 workers an appropriate labor force, although a few decades later Parrot could criticize this as more suitable for a “civil engineering project,” with any number above 300 posing a “serious threat to scientific work” (1953: 27). At Mari as elsewhere, supervision of the excavation’s progress and the recording of its findings were the responsibility of the single field director and the project head, the two other staff members being assigned to architectural plans and finds illustration, photography, and preliminary conservation.

The results of such broad enterprises suited a narrative publication format whose sweeping conclusions could be readily adapted into historical accounts. Object catalogs and technical discussions for specialists were placed at the end of this narrative, and often set in smaller print. Finds thus illustrated the context, instead of constituting the basis for its interpretation. The recovery of immense quantities of artifacts also favored selecting those few with artistic and historic merit that best served the excavation’s immediate aims. One could call this a sampling strategy of sorts, in a research program that made the archaeologist a full partner of the historian. In the words of Parrot, Mari’s distinguished excavator, historic sites do not lend themselves to “digging with a microscope” (1974: 19).

From this heroic era of fieldwork emerged a historical and chronological framework for the Ancient Near East that today remains unchallenged. The outline has of course been fleshed out and refined, both in its historical and in its archaeological details. In particular, an interest in the dynamic between urban centers and their countryside has introduced into mainstream discussions information collected by later archaeological surveys (Matthews 2003: 182–8), and efforts to understand archival practices and economic systems have encouraged study of the archaeological contexts where individual archives were found (Zettler 1996; Reichel 2001). But such interdisciplinary studies have, on the whole, been initiated by archaeologists who can also read the texts, rather than by specialists in the ancient languages. In fact, the changes that transformed archaeological research after the mid-twentieth century and shaped its many excavation projects do not coincide well with a historical agenda. Current archaeological research might even be thought irrelevant to a historical scheme, given the technical perspective and problem-oriented focus with which most of the recent projects are associated. Hence the tendency has been for historians to sideline new projects in favor of old standards. Even the spectacular (non-epigraphic) finds from Tell Mardikh, ancient Ebla, remain consigned to a few lines only in connection with the conquests of Akkadian kings – hardly more than before the site was excavated, and despite its widely circulated and accessible publications (Matthiae 1977, 1985; Matthiae, Pinnock, and Scandone-Matthiae 1995). Yet Ebla’s third millennium BCE urban development says much about Sumerian cultural and economic preeminence over a large geographical area, as other excavations in western Syria can confirm. New historical studies of Early Dynastic Sumer must take these sites into account if they are to explain why the rulers at Ebla and elsewhere turned to the cities of Sumer for models to emulate.

### **Archaeology and Near Eastern Relative Chronology**

The relative chronology used for Mesopotamian archaeology was set up at an international conference in 1929 on the basis of two coordinated schemes: one for prehistory, the other for historic phases. Prehistoric periods were named after the individual sites then thought to characterize best a particular stage of development. These type-sites, standing for distinct cultures, were arranged into a continuous sequence according to the stratigraphic evidence from excavations up to that point. They eventually attributed the earliest Mesopotamian settlement to the site of Hasuna, in northern Iraq, and the latest prehistoric ones to Uruk and Jemdet Nasr in the south. The first occurrence of writing in the Uruk IV and Jemdet Nasr phases prompted, in 1931, the adoption of the label Protoliterate period to describe that stage more vividly, and to highlight a perceived transition into the succeeding chronological scheme (although not without protest: Mallowan 1970: 328–30). The terms Late Uruk-Jemdet Nasr and Protoliterate are still used interchangeably today for the centuries on either side of 3000 BCE.

For archaeological phases following the Protoliterate period, a sequence of prominent historical markers was chosen in preference to the type-site system. The third

millennium was divided into three major periods – Early Dynastic, Akkadian, and Ur III or Neo-Sumerian – and coordinated with stratigraphic sequences and artifact typologies mainly from the Chicago Oriental Institute’s excavations in the Diyala Valley (Lloyd 1984: 91). This terminology was intended to bind archaeological and historical findings into one harmonious, compatible system. Like the type-site sequence, it assumed that a linear development best reflected ancient Mesopotamian history. It also presumed that historical periods offered a more flexible framework for integrating new archaeological findings than cultural stages could, and that Mesopotamian culture was monolithic, without significant regional variants. It was especially based on the idea that a historical perspective should take precedence over a cultural or archaeological one – a view that was fully endorsed by the excavators themselves (Parrot 1953: 40–1).

This chronological framework has proved a poor fit from both perspectives. Historians have struggled in vain to stretch the Sumerian King List over the three phases of the Early Dynastic period: Early Dynastic I, II, and III (Hallo and Simpson 1971: 34–9; Lloyd 1984: 90–3, Kuhrt 1995: 29–31). In archaeological terms, this system has not proved satisfactory either. The artificial division created by this phasing between Protoliterate and Early Dynastic I has obscured the cultural continuity linking the two periods. The Early Dynastic I archaeological assemblage of pottery types and seals, and households at sites like Abu Salabikh, illustrate the economic decline of southern Mesopotamia after the collapse of Protoliterate state organization, rather than the political structure of the Sumerian city-states that emerged in Early Dynastic II. A more accurate scheme from both the archaeological and the historical perspective would make Early Dynastic I the closing phase of the Protoliterate, followed by a break before the onset of Early Dynastic II–III. Recent general discussions about the Sumerian city-states (Roaf 1990: 79–88; Postgate 1994) have avoided attributing specific developments to all three phases within Early Dynastic, a sign that they are now recognized as coinciding poorly with the current understanding of this period. Akkadian and Neo-Sumerian reflect the next two (brief) cultural and historical stages more comfortably. But for the rest of the second and first millennia BCE, where individual periods last longer and the fit is, in consequence, superficially less awkward, cultural realities in the archaeological record remain concealed or distorted by the need to formulate them in historical parameters applicable to restricted geographical areas only. Shifting population groups and transitional stages before and after the existence of centralized states disappear within this scheme.

Finally, this relative chronology has isolated both Mesopotamian history and archaeology from the greater Near East, which uses the Three Age system: Neolithic, Bronze Age, and Iron Age. Perhaps an initial reason behind choosing the historical sequence was that it was thought a simpler expedient into which archaeological levels could be slotted (Parrot 1953: 40). Implicit to the original scheme, however, was the concept that Mesopotamia, the core civilization, was central to developments elsewhere, and that the burden of cross-dating rested with the peripheries. Efforts to cross-reference the two systems have carried little weight with archaeologists working primarily with Mesopotamian material (Hallo and Simpson 1971). Adopting the

Three Age system would require a complete review of Mesopotamia's diagnostic cultural features to key them in with the sequences in other regions. Because this task can be circumvented by using the two in parallel, however loosely, no radical overhaul has yet been introduced.

The consequences of this relative dating system have hindered rather than clarified issues even pertaining to internal Mesopotamian history, since some of its complexities can be resolved only from outside the core, with reference to the archaeological record. To cite one instance: where, in the larger scheme of things, do the First Dynasty of Babylon and by extension the Old Babylonian period coordinate with specific archaeological phases in the eastern Mediterranean, with which it entertained political relations, but whose sites and levels use the Bronze Age system? This question is only one of many with a direct bearing on absolute chronology, in which archaeology plays the critical role.

### **Archaeology and Near Eastern Absolute Chronology**

Absolute chronology assigns calendar dates to historical events and archaeological periods. It offers an irresistible challenge to historians of the Ancient Near East, where king lists and other documents invite a semblance of chronological precision, second only to Dynastic Egypt. Archaeological research is also keenly interested in absolute dates that allow fixed reference points across different cultural zones. However, it is essential that the absolute dates attributed to historical events conform with the archaeological record, and vice versa. This is the one area of Ancient Near Eastern study that requires the closest collaboration between historians and archaeologists.

The longest chronological debate of this type has involved the regnal years of kings belonging to the First Dynasty of Babylon, the so-called High, Middle, and Low Chronology. It was first formulated in 1928, when the Assyriologist S. Langdon and the astronomer J. K. Fotheringham published a compilation of omens relating observations of the appearance of the planet Venus to specific years for Ammisaduqa, the dynasty's penultimate king. Since this chronology provided a convenient handle on which to hang centuries of historical and archaeological data, it gamely survived all efforts to discredit the reliability of its premises (Neugebauer 1929; Reiner and Pingree 1975), despite eventual disclaimers from some early champions (Smith 1951: 67). The chronological debate was, I believe, conclusively resolved in 1998 only because, for the first time, ceramic typology, stratigraphic analysis, and settlement distribution patterns for mid-second millennium Babylonia were given equal weight with textual data (Gasche et al. 1998). In a second innovative move, the newly proposed chronology was tested against current historical and archaeological dating systems in the rest of the Near East, from Iran to Anatolia, modern Turkey, and Egypt (Tanret 2000).

Since this Babylonian chronology ties in with earlier Mesopotamian history, and affords synchronisms with other parts of the Near East and eastern Mediterranean, its resolution is of momentous significance. Thanks to this, contemporary civilizations where written documentation is spare or inadequate for historical purposes, but

which have a high visibility in the archaeological record, can be dated with more accuracy. They include Minoan Crete and Mycenaean Greece, whose export trade in pottery gives a crucial index for cross-dating archaeological deposits in the Levant, the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, and Anatolia. Indeed, the overwhelming outside interest in what might seem a parochial detail of Mesopotamian history underscores the tightly knit fabric of most research questions involving the Ancient Near East (for instance Manning 1999, on the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean).

The issue here is that archaeological deposits rarely provide unequivocal absolute dates with the precision needed to pinpoint historical events, that is, to a specific year rather than a generation or a century. Radiocarbon dates and similar chronometric techniques involve margins of error ranging well beyond the duration of most Ancient Near Eastern dynasties, let alone the reign of one king. It is not radiocarbon-dating that will determine, for instance, whether Sargon or his grandson Naram-Sin destroyed Early Bronze III Ebla. In any case, the current radiocarbon sample for Mesopotamia proper is too small and too spotty to provide any conclusive assessment, even when conflated with readings from contemporary sites outside Mesopotamia (Reade 2001: 13–14; Hassan and Robinson 1987: 127–8). The fact that samples processed in the early decades of this technology were several hundred years out of line with traditional chronologies no doubt discouraged systematic collecting on the grounds that it was an imperfect (and costly) pastime (Mallowan 1971: 242–3; Reade 2001: 13). It is also likely that reliance on a historically based Mesopotamian chronology made radiocarbon dating seem irrelevant, and suitable only for prehistoric sites, which have no recourse to written benchmarks.

Dendrochronology, or tree-ring dating, is a far more precise tool, but first one must come by the appropriate sample, and it must have at least fifty to one hundred preserved, countable, and well-patterned rings (Kuniholm 2001). Wood of this caliber was especially used as structural timber, or to span monumental buildings. It can be expected for ordinary housing only in forested regions like central Anatolia. Dendrochronology moreover dates the year when a tree was cut, but this need not be the year when it was incorporated into a building or even less the year when that building fell out of use; in short, it offers a *terminus post quem*. The timbers from Kültepe-Kanesh and Achemhöyük in central Anatolia provide no more than a series of earliest possible dates (2055, 1832, 1774, and 1761 BCE [Kültepe II and Ib periods/Middle Bronze II A]) for the many generations of Assyrian businessmen who kept records according to the yearly calendar in Assur (Manning et al. 2001). A further cautionary note on how dendrochronology must be evaluated in conjunction with context and associated features is indicated by Achemhöyük. Although its two excavated monumental buildings were used concurrently, their timbers had been felled 152 years apart (Özgüç 1980: 63). Contemporary private housing at Achemhöyük included twenty-four other timbers dendrodated from four to eight centuries earlier (mid-late third millennium BCE!), indicating that informal buildings recycled materials from much older structures (Kuniholm 1996: 331). Still, the ever-expanding database of dendrochronological samples and correlations offers a resource of great promise.

It must also be accepted that archaeological deposits are less discrete than one might wish. Even the well-attested campaigns of Neo-Assyrian kings are difficult to

correlate with specific destruction levels at most relevant sites, to say nothing of destructions with weaker credentials, like those attributed to the Biblical patriarchs, or recounted in Near Eastern epics (Forsberg 1995). The factors conspiring to blur the archaeological picture range from human interference (ancient and modern) to the natural processes of erosion, flooding, deposition of soil by rivers, and decomposition. Victorious soldiers stripped buildings of their contents, abandoned houses gradually filled with garbage dumped by their neighbors, moles burrowed through stratified deposits and shifted potsherds, coins, tablets, and similar diagnostic data indiscriminately from one level to another. Identifying these transformations in the field comprises an entire area of archaeological inquiry in itself, and archaeologists have worked out methods to override these confusions (Schiffer 1976). But neither archaeologists nor the archaeological record should be held responsible when their results fall outside the time frames that historians request. An enlightened understanding of each discipline's methods, limitations, and possibilities can achieve conclusive results, as in the case of dating the Old Babylonian dynasty. Chronological problems require the concerted efforts of archaeologists and historians in equal measure, since the system in use for the Ancient Near East inextricably combines the two.

### **Recent Archaeological Research on the Ancient Near East**

Only one aspect of fieldwork remains universal and timeless: financial shortage, a theme common to virtually every excavation report's preface. In other respects, however, archaeological projects initiated in the Middle East during the past fifty years have followed different agendas from those preceding World War II, and have been carried out under more restrictive conditions. Superficial explanations behind these changes involve practical issues. Field seasons, on average, became shorter once academics, who are constrained by university calendars, replaced institute- and museum-sponsored teams as the majority force engaged in excavations. University-based projects also embraced the mission of training students in fieldwork and field-related research. This aim toward instruction speeded up technical improvements, bringing excavating, sampling, and recording practices to much higher standards. Field teams accordingly expanded to include a battery of specialists and site supervisors several times more numerous than the handful recommended by Parrot, at greater expense to transport, house, and feed. The local labor force was reduced as a result of such developments.

These factors shifted the scale of excavation toward smaller trenches and a slower pace. Other types of restrictions also played an important role in modifying the nature of fieldwork. A heightened conscience about preserving sites rather than destroying them led to the argument that soundings and surveys should substitute for excavation,<sup>2</sup> although it is today again recognized that they generate distinct and complementary information (Matthews 2003: 34–5). Industrialization, road work, and hydroelectric dam construction in the Middle East have increased the pressure for salvage projects, which detract from a free choice of site, based on research interests,



by focusing efforts instead on short-term and largely random investigations. Much good and unexpected data have emerged from these, but they have also diverted earlier patterns of research.

Underlying these structural changes, however, is a profound shift in perspective within the archaeological discipline itself. I will not even summarize the many theoretical concerns that have rocked the archaeological establishment during these six decades. They belong – in one activist’s words – to an internal dialogue that interests only the profession (Trigger 1989: 2, citing Binford). It is enough to say that they query what archaeology does or does not do, particularly in its aims at explanation. One consequence for Near Eastern archaeology has been a preference for prehistoric sites through the Protoliterate period, because they may answer fundamental issues about transformations in the human condition: the invention of farming and animal-breeding, the move from village to urban life, or the development of state systems. For historic periods, a similar turn toward “blue-collar” research led to concentrating on private housing rather than monumental buildings, and on small sites instead of urban centers. To investigate diachronic change and transitions, small, multi-phase soundings replaced broad exposures, so that contrasts from one period to the next could be sampled and highlighted.

Another result of post-World War II fieldwork agendas has been a renewed awareness that archaeological data and historical data produce two distinct classes of information, and therefore require two different styles of research questions in archaeology. The debate is an old one, a sign that its seeds rest at the very core of archaeology as a discipline. It lies behind the American “New Archeology” [sic] movement of the 1960s, spearheaded by L. Binford, and it resurfaced in the 1990s when the collapse of the Soviet Union prompted even its archaeologists to query the premises behind their research design (Klejn 1993). The force of this ideological rift among archaeologists was vividly expressed by the title Renfrew chose for his centenary lecture at the Archaeological Institute of America: “The Great Tradition versus the Great Divide” (1980). Despite the many reasonable arguments urging cooperation and peace between the two factions in the archaeological establishment, they continue to view each other’s basic approaches with misgiving.

Whatever their position on this debate, it has led excavators in the Middle East to sheer away from investigating historical problems, since they cannot be formulated – in the present scientific view – as relevant research questions except when set against a much wider backdrop. Woolley’s declaration that “a nameless ruin was none other than Ur, so-called Ur of the Chaldees, ‘the home of Abraham’ ” (1930: 14) would not give him either a viable research proposal or funding were his excavations to begin today! It will then hardly come as a surprise that historians of the Ancient Near East find these recent projects less suitable to their purpose, when the archaeologists themselves are questioning whether material culture has anything to do with history.

Still, there is much in current fieldwork that the Ancient Near Eastern historian can apply directly. Projects make increasing use of remote-sensing and aerial techniques to compensate for limited horizontal exposures. They can recover entire and extensive site plans when conditions are favorable: brilliant examples spanning three millennia are *Titriş Höyük* in southeastern Turkey (Matney and Algaze 1995; Algaze et al. 1996),

the Old Babylonian city Mashkan-Shapir (Stone and Zimansky 1992), and the Late Iron Age Median site at Kerkenes Dağ, in north central Turkey (Summers 2000). Judicious selection of which features from the geophysical plan to excavate can also produce results worthy of archaeology's heroic age, but using meticulous technical standards. Thus ten seasons at Kuşaklı, the Hittite city of Sarissa, have uncovered several monumental temples and administrative buildings, residential quarters, workshops, the fortification wall and its gates, and an extramural sanctuary – thanks to geoelectrical and geomagnetic surveys that outlined where these buildings lay underneath the ground surface (Müller-Karpe 2002a, 2002b). This ongoing project on the northeastern frontier of the Hittite state has definitively dispelled the established view that only the Hittite capital Hattusha could pretend to urban status. Kuşaklı's impact on historical issues concerning the Hittites is as considerable as on archaeological ones.

A second characteristic of recent fieldwork is that it produces clear data on environment, subsistence, and technology, three topics of immediate relevance to ancient economies. Systematic collection and analysis of cereal and faunal remains from well-defined archaeological contexts can provide direct evidence for situations inferred from texts, while relating them to a broader geographical scale. For example, investigations at Early Bronze Tell al-Raqa'i and Tell 'Atij in northeastern Syria concluded – by evaluating architectural and botanical findings in tandem – that these small early-to-mid-third millennium BCE sites served as regional centers for storing cereals (Schwartz and Klucas 1998; Fortin 1998). The social and political administration behind such centers would thus parallel the structure in contemporary Sumer, although no written sources have (as yet) been found to suggest this. Comparable studies on second millennium sites in the region have provided urban centers like Mari with way-stations for agricultural produce (Del Olmo Lete and Montero Fenollós 1998), and documented the shift from Middle Bronze Mari to Late Bronze Terqa for control of the central Euphrates valley's mixed urban, farming, and nomadic economies (Rouault 1998). Since archives tend to be locality-specific and their distribution sporadic, the archaeological record can supply a fuller and more comprehensive picture from which to generalize than the textual one alone.

Questions involving ancient industries can also benefit from the many studies that archaeologists routinely conduct on ceramics, metallurgy, and other materials. Here too, such information fills gaps in the written record, and can redress its biases. At the simplest level, the contents of ordinary households illustrate facets of economic life that lay outside the spheres of official record-keeping, but were nonetheless fully connected to the existing system. The manufacture of pottery on a wheel, which occurred in southern Mesopotamia from the Protoliterate period onward, was a specialized industry in the hands of trained craftsmen. Obvious signs of mass-production are the homogeneity and narrow range of vessel types that characterized Sumerian and Babylonian ceramics over centuries and even millennia (Potts 1997: 150–62). The actual mechanism through which tableware and storage jars were acquired by individuals may be variously imagined, but it certainly involved a supplier – the potter's workshop – and a purchaser. Thus, for the reconstruction of Mesopotamian economic systems after 3400 BCE, any proposal that assumes ordinary

families were self-sufficient, even to making their own pottery (for example, Renger 1984: 88), runs in direct contradiction to archaeological realities, and can be considered flawed in its basic premise. In historical contexts where there is no written documentation preserved about economic affairs, the archaeological record provides the only evidence. During the Late Bronze Hittite Empire, for example, ceramics and other products show that highly standardized industries exerted a centralizing control in order to ensure economic stability over the entire territory (Ertem, Summers, and Demirci 1998; Gates 2001).

The historian may find the format in which this class of archaeological data is presented more difficult to approach and adapt than excavation summaries. Nonetheless, it remains essential corroborative evidence for any text-based discussion of economic topics, just as the texts themselves supply details which the archaeologist should consult (Potts 1997: vii).

### **Prehistory and Parahistory**

Prehistory, by definition, belongs to the discipline of archaeology, since it involves reconstructing ancient cultures on the strength of their material remains, without the help of written commentary. But the division between the prehistoric and historic periods in the Near East is – for the archaeologist – a largely artificial boundary. Roots for its early historical developments extend back into prehistoric times. The Late Ubaid phase (4500–3500 BCE) presents many of the characteristics that qualified Protoliterate Sumer for statehood: monumental buildings laid out on a fixed architectural standard, long-distance trade, implantation of South Mesopotamian types (and populations?) in foreign lands, specialized industries, wide cultural distribution patterns, and simple record-keeping devices (Matthews 2003: 102–8). Should the two not be linked into a continuum with several stages, rather than split into separate entities by archaeologists and historians both?

More to the point, however, is the fact that most archaeological contexts, whatever their period, represent ahistoric or parahistoric (almost historic) entities peripheral to, or entirely dissociated from, any relevant framework of events and persons. Regardless of whether a historic or prehistoric setting is concerned, time in the archaeological sense is calculated in units of multiple generations (such as three generations for the average life-span of a house), or in larger blocks of centuries or millennia for cultural phases (Smith 1992). What emerges from the archaeological past, therefore, is a picture of societies within their environment – Braudel’s mentalities and patterns – occasionally punctuated by historical detail that gives an additional dimension to the picture.

The analytical techniques used by archaeology are applied in the same way to sites and regions before and after writing appears in the Near East. The only pertinent distinction between the two is whether they speak solely through the words of archaeologists, or whether some members of those ancient societies also manage to express themselves verbally. The example most often cited to illustrate the importance of written testimonials in interpreting an archaeological context is the case of the

Assyrian businessmen who resided in central Anatolia from the nineteenth to seventeenth centuries BCE, and wrote their correspondence and contracts on clay tablets (Veenhof 1995; Matthews 2003: 120). Their presence is attested at Kültepe, where excavations have exposed the largest area of a neighborhood in which they lived, and in smaller communities at Boğazköy and Alişar. They assimilated completely into local culture: house architecture, tableware, even the deities represented on their seals were Anatolian. The only material clues to their presence at these sites are their tablets, their use of cylinder seals instead of stamp seals, and their burials inside houses. Contemporary Achemhöyük and Karahöyük-Konya, although in close communication with Kültepe, produced no tablets and thus no trace of whether foreigners were settled there too. However, the letters of these Assyrian businessmen tell a different (and sadly human) story. Far from acknowledging that they had “gone native” by adopting an Anatolian lifestyle, making a common practice of taking local women as wives, raising their children, and worshiping their gods, they referred to their hosts in strictly pejorative terms and avoided introducing any borrowed words into their written language (Veenhof 1977: 110, 1982: 150–4).<sup>3</sup> If we had only their archives from Assur (which have in fact not been recovered), and did not know the realities of their entrenchment in Anatolian society, our impressions of their activities and interactions would again be incorrect. A balanced perspective drawn from a social setting revealed through archaeology, and from individual commentaries documented in writing, achieves a closer accuracy.

### Renewing the Alliance?

I have argued here that Near Eastern archaeologists and historians parted ways half a century ago to follow independent routes, after a healthy partnership that had lasted more than one hundred years. I have also presented cases where the two disciplines continue to run a parallel course, and occasionally intersect with resounding success, such as in resolving Old Babylonian absolute chronology. European scholars especially, thanks to academic training, temperament, and the structure of their institutional settings, still coordinate the two disciplines (Postgate 1994 most brilliantly). But there too, one can envisage eventual separation. An immediate sign is that Near Eastern specialists who divide their scholarly efforts equally between archaeological fieldwork and ancient texts have become increasingly rare. The Ancient Near East is also attracting fewer students in general (Matthews 2003: 189–98).<sup>4</sup>

Paradoxically, one reason for this distancing is that the two approaches have redefined their parameters toward similar expectations and aims, while still claiming territorial independence. Text-based scholars are now likely to define their briefs in broader terms than ancient history. Institutional titles like Ancient Near Eastern Languages and Literatures have been replaced with Ancient Near Eastern Cultures and Civilizations, or Mesopotamian Studies, or Eastern Mediterranean Studies. These are not mere cosmetic changes. As for “cultures” and “civilizations,” Near Eastern archaeologists on both sides of the Atlantic had long appropriated them to reflect their concerns more accurately than, for instance, “Mesopotamian Art and

Archaeology.” Yet the two perspectives show reluctance to admit that the limitations of one documentation type may well be compensated by the other. One could conclude that the different classes of data they use have directed the two perspectives into increasingly independent rather than connected paths.

Nonetheless, historian and archaeologist should renew their earlier association, this time in the spirit of interdisciplinary research. Archaeological projects involving historical periods should include a historian among their specialists; and historians should consult archaeologists on issues that may be attested in forms other than the written word. A fundamental commitment to a united discipline of Ancient Near Eastern Studies will ensure its future vitality and progress.

## NOTES

- 1 This comment, perhaps made tongue-in-cheek, was written by H. R. Hall, co-author with C. L. Woolley of the excavation report on Tell Al-‘Ubaid (Hall and Woolley 1927: 4). De Genouillac misattributes it to Woolley.
- 2 Replacing excavation with survey and limited soundings was a major tenet of the 1992 European Charter for the Protection and Management of the Archaeological Heritage (Articles 4–5), and reflected a crusade that had gained momentum over the two previous decades. *Antiquity* 67 (1993): 400–45 devoted a special section to this charter, whose ideology has guided and influenced research in the Middle East too.
- 3 There is evidence for mixed marriages at all social levels, including Assyrian women taking Anatolian husbands, but the recorded instances are few (Veenhof 1982: 152), perhaps because few were formalized. Children raised in these families would surely have been bilingual and bicultural.
- 4 Matthews, who vigorously endorses combining the efforts of Mesopotamian historians and archaeologists, describes the prospects for training a future generation of Ancient Near East specialists in the UK (and France) as “catastrophic” (2003: 196). The situation is not restricted to European and North American schools. It also applies to Turkey, where archaeology students are attracted in significantly larger numbers to the Classical periods, no doubt because the Greek and Roman worlds are a more familiar aspect of their cultural heritage.

## FURTHER READING

Basic introductions in English to the archaeology of the Ancient Near East are Lloyd 1984 and Roaf 1990. For the early historical periods, Postgate 1994 provides a lively survey in which archaeology and ancient texts are superbly interwoven. Potts 1997 is recommended for textual and archaeological documentation on practical aspects of Mesopotamian culture, from agricultural products to kinship structure and burial customs, industry, the survival of temple architecture into the Sassanian era, and much else.

Lloyd 1980 remains the standard history for archaeological research in Iraq through the 1960s. Personal accounts by pioneers in the field (E. Porada, S. Lloyd, T. Jacobsen and

H. G. Güterbock) can be found in Sasson 1995, and make colorful reading. For recent developments, and an impassioned demonstration of Mesopotamian archaeology's current techniques and capabilities, see Matthews 2003. The evolution of archaeological methods and theory is best presented by Trigger 1989. For the promising application of the *Annales* approach to archaeology, see Knapp 1992. Neither Trigger nor Knapp refers specifically to historic Mesopotamia and the greater Near East, however.