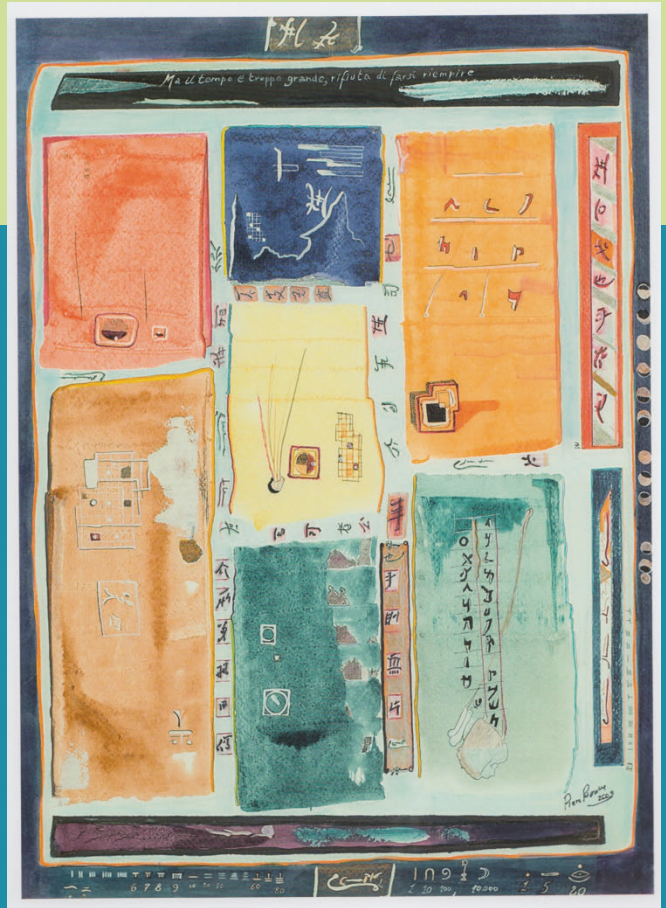


Assyriology, Anthropology and Theory

Analytical Perspectives and Interpretive Prospects

Edited by
Emanuel Pfoh and
Lorenzo Verderame



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Introduction

Emanuel Pfoh and Lorenzo Verderame

The collection of papers presented in this volume originated in a workshop organized for the 65^e *Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale* held in Paris in July 2019¹. The driving idea of the workshop was to foster anthropological readings, insights and interpretations of cuneiform sources, Assyriological questions and, in general, theoretical matters related to ancient Near Eastern history and historiography. Although there are concrete antecedents of a use of anthropological models in Assyriology, we think that this use is currently mild and modest in its full potentiality and that further anthropological perspectives ought to be pursued in ancient Near Eastern studies, not less in dialogue with social and cultural anthropologists and other social scientists.

At times, the issue of common-sensical interpretation of textual (epigraphic) or archaeological data in Assyriology is exposed by the lack of explicit theoretical frameworks or insights. Different thinkers, from Karl Popper in epistemology of the sciences to C. Wright Mills and Pierre Bourdieu in sociology and Ian Hodder in archaeology, have noted that the apparent lack of a theoretical outlook only veils approaches to reality (past or present) built upon common sense premises (e.g., “this building must be a palace because it looks like one”; “the text records an event, so the event must have really happened”)². The main problem of common-sensical or (seemingly) theory-free approaches to ancient textual and archaeological data is the neglect of cultural conceptions and their symbolic and material manifestations. Ancient Near Eastern cultures were distant not only in time from the West, but also conceptually from the modern Western mind³. Even when we may find coincidences and similarities, the logical historico-methodological procedure is to assume the cultural difference. This means that, besides the initial language translation of ancient textual data, a culture translation must be pursued. This assertion may be directly related to Benno Landsberger’s (1890–1968) *Eigenbegrifflichkeit* notion, usually translated as “conceptual autonomy”, for studying the ancient Mesopotamian world: we can only understand the Mesopotamian worldview through their language—an assertion with which modern anthropologists would wholeheartedly agree—and in relation to that, Mesopotamian civilization should be studied in itself, without any comparison to other cultures—

¹ In addition to the contributors of this volume, Ann Guinan and Marinella Ceravolo also delivered papers during that workshop (Guinan, *Omenology and Anthropology*; Ceravolo, *The Chicken and the Egg Debate: Facing Myth and Ritual Theory in Assyriology*).

² Popper 1972: Ch. 1–2; Wright Mills 2000 [1959]: 123–125; Shanks / Tilley 1992; Hodder / Hutson 2003: 2–6.

³ I.e., Liverani 1976c.

an assertion with which at least half of modern anthropologists would not agree in principle⁴. Naturally, each culture set in time and space is unique in its social manifestations and such a particular historical inscription ought to be recognized in those terms. Yet, from a more sociological approach, social and cultural features may be compared to other social and cultural features⁵, even at different periods of time and at different locations in the world: the issue is not to draw evolutionary scales—like those proper of nineteenth-century evolutionary Anthropology—but rather isolate social and cultural expressions whose working may help explain other historical examples by critical analogy. This may constitute a profitable and proper use of anthropological approaches—together with other theory-driven interpretations—in Assyriology and in general the study of the ancient world.

Of course, these questions and discussions should also apply to material culture. Any indigenous mental, conceptual or epistemological categories that we find in the textual sources cannot be taken to represent analytical categories proper of the researcher. In anthropological terms, the emic perspective cannot become an etic perspective automatically, i.e., Sumerian or Assyrian notions of, for instance, otherness or ethnic identity are first indigenous data that needs to be decoded in its arrangement and working in ancient Near Eastern society, and then interpretive models that the Assyriologist can adopt and use. Once this cultural context of otherness is assumed as a proper analytical method of Near Eastern historical sources, a competent interpretation of social aspects may be achieved. All these questions expose the need for clear theoretical departures in the research design for studying ancient societies and their textual and material remnants, including, of course, ancient Near Eastern.

As mentioned above, these issues have antecedents in discussions about the necessity of theoretical approaches in Assyriology and ancient Near Eastern studies. Already in his presidential address to the American Oriental Society meeting of 1966, Ignace J. Gelb made an explicit effort to distinguish a kind of social history of ancient Mesopotamia that should be pursued. It should be noted that the kind of “social history” that we nowadays would directly relate to the French historiographical school of the *Annales* in its first and second generations (Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, Fernand Braudel) had yet had no relevant impact in Assyriology during the 1960s⁶. It would be especially Max Weber, mainly in German Assyriology, and Karl Marx, mainly in Soviet Assyriology, the principal theoretical referents in the socio-historical elaborations of a then essentially “non-

⁴ See Landsberger 1926; for the context of these assertions cf. Van de Mieroop 2016: 216–24. On the question of comparative epistemologies and methodologies in Social and Cultural Anthropology, see now Candea 2019.

⁵ Cf. Detienne 2000.

⁶ And it would have a limited impact only recently; cf. Van de Mieroop 1999; Fleming 2014.

theoretical” Assyriological international discourse.⁷

Despite this situation and besides stating the need for a methodological distinction between the collection of data and then primary and secondary interpretation of this data, Gelb in his address proposed a more complex approach to Mesopotamian economy and society through different analytical categories (in this case, social stratification and land tenure). This conscious intervention for making the historiographical approach to the ancient Near East more complex had been preceded by some clear attempts, or at least intentions to integrate more anthropological interpretations in the readings of the cuneiform sources by A. Leo Oppenheim and Samuel N. Kramer⁸. These early efforts to rearrange Assyriology towards more theoretical approaches did not fully develop since the 1970s. It is telling that Assyriology in Germany and France continued being an overwhelmingly empirical discipline, focusing on philology and archaeology. During the last quarter of the twentieth century, only in the United States (the workplace of European expatriates like Gelb, Oppenheim, Kramer and Civil) and in Italy (especially with Mario Liverani and the so-called Rome School) Assyriology would address questions originating in the previous and contemporary theoretical insights and developments of the wider humanities and the social sciences.

The papers in this volume respond to this general situation proposing ways of integrating different approaches from anthropology and similar theoretical insights with Assyriological interpretation.

As an introduction or necessary premise to the following chapters of the volume, Emanuel Pfoh’s contribution *Anthropology in Assyriology: An Historiographical Overview from the Periphery* offers an outline of the relationship between the two disciplines or, more precisely, regarding the incorporation of anthropological theories and trends into Assyriological studies⁹. The first part provides a historical survey of this relationship, starting from the earliest encounters with the “Oriental” world to the rediscovery of Near Eastern civilizations up until the beginning of the current century. Pfoh emphasises the efforts and positive results of Assyriologists who have been open to considering the epistemological and theoretical enquiries posed by an anthropological viewpoint. In the second part of the chapter, the author spurs the fruitful collaboration between the disciplines, offering an epistemological reflection on the production of knowledge in Assyriology.

The subsequent chapters encompass classical anthropological topics and perspectives as well as contemporary methodologies from other specialised research

⁷ Perhaps the main exceptions are illustrated by the explicit Marxist approach in Liverani 1976a and 1976b; and by the Weberian approach in Schloen 2001.

⁸ Cf. Oppenheim 1960; Kramer 1962. Further, on Oppenheim see Winitzer 2025; and also the chapter by E. Pfoh in this volume.

⁹ For a discussion on the lost chances of Assyriology to contribute to the wider discussions in the field of social sciences, see, for instance, Van de Mieroop 2013.

domains. The subjects discussed cover a broad spectrum, from classical subjects such as kinship (Verderame) and matriarchy (Garcia-Ventura), to animality and masculinity (N'Shea), with an emphasis on rituals (Urbano) and disease (Zisa). The textual corpora and periods addressed span from Early Mesopotamia to the Neo-Assyrian period, and include different sources, such as literature, rituals, royal inscriptions, and documentary sources.

In his paper (*The Sumerian Kinship System: Dialoguing with Anthropology*) Lorenzo Verderame explores the possibility for a dialogue between Anthropology and Assyriology focussing on the crucial issue of kinship and the Sumerian tradition. He provides an in-depth look at the Sumerian kinship terminology, emphasising its connection to the Hawaiian system. He addresses the implications of this system, particularly the lack of terminology extending beyond the first grade, the significance of generational groups, and the function of the “brothers”. He also examines the use of kinship terms to denote hierarchical relationships that extend beyond familial connections (pseudo/fictive kinship). He discusses the distinction between social and biological parenthood and the difference between father/mother and genitor/genitrix. Ultimately, he highlights the parallels in kinship terminology throughout other early state societies, such as Egypt and China.

A classical topic in the social sciences is that of matriarchy, which is the focus of Agnès Garcia-Ventura's paper (*The Underlying Myth of Matriarchy: Some Reflections on the Entanglements between Anthropology, Ancient Near Eastern Studies, and Women's and Gender Studies*). In the title, she outlines the main themes of her research: the examination of matriarchy within Near Eastern studies and its analysis from the perspectives of Anthropology and Gender Studies. At first, she introduces the traditional perspective on matriarchy as opposed to or a different societal model of patriarchy, i.e., based on difference or inequality, and overviews Françoise Heritier's research on the subject. She delineates the historical evolution of the idea of matriarchy since Bachofen and its reception and use in Near Eastern studies. In her conclusions, she advocates for transcending the impasse established by the myth of matriarchy, advancing beyond fantasy and utopia towards innovative models and research perspectives.

N'Shea (*I am a Lion, I am a King: Metaphor, Mimesis, and Masculinity in the State Arts of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (911–613 BC)*) addresses the interplay between animality and sovereignty within the state art of the Neo-Assyrian empire. Through the examination of the rulers' epithets, literature concerning the king's hunts, palatial reliefs, and royal glyptic, he questions the conflicting logic that arises from the multi-species relatedness as it crosscuts with the search for a sovereign identity in imperial discourse. He also examines masculinity and the martial homosocial order, while also considering the emic ontology of animality.

The starting point of Zisa's paper (*Towards an Anthropology and Ethnopsychiatry of Mesopotamian Medicine: A Case Study on Therapies for the Loss of Sexual Desire*) is a critical reading of the works of Ethnopsychiatry and Medical

Anthropology. He adopts a theoretical approach to discuss therapeutic efficacy in a collection of incantations, rituals, and medical prescriptions for the lost sexual desire (ŠA₃.ZL.GA). At first, he analyses the patient's sense of suffering while also considering the woman's agency in the rituals. He examines the connections between the intricate semantic network of illness and the similarly intricate semantic network of cure. In this context, the author investigates the several elements involved in the construction and conceptualization of the cure: the use of persuasive analogy, the symbolic aspect of pharmaceuticals, and the significance of incantations' *mumbo jumbos*. He discusses the role of "dehistoricization" (de Martino) of *historiolae*, which alleviates the patient by connecting current event (the illness) to a mythical past.

In *The Conformation Rituals of Political Alliances in the Old Babylonian Sources from Mari: A New Interpretation from the Anthropology of the Body*, Luciana Urbano approaches another main topic of the theoretical analysis of the past century, the body. The author shows the potential of the anthropology of body applied to ancient sources through a discussion of ritual and practices of alliances in the evidence from Old Babylonian Mari. After a presentation of the sources and of the various theoretical approaches to the body of the past century, the author advances an analysis of some recurring gestures and motifs structured on the opposition of the two pairs internal/external and liquid/solid. She discusses the symbolism of blood (Internal-Liquid), the act of washing hands (External-Liquid), the embodiment through drinking and eating (Internal-Solid), and the role of dressing and the gestures of hands (External-Solid). In the conclusion, she stresses the role of embodied ritualization to create social bonds.

Anthropology started as a rather peripheral orientation within the social sciences (especially the behavioural sciences) focusing on the present conditions of human life, to later, during the twentieth century, receive a recognition of the relevance of its perspectives and interpretation¹⁰. A similar movement in other historical fields should also be pursued further. Thus, it is hoped that with this collection of studies more interest into theoretical, and in particular anthropological interpretation of Assyriological questions and problems will be fostered within Assyriology and ancient Near Eastern studies.

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¹⁰ See Handler 2006.

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