

ANCIENT KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS: A SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY OF CUNEIFORM SCHOLARSHIP IN FIRST-MILLENNIUM ASSYRIA AND BABYLONIA

by Eleanor Robson

2019. London: University College London Press.

E-book. 340 pp. 37 colour illus.

ISBN: 978-1-78735-594-1

REVIEWED BY RHONDA MCGOVERN

Trinity Centre for Environmental Humanities, Trinity College Dublin

Eleanor Robson's 2019 book examines the social geography of cuneiform scholarship in Assyria and Babylonia in the first millennium BC. Social geography (the study of spatial patterns of social factors) requires not only spatial examination, but because the field is so broad, it demands social geographers assess the theories and methodological approaches to adapt and refine their subject of inquiry (Del Casino 2009). Using both micro-geographies, which focus on single communities over a specific and restricted period of time, and macro-geographies, which focus on movement of ideas, practices, and objects between communities and across greater distances, Robson tracks the evolution of cuneiform. Alongside this, she tracks the relationship of gods, kings, and scribal professionals to cuneiform culture, and situates the story of this discipline firmly in the past, the present, and the future.

Introducing the reader to problematic concepts that do not consider the nuances of ancient life in the region known as Mesopotamia, Robson immediately explains her avoidance of using the term 'Mesopotamia' as it is often associated with a vast region over a long period of time. Instead, she uses the term 'cuneiform culture', introduced by Radner and Robson (2011) to incorporate the social groups, individuals and professionals surrounding the scholarship of cuneiform.

Robson highlights that although there are many micro-histories for short timeframes and single communities, the social geography of the region for this time frame has remained relatively untouched. In explaining why, the

reader is introduced to two important events in chapter two that are threaded through the entire book. Firstly, the discovery of ‘Ashurbanipal’s Library’ in the 1840s, and secondly, Oppenheim’s (1975) conception of cuneiform scholarship as a ‘stream of tradition’. It is worth spending some time understanding these as she comes back to them often and this is the basis for the thesis of the book: Robson argues that both events have inadvertently impeded a more dynamic examination of the subject. The discovery of over 31,000 tablets at Ashurbanipal’s palace in Nineveh in the 1840s preceded the construction of a library at the British Museum to house the tablets. One such tablet (Library of Ashurbanipal Series, number K39) referenced by Robson reads:

Palace of Ashurbanipal, king of the land of Aššur on whom Nabu and Tašmetu bestowed broad wisdom, who has sharp eyes: the highest level of the scribal art, such a skill as none amongst the kings my predecessors had learnt, the wisdom of Nabu, as many cuneiform signs as exist, I have written on tablets, checked and overseen (them), and for my viewing and reading out I deposited (those tablets) in my palace (p. 20).

This particular find, along with academic preconceptions about libraries, the idea of establishing an Assyrian library in London, and the sheer volume of artefacts led to the overarching idea that this excavation revealed an ancient library. It became an accepted concept and remained unchallenged for many years.

Oppenheim’s ‘stream of tradition’ bolstered this static view of cuneiform tablets. Coined in the twentieth century, this term was applied to the practice of cuneiform writing that saw scribes copy and recopy a body of literature. Oppenheim (1960: 411) refers to this as “an important cultural trait of Mesopotamian civilization”. It became ‘tradition’ when specific wording and content was standardized. This widely accepted term describes the apparent homogeneity of cuneiform scholarship through time and space. While Oppenheim placed this construct in the twentieth century as a method of looking backwards, Robson points out that other authors interpret it as a native ancient concept, solidifying the idea in the field of Assyriology (p. 28). Robson argues, particularly in chapters two and seven, the widespread acceptance of ‘Ashurbanipal’s Library’ and the ‘stream of tradition’ inhibit critical analysis of cuneiform culture as they cause us to think of cuneiform scholarship in a stationary, unmoving, immutable way. These concepts and associated issues constitute the past for the field of Assyriological studies.

The present is absorbed with current examinations of individual and groups of cuneiform tablets from individual professional scribes, specific temples or sites, and the associations with royalty and/or deities. Robson contextualizes the present with Caroline Waerzeggers' (2003/4) 'end of archives' concept, which marks the end of royal patronage of scribal scholarship, while borrowing the 'survival bottlenecks' term from natural science to portray the loss of tablets over time. She provides an abundance of evidence throughout chapters three to six, tracking these themes using content from cuneiform tablets, excavations, and information about known scribal families.

Chapter three makes for a compelling story as Robson treats cuneiform tablets as clues to a bigger puzzle to look at the 'lord of the stylus' Nabu, as seen in the colophons. For the Assyrians, Nabu is the god of scholarly knowledge with an identity closely linked to cuneiform scholarship, while the Babylonians see Nabu as son of god Marduk, both of whom are important for the *akitu* (New Year) festival. The gods are linked to temples, as is cuneiform scholarship, although not exclusively. Temples are multi-functional: they are used for performing rites, storage, presentations to the gods, but also hold a role in generating taxes. In this way, the cultural and the political are inextricably linked. Changes in society and political (in)stability therefore impact on cuneiform culture.

In chapter four, Robson examines in detail the relationship between political instability and cuneiform culture, through the reign of Esarhaddon and his son Ashurbanipal in the seventh century BC, highlighting the concept of 'distributed libraries'. This concept was introduced by Robson and Stevens (2019) and it refers to the borrowing and then copying of tablets between scribal scholarship professionals. First, she references the work of Hobsbawm (1983) and Latour (1987) on creating traditions through 'blackboxing', in other words simplifying internal and obscure workings of a given system and eliminating the complex processes of tradition production to provide a sense of longevity. Then, she uses this concept to discuss how we see the detrimental outcome of Ashurbanipal's work in collecting cuneiform tablets. The eradication of provenance, as original tablets were copied and then destroyed, means we cannot fully comprehend the works included in this site. Robson suggests that this collection would have halved the available written knowledge to other contemporary scholars, as Ashurbanipal attempted to monopolize these works by removing them from circulation. This contradicts the popular opinion of Ashurbanipal as the 'last of the great

kings', a revelation which means we must reframe the concept of 'Ashurbanipal's Library' and begin to think of such large sites as distributed libraries.

Chapters five and six explore anti-Persian revolts and political instability during the reign of Darius I and Xerxes I (522–465 BC), which led to a systematic removal of scribal families from their official roles and positions of power, and cuneiform as the official language. These chapters are important as the changes highlighted here mark the aforementioned 'end of archives' (Waerzeggers 2003/4), taken as 484 BC under the reign of Xerxes I, forever changing the cuneiform landscape. The sacking and/or abandonment of cities led to destruction or burial of tablets, again halving the number of tablets available to cuneiform communities, resulting in 'survival bottlenecks'. These geographically-distinct changes to cuneiform scholarship are also demonstrated in the 'blackboxing' evident in the reconstructed seven-tablet god list in Uruk. This removed any links to the Babylonian gods Maruk and Nabu, distancing themselves from broader cuneiform scholarship (Beaulieu 1992). Taken together, these examples show the development and eventual decline of cuneiform scholarship was not static, but varied according to geography, links with specific regions and therefore specific gods, and relationships to royalty and inadvertently to the tax system. For all these reasons a study of its social geography provides a perfect lens to examine this region in this time period.

Through this social geography, Robson has provided us with a re-examination of methods used in the past, making a major contribution to how we view the 'stream of tradition' and 'Ashurbanipal's Library', enabling a different perspective of the present work in the field. In chapter seven she sets out a stall for how to develop work in the future, for example with orthography. Although a tablet may be found in one region, and we now know its provenance may have been removed, orthography allows a researcher to place geographical or social context to tablets. This process is subject to statistical analysis allowing future work examining cuneiform scholarship to tell us much more about these ancient scholars and the movement of the tablets they produced through time and space.

Traditional ideas about cuneiform scholarship would have us believe it to be a fairly static endeavour. Eleanor Robson tracks the geographies of cuneiform tablets and scribal professionals, highlighting cuneiform culture as a vibrant and ever evolving practice. She has built upon, and challenged, the work of many scholars who have gone before her, providing historical context: e.g. Latour to discuss knowledge networks, Hobsbawm's work on creating traditions,

Oppenheim's 'stream of tradition', Waerzeggers' 'end of archives'. Introducing new theories to the field, Robson has shown that Assyriology, much like cuneiform scholarship, is ever evolving and we must keep a critical perspective when conducting research in this field. The book is highly nuanced. It is a thoughtful, well written, modern approach to the study of cuneiform culture. An essential read for those of us studying any aspect of cuneiform writing.

References

- Beaulieu, P.A. 1992. Antiquarian theology in Seleucid Uruk. *Acta Sumerologica*, 14: 47–75.
- Del Casino, V.J. 2009. *Social Geography. A Critical Introduction*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hobsbawm, E.J. 1983. Introduction: Inventing traditions. In Hobsbawm, E.J. and Ranger, T.O. (eds). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1–14.
- Latour, B. 1987. *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Oppenheim, A.L. 1960. Assyriology - why and how? *Current Anthropology* 1: 409–423.
- Oppenheim, A.L. 1975. The position of the intellectual in Mesopotamian society. *Daedalus* 104(2): 37–46.
- Radner, K. and Robson, E. (eds). 2011. *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Robson, E. and Stevens, K.R. 2019. Scholarly tablet collections in first-millennium Assyria and Babylonia. In Barjamovic, G. and Ryholt, K. (eds). *The Earliest Libraries: Library Tradition in the Ancient Near East*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 317–64.
- Waerzeggers, C. 2003/4. The Babylonian revolts against Xerxes and the "End of Archives". *Archiv für Orientforschung* 50: 150–73.