

THE EMPIRE OF THE AMORITES REVISITED¹

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“En dehors de notre existence dans l'histoire, nous n'avons aucun fil d'Ariane conduisant à la réalité.”

Karl Jaspers

1- THE TRUST

Since the days when they gathered around their hearths, it was to their historians that the people turned to when they wanted to be told “whence they came from, and hence who they were”. Entrusted with the care of the collective memories, the historians had to assume the heavy responsibility of being the teachers, and the conscience of their people.

Today, this trust has become even heavier to shoulder because the historians have lost their social status and because human history is now seen to be the most complex of all potential objects of study and the least structurable by the deductive-nomological approach of modern science. But the historians still must perform the reminiscing function without which there would be no human societies.

It is in this context that we can best understand one of the basic problems confronting the historians of “Syria and the Near-East”, indigenous, colonizers and foreigners alike:

- For the indigenous historians, the history of the area, or rather, its most recent third, is the ground upon which to uphold and defend the traditions, traditions which are often confused with religions.

- For the colonizing historians who, armed with a historical claim, settled in the area, history has been at once a weapon and one of the theaters of war.

- For the Western scholars who defined the history of this area as “le carrefour des sciences bibliques et orientales” (Lipinski, 1989), it is there that they look for the roots of Western civilization, and for “nos ancêtres les Mésopotamiens” (Bottero, 1987).

- And for all historians and social scientists, this history, with its millennia upon millennia of rich archaeological and epigraphical documents, is the treasure-trove of human history and the biggest open laboratory for “testing” all kind of theories about the evolution of human societies (Yoffee, 1979).

But in spite of all the stupefying details that archaeology has revealed in the last few decades, it is never the aim of the histories of “Syria and the Near-East” to relate to the actual inhabitants of the area the history of their ancestors or to tell them where they come from, and hence who they are.

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The neglect of this basic responsibility the historians have towards the present-day inhabitants of “Syria and the Near-East” has developed for a variety of reasons. These reasons will not interest us here. Rather, from a practical point of view, we will only deal with an element that aids and abets in the perpetuation of this state of affairs. I am referring here to the framework used for integrating, organizing and interpreting the data so as to transform it into history. The problem with this framework is nowhere as obvious as at its highest level aggregate, the scheme used for the periodization of the history of “Syria and the Near-East” and consisting in the “Ancient Period”, the “Classical Period”, the “Islamic Period” and the “Modern Period”. The reason for which this scheme helps in perpetuating the neglect is that its periods are seen as, and function as, self-contained, self-sufficient and non -communicating compartments. This is why it is, for instance, very hard for the users of this scheme to relate the “Ancient Period” to the “Islamic” one, while only the “Islamic Period” is seen as having relevance to the “Modern Period”.

The mass of new data presently at our disposal makes possible, even necessary, a revision of the existing historical synthesis. We should take the opportunity of this revision to reintegrate history, all of history, into the lives of the present-day peoples of the area, and this by making of the histories of this area histories for its actual inhabitants.

Since it is an overarching historical synthesis that we have to revise, we have to come up with complete alternatives, new frameworks entire and coherent enough so that we can falsify them, and this till a new paradigm emerges. In the following I will present some elements of a sketch of one such proposition, focused upon a new periodization scheme for the history of the area. This is “un'operazione rischiosa al limite della presunzione”, and I am grateful to the Universities of Aleppo and “La Sapienza”, Roma, for having provided the incentive to submit such propositions.

2- THE HISTORY OF WHO?

Let us start with the title of the symposium, “Syria and the Ancient Near-East, 3.000 to 300 BC.” We can, with a minor syntactic modification, recast it as a standardized “capsule”:

History of [Syria and the Near-East (1)] from [3,000 to 300 BC (2)]; the [Ancient period (3)]

This capsule, one of the series making up the current periodization of the, history of the area, does not only specify the object of the study (1) and its time-frame (2), but it also provides a label for the general characterization of the results of the study (3). It is thus the highest level aggregate and the most synthetic expression of the existing historical framework.

2.1 - We begin by noting that the first definition of the field of research is that it is history: “*History of...*”

There is no need to go into a discussion of the theories and methods of modern historiographic practices. It is well-known that the face and complexion of history as a discipline is ever-changing. It will therefore be enough to accept “the state of the art” as

being just that, and to take the definition of history at its widest, that is, as the “History of the peoples and their societies”, as rendered by the rich palette of the modern historians.

Therefore a major aim of the interpretative and integrative framework should be to facilitate a reading of the history of the peoples of the area satisfying two sets of conditions: of foremost importance, it should meet our criteria for historical objectivity, but it should also be attuned to the needs of the peoples of the area to know who their predecessors were.

Let us briefly review how the “peoples” actually appearing in the existing histories of the area till 300 BC fare on both these counts of meeting the conditions of objectively ascertained historical presence and of having the potential for an “honorable ancestor's” status.

2.2 - The Semites. This term has been extensively used in the last two centuries to refer to all the indigenous peoples of this particular area of our planet. It would therefore fulfill the first condition.

However, from its inception, it was loaded with the prejudices the “Europeans” - as all human beings- “naturally” harbored towards their neighbors. There is no need to beat a dead horse. We have come a long way since one of the least prejudiced scholar of his time, A.T. Clay, wrote: “the racial characteristics -intensity of faith, ferocity, exclusiveness, imagination- can best be explained by a desert origin” (Clay, 1919). Clay was reviewing the then-current theories about the original home of the Semites, and for him and his contemporaries, the “racial characteristics” of the Semites were self-evident truths, nearly sensory data that needed no proof and that could be used to infer further data about the “Semites” origins and history.

These prejudices are waning under the pressure of recent discoveries, such as that of Ibla, of the “Kish Civilization”, or of Mari's origin as a “product of a political will which had the authority as well as the material and human means to put into action such an accomplishment” (Margueron, 1991, p.85), but it will still be a long time before we will definitely be rid of the negative connotations of the term “Semite”.

And a battle to get the “Semites” accepted as the name of the “venerable ancestors” is hardly worth fighting for because “Semites” is not, and has never been an ethnonym. No land was ever named after the Semites, no people ever thus referred to themselves or ever charged this word with any positive emotional connotation. France was named after the Franks, and in turn the French are named after their country, France. The same holds true for the Rus, Russia and the Russians, the Chin, China and the Chinese, etc.... but the Semites, Semitia and the Semitians!

2.3 - The Hebrews-Israelites-Jews. Though never thought of as the only “people” of “Syria and the Near-East”, this “people” has long held the pride of place in the ancient history of the area, and is still attracting much attention. It would therefore easily fulfill the second criterion.

Recent research has however made it plain that there is a problem with the fulfillment of the first criterion. The literature about the reconstruction of the historical development of Judaism as a religious community is vast (Thompson, 1974; Smith, 1971/1987; Laperrousaz, 1982; van Seter, 1985) and its exhaustive review is impossible here. I will instead try a “representative sampling” to see if “Hebrew” is an objectively ascertained ethnonym during the period prior to 300 BC For instance, “Hebrew” appears 4 times in A.N.E.T's index:

- The first is an invocation to the “Hapiri gods” in the treaty between Mursilis and Duppi-Tessub of Amurru.

- The second is also an invocation to the “Hapiri gods”, this time from the treaty between Suppiluliumas and Kurtiwaza. In both this case and the previous one, a note comments: “much discussed in connection with the question as to whether the Hapiru (widely quoted as Habiru), who are ubiquitous in cuneiform texts of the times, are to be equated with the Hebrews”.

- The third case concerns two “Hebrew slave documents” from Nuzi, the first about “Mar-Idiglat, a Hebrew from the land of Assyria”, and the second about “Sin-Balti, a Hebrew woman” (note that Chiera and Speiser in their original publication translated noncommittally Habiru and not Hebrew).

- The fourth time the text, from Papyrus Harris testamentary enactment of Ramses III, has “apiru”, while the note states “the term 'apiru has been argued to mean “aliens”, particularly applicable to foreign slave labor, perhaps the same word as Habiru, and thus etymologically related to “Hebrew” -but not implying that these captives were “Israelites”, with a renvoi to p. 247, n.47, where we find some details about the “apiri” and a further renvoi to p.255, n.2, which states “the Apiru are probably etymologically related to the Habiru”.

A meager but illuminating harvest. For the period prior to 300 BC, the editor and contributors to “Ancient Near-Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament”, a land-mark and reference in the field, could not muster a single unequivocal epigraphical attestation of the Hebrew ethnonym.

The D.d.B. had already exclaimed: “C'est un problème non encore résolu si le nom des Hébreux se retrouve sur des monuments profanes plus anciens que ceux des Grecs et des Latins” (s.v. “Hébreu”). And nor the Sup. D.d.B., nor the EJ (which has no entry under Hebrew), nor the E.B. (which serves us mush), not even the I.E.J or E.-I. (in spite of a multitude of reported finds of “Hebrew” bullae and seals), could come up with even one attestation.

We would have reached the same result had we looked in A.N.E.T. for “Israel” (mat 'Omri, Bit 'Omri, the Mesha stone and the Merneptah stela), or “Israelite” (mat sir-'i-la-a-a). And no ingenious definition such as that of “Hebrew” as a “social ethnonym” (Rowton, 1976) or “Israel” as a “pur ethnonyme a connotation religieuse” (Sapin, 1982) can change this state of affairs. This conclusion is not affected by the attestations, towards the end of this period, of “Yahudi” as a nisbeh from “Yahuda”, i.e., used for someone coming from, or living in, the province of “Yahuda”. Nor does it mean that, for the period in question, we cannot study the social and political formations that around 300 BC compiled the “Old Testament” and eventually gave rise to rabbinic Judaism.

What it means is that ethnicity is a social, not heavenly product, and that outside of tradition, the “Hebrew” (or “Israelite” or “Jew”) does not fulfill the criterion of objectively ascertained historical presence as a definable ethnic group, at least in the period prior to 300 BC.

2.4 - The Phoenicians. The modern definition of the term, by general scholarly agreement, is that the Phoenicians are the people who inhabited, between 1,200 and 300 BC, the thin coastal plains of modern Syria, Lebanon and northern Palestine/ Israel. This is, quite obviously, not an ethnical definition providing the sundry conditions that have to be present for perceiving one-self, or for being perceived by others, as belonging to a specific ethnic group. This definition does not allow us either to separate those “Phoenicians” from their contemporaries of other ethnies, nor to identify their

supposed ancestors or heirs. The modern definition is just an “*artificiosa distinzione*” (Garbini, 1990), an ad hoc expedient (for Phoenicians understand Coastal Syria ca. 1200-300 BC) by which modern scholars kept the “Phoenicians” alive as a “people”.

The “Phoenicians” as a people were invented by 19th century scholars who were attempting to give credence to their historical reconstructions by steeping them in “classical”, i.e., Greek, historiography. Unfortunately, while the Greeks perceived the “Phoenicians” as precursors and competitors and looked at them with awe (Strabo, Geography XVI.2.24), most of the modern connotations carried by the name are negative or phantasmagoric.

The problem is not any more that the “Phoenicians” supposedly sacrificed their children out of pure barbarism or to spite YHWH (Gras et al., 1989), but that they have come to represent in the modern imagery the epitome of the “Semitic” traders (Vattioni, 1990) “the merchants par excellence” (Cornelius, 1981).

As historians it is not the ethnic slight we object to, but the associative chains that the mental image provokes. These chains are so pervasive that they blunt the most critical mind, and we find in a recent and most valuable textbook such “*image d’Épinal*” as: The Phoenicians were merchants with very casual interest in, or attachment to, the land, and, as your typical intermediaries, they played one role on the theater of history, that of paving the way for the Greeks; they then vanished in thin air (Knapp, 1988). These chains even shackle the results of the most informed of studies by seemingly providing an explanatory link between the commercial role of the “Phoenicians” and the decline of the “Phoenician” language at home (Briquel-Chatonnet, 1992). It is only the most methodologically aware study that can escape, through excruciatingly minute attention to the nature of the data, being trapped by these associative chains (Xella, 1991). But, unfortunately, it will take much more than St. Augustine's confessions or the indication of the persistence of “Phoenician” religious customs till well into the “Islamic Age” (Aggoula, 1990) to dispose of the image of the “Phoenician” as simply merchants.

While grateful for the abundant harvest of the “*studi fenici*”, we have to admit that we still have to define historically who were the people(s) we name “Phoenicians”.

2.5 - The Arabs. Our knowledge about the ancient Arabs has tremendously benefited from recent archaeological work, more so than our knowledge about any other ancient ethnical group. The wild, wide and still unfruitful search for the Empire of David and Solomon has come up with an unexpected result: The Arabs are now one of the best epigraphically attested ethnical groups of the early first millennium BC in the area (Eph'al, 1982). For the second half of the millennium the attestations are so plentiful that they enable us to estimate even the strength of particular tribes, such as the Qedarites (Tuell, 1991). And the furious search for a historical basis to the “foundation myth” promises to bring to light even more data about the ubiquitous “Other”.

The first millennium BC “Arabs” have an objectively ascertained historical presence and they have, at least in the eyes of present-day Arabs, the potential for an “honorable ancestor's” status. But we still do not know who this “people” were, not even if they considered themselves a “people” and were thus considered by others. “In scholarly literature the concept “Arabs” (...) turns out to be rather hazy. (...) This modern haziness of national terms is (...) dangerous when dealing with ancient history” (Retso, 1991). The early first millennium BC “Arabs” might have been just one small occupational group of people, mostly camel beduins and their families, as implied by Ahiqar in his proverb “do not show an Arab the sea nor a Sidonian the desert; their occupations are different”. Or they could be the inhabitants of a land (*maat Aribi*)

governed by powerful queens and kings having far-flung commercial enterprises, as implied by some of the inscriptions from Assyria. Or they could be both or again something else, we still do not know. In any case the relations of these “Arabs” with their predecessors (chiefly with the Sutu/Setiu), their contemporaries and the various later days “Arabs” still need to be historically defined (Naccach, 1991).

2.6 - We could go on and on with the Akkadians, the Amorites, the Arameans, the Assyrians or the Cananeans etc. Ethnies are popular and, at least since Agatharchides of Cnidus' book “Asia and Europe”, have been emphasized as explanatory factors in history (Fornara, 1983). But again and again we would see that ethnies do not exist outside of society as reified things in themselves, and that what is meant by an ethnic group is not coherently defined or named. Examples of the problems created by ignoring these warnings can, in addition to the ones mentioned above, be seen for instance in Palestinian archaeology (Coogan, 1987; Finkelstein, 1991), or in the studies of the early development of the alphabet (Garbini, 1990).

In conclusion, ethnies cannot be taken as givens or building blocks in our historical reconstruction. We cannot a priori name or define a particular people, or group of peoples, and say that we are studying their history when we study the history of “Syria and the Near-East”. Ethnicity is a social phenomenon and it requires, at the social level at which it functions, a doubly subjective condition to be fulfilled: To be accepted as such, ethnicity has to be both self-ascribed by the human sub-group concerned (how the group sees itself), and ascribed to it by the other groups with which it is in contact (how other groups see it). Furthermore the concept of ethnicity is itself dependent on ethnical definitions. As “for a large number of social and psychological phenomena the concept that names the phenomenon is itself a constituent of the phenomenon” (Searle, 1984), and is not an independent variable upon which we could ground our analysis. The “ethnical” reading of this history can only be, should only be, the result of our analysis and synthesis of all the historical data at our disposal.

3- HISTORY OF THE PEOPLE(S) OF [*] (1), FROM [**] TO [**] (2). SOME CAUTIONARY NOTES**

3.1 - The title of our symposium, as we can rewrite it, has the following definition: “*the History of (the people(s) of) [Syria and the Near-East]* “. Having stated that we want a history of the people(s) of a given area of planet Earth to answer the needs of its actual inhabitants, we now have to define this area.

Such a geographical definition of a field of historical studies is but a handy way of specifying a particular theater for the history of a particular people, or group of peoples. And since land, contrary to ethnicity, has an objective existence independent of human societies, whatever patch of it we pick up in order to define the limits of our object of study, we could write the history of its human settlement, no matter how coherent or illuminating this history might turn out to be.

The minor problem with the geographical definition is easy to overcome if we accept the arbitrary nature of name-giving. A given, well defined region has often been known by many names at the same time (see below), or at different times, for example, most of the area referred to today under the name Syria was, once, called Phoenicia Libanensis.

These geographical names have long, involved and partly obscure histories (Cannuyer, 1985), still, there would not be much discussion about what geographical

area is meant, today, in historical studies, under the name “Syria”. This name is used as a euphemism for a readily definable geographical sub-region of South-West Asia. I prefer to refer to it under the name of the “North-West Mashriq” (hereafter abbreviated as the N-W M.), since the “Mashriq” is the name given to that half of the Arab World by its inhabitants. Within the larger context of the Mashriq, its North-Western corner, with its clear specificities, has often been conceived as a unit. As such it has been referred to under many names, such as Geographical Syria, Syria-Palestine, Greater Syria, Bilaad ash-Shaam, the Levant, the Land of Canaan, Abr Nahra etc., depending on the perspective of the conceptors.

3.2 - The second element of the standardized capsule is the definition of the time-span of the period of interest, here *“From 3, 000 to 300 BC”*

Such a time-span, far from being a given, except through the weight of tradition, is the result of the historiographic process of analysis and synthesis. In addition, it is but one element in the long chain by which we reckon with the past and divide it into periods, one element in the traditional periodization scheme in use for “Syria and the Near-East”, which consists essentially in a “Prehistorical period”, an “Ancient period”, a “Classical period”, an “Islamic period” and a “Modern Period.”

Such divisions, no matter how arbitrary, are an unavoidable cognitive necessity, even if we claim, as I do, that we should look at history, particularly the history of the Mashriq, as one continuous whole. We need to divide the past into periods, first in order for us to come to term with its vast expanses, and second, as a mnemonic help in characterizing its main articulations.

The field of history being what it is, there is no hard and fast rule by which to judge such periodizations and their characterizations of the past. We have to rely on a general feeling for their usefulness, for how well we think that, given what we know of a past, they define its main articulations, and denote what we deem to be the main characteristics of each period.

To come back to our “Ancient Period” let us start by noting that the selection of its closing date has recently been the subject of some revision, the traditional date of 300 BC losing ground in favor of 500 BC.

As the highest level aggregate of the integrative and interpretative framework used to perceive the history of the area, the traditional date was predicated on assigning a pivotal importance to European military and political domination over the Mashriq. The 19th century European scholars who devised this periodization were true to their Homeric and Herodotian models. They chose, to mark what they saw as the boundary between two “epochs”, what in their eyes was the most famous of the “klea andron” (famous deeds of men). Alexander of Macedonia's military campaigns were supposed to have at once given the “coup de grâce” to the “Ancient Period” and opened a millennium of European domination over the “Near-East”, the “Classical Period”.

A century of archaeological work has relegated Alexander' once seemingly “great divide” of history to the realm of the history of the discipline. But, instead of proceeding to the needed revision of the general framework and its periodization scheme, modern scholars picked up Cyrus' takeover of Babylon in 539 BC as the closing date of the “Ancient” period (Liverani, 1988; Knapp, 1988). It is true that this is a more appropriate date to mark the beginning of a millennium of Indoeuropean military domination over the Northern Mashriq (Smith, 1971/1987). But the selection of the periodization scheme which is the highest level representation of our understanding of the history of the area should not be based on one narrow point of view such as the military or the political, however important this point of view might be thought to be.

The periodization scheme that we adopt should be defensible as the result of the whole process of analysis and synthesis of all the available historical data.

4- THE STRUCTURING ELEMENTS OF THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE.

“L'impression, que les choses en passant font en toi, y demeure après leur passage, et c'est elle que je mesure quand elle est présente, non pas ces choses qui ont passé pour la produire.”
St. Augustine, Conf. XI, XXVII, 36

The development of perspective, at the close of the “Middle- Age”, allowed us to “look through” space, and thereby to perceive and grasp space rationally.

Today, the ever-accelerating development of scientific techniques, approaches and methods of studying the past is providing us, for the first time ever, with large amounts of “objective” and quantifiable data about the human past. To make sense of all this data, we need a new kind of perspective that will allow us to “look through” human time and grasp it rationally.

History is our only link with reality, but the dominant characteristic of our cognitive relation with history is that we cannot perceive it, we have to conceive it. We have to conceive history basing our conceptions on data of various ontological statuses, i.e., these conceptions will have to be informed by the necessarily complex “epistemology of the complex”. I do not claim to have developed the complex perspective needed to “look through” human history and to grasp it rationally. But I have been working in what I think is that general direction. While it would be easy to stonewall in matters epistemological, candid “shop-talk” will expose my procedure to the crude lights of criticism. This is why I chose the latter approach.

I will now briefly review the five structuring elements of a perspective on the long-time-span of human history that I have used to arrive at the new periodization I am proposing: environment, production and exchange, modes of land occupation, linguistic practices and finally religious practices (for an extended presentation of the method underlying this approach, see Naccach, 1985)

4.1 - The environment. I will look separately at climate and at deforestation.

Climate. We have some indications on the long-term trends for the climate of the N-W M., where warm weather tends to produce reduced amounts of rain, which means, in this normally arid and subtropical region, increased aridity. Arid conditions in the N-W M. have a direct negative impact on agricultural production and steppe vegetation and can furthermore combine with human factors in accelerating soil erosion.

The main cycles seem to have been the following: an attenuated but fluctuating cold and moist interval ca. 5000 to 2700 BC; a warm and dry interval ca. 2300 to 1900; a cold and moist interval ca. 1800 to 1200 BC; a warm and dry interval ca. 1200 to 900 BC; and finally an attenuated cold and moist interval till well into the first millennium AD (Butzer, 1976; Neumann and Parpola, 1987).

Deforestation. The process of deforestation, erosion and desertification has so much affected the N-W M. that it is hard today to get a sense of its magnitude. But we have strong indications that before our hunters and gatherers ancestors settled down and became farmers, pastoralists and urban dwellers, the whole of the area had an extensive

forest cover, from the Mediterranean coast to well inland, in what is today nearly desertic steppe (Seigue, 1985).

The process has been a gradual but inexorable one, with the following main articulations:

- In the steppes, felling of trees and clearing of forests must have started on a small scale in the sixth millennium BC to provide increased land for rainfed agriculture. Clearing of forest expanded at the end of the fourth millennium BC when arid-based rainfed agriculture increased the areas that could be profitably exploited. This process was greatly accelerated during the second half of the third millennium BC to provide for the needs of the growing urban centers (Sapin, 1982). By the end of the second millennium BC the ecological equilibrium in the steppes had been deeply altered, with much of the steppes' forests on the hills and mountains facing east having disappeared. By then cleared forest land had been much eroded and, having become improper for agricultural exploitation, it was taken over by pastoralists (total deforestation of the steppes happened during the first millennium AD).

- In the mountains the process of deforestation started later than in the plains. The dense forests, protected by Humbaba, were more formidable. However, driven by pyrotechnic and engineering needs, a gradual thinning out of the mountain forest cover took place all through the third, second and first millennium BC (Wertimé, 1983; Mikesell, 1969; Meiggs, 1982). This process was accelerated at the end of the second millennium BC by the development of terracing, i.e., by the first direct encroachment of agricultural land on mountain forests.

4.2 - Production and exchange.

Production. The evolution of industrial production is punctuated by three well-known and securely dated developments, those of pottery, of bronze and of iron. These have traditionally been deemed important enough to be taken as the basis for defining the major chronological articulations of the "Prehistoric" and "Ancient" periods into Pottery Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age. Recent research has helped us flesh our descriptions of the industrial processes and specially of their evolution, for instance, the gradual development, over the 12th to the 9th centuries BC, of the industries characteristic of the Iron Age (Hauptmann, 1990; McGovern, 1986). Furthermore, it has provided us with insights into particular developments and the way these affected societies, such as the "armament's industry revolution" of the second millennium BC (Liverani, 1988). It has also disposed of some old hypothesis that smacked of the old racial prejudices, such as the presupposed Indoeuropean primacy in iron metallurgy (Waldbaum, 1978; Stech-Wheeler et al., 1981).

Exchange. Though exchange has been much more extensively treated in the literature than production, it is hard to get a meaningful perspective on its evolution. Too many products have been exchanged, and we do not have enough data for a global evaluation. There is however one basic component of the exchange network whose evolution we can trace and that is the means of transportation. The evolution of the means of transportation has repeatedly and profoundly modified the functioning of the exchange network:

- The earliest use of donkeys as pack animals, and of towed or punted riverine boats harks back to the 6th millennium BC

- The next step took place near the middle of the 4th millennium BC and consisted in the development of donkey caravans, together with the first use of sails on riverine boats (coinciding with the development of the first urban centers).

- The third step, which happened sometimes in the first quarter of the 3rd millennium BC, is the development of coastal shipping.

- The order of the last two steps is not established. They both took place around the 12th century BC. The first is the development of the “North Arabian Camel Saddle”, which made possible for the first time the true “beduin” mode of life and opened up the desert routes. The second, some as yet unknown progress in shipbuilding and/or navigation that made possible sailing away from the coast, and in so doing, opened the whole Mediterranean basin to increased commercial transport.

We could, concurrently with the development of the means of transportation, trace on a map the evolving and enlarging network of trade routes.

4.3 - Modes of land occupation.

The study of human settlement patterns has established the basic quantitative dimensions of the settlement process (Adams, 1981; Brinkman, 1984). Such studies have become one of our most powerful tools in studying not only prehistorical societies but historical ones as well (Nissen, 1988). We can now trace the emergence and follow the evolution and the interplay of the agricultural, urban and pastoralist modes of land occupation (Liverani, 1975; Crawford, 1977). And it is the first blooming of the urban mode, during the second half of the fourth millennium BC that is generally taken to mark the incipency of the “Ancient” period. We can also distinguish cycles within the long-term evolution, such as the two well-known episodes of de-urbanization that happened respectively towards the end of the third and of the second millennium BC. We can even indirectly trace the development of sub-mode of land occupation, such as, around 1200 BC, the beduin mode. In addition, textual evidence allows us to follow, starting in the end of the second and all through the first millennium BC, the evolution of a new mode of land occupation, best characterized as parasitic, represented by groups of people having no direct productive relation with the land. The most important of these are the armies that roamed and plundered the N-W M. during the first millennium BC.

4.4 - Linguistic practices. I will look separately at languages and at writing.

4.4.1 - Setting aside the linguistic tree and classification of the so-called “Semitic” languages, and looking towards socio-linguistics for inspiration, I could discern the following lines in the evolution of the languages of the Mashriq (see Naccach, 1985).

The first thing to note is how flat the perspective is: in spite of a span of 4600 years covered by the fully legible linguistic instances, these display an amazing degree of conservatism, both lexical and grammatical. The one great change in the morphological system shared by all the instances, Garbini's Amoritic Innovation, is attested very early on, if not right from the beginning.

The ancient state, which is represented by the oldest fully legible instance, Akkadian, a literary instance, must therefore have roots deep into prehistory. This state had at the center of its morphological system three verbal conjugations: “iprus”, “iparras” and “paris”. The great lines of its attested social life can be traced as follows: in the third millennium BC it is attested as the spoken vernacular and the administrative and literary language of at least two groups of people, the Akkadians and the peoples of the Kish civilization; during the second millennium BC it progressively disappears as a spoken language -a process probably completed by the second half of the millennium-, but continues in use as administrative and literary instances, and is even developed as a canonical instance -with the development of a dependent conjugation “iptaras.”. The use of the administrative instance ends in the second quarter of the first millennium BC,

but the literary instance was carried on by a group -fast decreasing, of learned men till the end of the millennium.

We have attestations of the modern state nearly from the beginning of “history”. This state is characterized by a morphological system centered on two verbal conjugations, “paras/a” and “yaprus/u”. This innovation, more in harmony with the “aspect” nature of the verbal conjugations, allowed the system to differentiate better and more economically between the basic and the intensive stem conjugations. It is first attested as a vernacular in the MAR.TU personal names as early as the 25th century BC. In the first half of the second millennium BC it is again only attested as a vernacular through the Amoritic personal names, from the reigning dynasties to the common people. It is first attested as an administrative and literary instance in the second half of the millennium (“Ugaritic”). Early in the first millennium BC the attested instances - again administrative and literary- display a generalized new development, the introduction of a marker for the definite state. Two forms of this marker were used in the N-W M., a postfixed /-aa/ (full), and a prefixed /ha(n)-/ or /haC/Cx, thus defining two families of “dialects”, the Aramaic and the Cananean/“Arabic” (see further below). The “mutation” of the third form of the marker, the Nabataean-then-Arabic prefix /al-/ or /aC/Cx, must have happened during the last part of the first millennium BC (Milik, 1985).

4.4.2 - Writing. The evolution of the writing system and its main articulations has lately been relatively securely dated:

a) A pictographic origin around ca. 3400 BC, at which time writing was a kind of graphic memory aid not connected to a language;

b) A parallel shift of graphism and its referent, 3200 to 2800 BC, the referent shifting from an object to its idea and/or its name (i.e. from pictographic to ideographic and/or logographic “reading” of the signs) while the sign became more and more abstract;

c) The abstraction from this system of sound values (syllables) and the development of “syllabic” writing, a process essentially completed by ca. 2300 BC at which time the writing system was able, for the first time, to graphically represent speech, Akkadian speech in that case (Bottero, 1982);

d) And finally the “two-steps” development of consonantal alphabetic writing. First, the development of the principle of consonantal alphabetic writing, that we can trace from the Gbeyl syllabary, through the Tell ejJisr sherd (Mendenhall, 1971) and the Kahun inscription (Dijkstra, 1991) till, around 1500 BC, the cuneiform consonantal alphabet of Ugarit (with its three syllables 'a, 'u, and 'i or is it four, including “su”). Second, the long and much ramified process of graphic elaboration (Puech, 1986; Loundine, 1987; Bernal, 1987; Lipinski, 1988; Sass, 1988; Naveh, 1991; Colless, 1991), that resulted in the so-called “Phoenician” and “Proto-Arabic” alphabets (we should add to the file of the 2nd millennium BC attestations of the latter the 13th century BC Deir-'Alla tablets, see Masson, 1974). The final touch in the development of the consonantal alphabetic writing, and a graphically highly significant one, happened during or near the first half of the 10th century BC, when the scribes of the coastal cities adopted the Egyptian way of writing with a pen-brush and ink. The adoption of this writing tool, made of the sea-rush's stem, together with its associated techniques, chisel-shaping of the pen, papyrus, etc.... had an enormous influence on the shape of the signs, who could then be produced through regular combinations of strokes. These new shapes were copied in the lapidary inscriptions, and became from then on much more amenable to paleographical analysis (Daniels, 1984; van der Kooij, 1985).

3.5 - Religious practices

The voluminous literature on “Semitic” religions in the pre-Christian era provides us with some of the trends in the evolutionary process, but not quite enough to be able to securely articulate or date it.

What we know of the cultic practices and cultic architectures displays a remarkable continuity for all the period till 300 BC, though we should note that our data is biased, because relatively silent on popular practices.

We can guess at a process of increased abstraction, not in the practices, still opaque to us, but in the social conceptions of religion which affect the popular cultic practices over the long term. The oldest epigraphically attested urban pantheon is a reflection of the social organization (Bottero, 1987). But this state of affairs did not last. As the social organization underwent a momentous reshuffling in the second half of the second millennium BC, which we might illustrate at the ideological level with the substitution of the image of the “just and rightful king” by that of the “strong and courageous king,” the images sustaining the conception of the pantheon reflected new and enhanced preoccupations with cosmogony, the establishment of order, and rule in the universe. Then, with the beginnings of the Iron Age we find attested a group of gods “spécifiquement reliées à l'espace urbain, au territoire et à ses structures” (Xella, 1991). One of the specificities of this group is the adjectival theonyms, such as “Adon” (lord), “Baalat” (lady), “Melqart” (owner or king of the city), “Malaakbel” (angel/envoy of the lord), etc.

Later on during the first millennium BC, towards the end of the “Ancient Period”, an even greater reorganization seems to take shape, and we get the first glimpses at the “jealous god”, a portent of things to come. By then Persian and Greek religious influences must have been felt in the N-W M.

5 - “THE FOUNDATION PERIOD” OR “THE EMPIRE OF THE AMORITES”

One of our postulates is that, in order to deal with the long and involved history of the human societies that functioned and interacted in the North-Western corner of the Mashriq, we have to delineate the main articulations of the history of this area. To enable us to do so, we have briefly reviewed what we know about the evolution of five basic structuring elements of the long-time-span of human history, for the pre-Christian era and over an area wider than the N-W M. We have looked at each element on its’ own. Bundling together these structuring elements to achieve, so to speak, a bird's eye view of the “whole” past of the area, is now a rather straightforward operation.

Reflecting upon this newly achieved perspective we note that the N-W M. defines the “theater” of a homogenous, continuous and largely self-contained and coherent human history. We also note that the Mashriq as a whole would provide a more self-contained definition for a field of historical studies. In other words, the North-West Mashriq is a historical as well as a geographical province of the Mashriq.

We also note two conjunctions in the pre-Christian era evolutions of the five structuring elements (discontinuities or articulations or thresholds or divides happening in near synchronicity). This happens a first time around ca. 3400-3000 BC, and again around ca. 1200-900 BC. These two large-scale conjunctions in the trends extracted from the largest practicable mass of data define two nodes in the history of the N-W M. Since these two nodes belong to the category of major conjunctions, they entitle us to consider the interval between them as a main epoch or period. We remark here that the first node is the one currently used to define the beginning of the “Ancient” period, and that the second defines the major articulation within that period, that is the transition

between the “Bronze” and “Iron” Ages. What we have done in selecting them as the boundary marks of an epoch is therefore not so much an innovation as it is the simple result of a systematic analysis of the available historical data.

Armed with these two “observations” we can now Propose a new formulation of the standardized capsule defining our field of historical studies:

*The history of the people(s) of the North-West Mashriq (1), from 3,200 to 1,000 BC (2); the [**] period (3).*

For this capsule to be completed, that is, to be usable as the highest and most general representation in a periodization scheme, it still has to include the characterization (or label) of the period. There is no readily available grid that we could use to characterize the period, that is, to capture, as in the art of caricature, its essential nature. I tried to do it by reflecting on the period first as one link in the historical chain and then as it stands on its own. The result is the following full capsule:

The history of the people(s) of the North-West Mashriq, from 3,200 to 1,000 BC; “The Foundation Period “ or “The Empire of the Amorites “.

This standardized capsule represents the essential element of the sketch of the new periodization scheme that I am offering to the critical eyes of the participants of this symposium. I will now conclude my presentation by briefly stating the intended context and connotations of the labels used to characterize the period.

5.1 - The diachronic approach. The period extending from 3200 to 1000 BC in the history of the N-W M., characterized as “The Foundation Period”, is one of the definable large scale periods in the history of the settled human societies of that region of the planet. The complete periodization scheme that I am proposing is the following:

- a - The Settlement Period, 10,000 to 3,200 BC;
- b - The Foundation Period, 3,200 to 1,000 BC;
- c - The Formative Period, 1,000 BC to 1,000 AD;
- d - The Modern Period, 1,000 AD till today.

Such a scheme is proposed, it should be pointed out again, as an alternative to the prevailing one that does not acknowledge civilizational continuities between the “Ancient”, “Classical”, “Islamic” and “Modern” periods. Furthermore it is meant to capture the essential unity and continuity in the history of the evolving and interacting N-W M.'s societies.

a - The “Settlement Period”, ca. 10,000 to 3,200 BC describes the long transitional process through which passed our ancestors on the way from hunters-gatherers to urban dwellers.

b - The “Foundation Period”, ca. 3,200 to 1,000 BC, as in the dictionary's definition, is “the basis on which something is founded: the basis upon which something stands or is supported”. It is that period of history during which the basic “building blocks” of the character of this region of planet Earth were laid down and became recognizable: the settlement mosaic of urban dwellers, fellahin and bedu; the typical industrial production of cotton, linen, glass, metals; the long-distance exchange networks; the Amoritic type language and alphabetic writing; the religious pantheon dominated by El; the mores and customs; the perennial urban and rural architectures etc.

c - The “Formative Period”, ca. 1,000 BC to 1,000 AD, is the period during which the characteristic social morphology of the area was formed. The specificity, or cultural and civilizational “flavor” of the North-Western Mashriq was established

during the “Foundation Period”, but it is during the “Formative Period” that, through various processes and under many different influences, the peoples of the area organized themselves in the “multiconfessional societies” typical of the “Modern Period.” At the start of the “Formative Period” it is as if we could see three “ethnic” super-groups emerging from the “Amoritic” nebulae that characterized the previous period. We could provisionally designate these super-groups as the “Arameans”, the “Cananeans” and the “Arabs” (including all their various kingdoms and/or emirates). These groups then mix and mingle in various ways, and also variously interact with the successive dominant military powers until they are nearly linguistically and socially homogenized by the end of the period, but organized in the characteristic mosaic of religious communities.

d - And finally the “Modern Period” (1,000 AD till today) focuses on the evolutions of this multiconfessional society as it had to react to foreign influences and interferences.

5.2 - The synchronic approach. Reflecting upon the specificity of the period extending from 3200 to 1000 BC in the history of the N-W M. as seen on its own, and in an effort to come up with a characterization that would be congenial to political history (l'histoire événementielle), I propose to label it “The Empire of the Amorites.” This label should not be interpreted as claiming that there was one ethnic group known as the “Amorites” or “Amurrites” during that period. The intended connotation is simply that linguistic and ethnic differentiation among the people(s) of the N-W M. does not seem to have taken place yet during that period, and all the people(s), states and dynasties of this area in this period seem to participate in an “Amoritic” nebulae.

And if the word Empire does not seem today as appropriate as it did in A.T. Clay's time, the period is nevertheless one during which the empire of the “Amorites” over their environment, their culture and their neighbors came to maturation. It is during that period, and at the hand of various “Amoritic” groups, that baked bricks and glass were first produced, that donkeys and camel caravans got organized, that sea trade developed, that the language type that is still spoken today in the N-W A emerged, that the basically consonantal alphabetic writing system still in use today was invented...

It would be easy to write about the achievements and the conquests of the various “Amorites” kings, who, from their ancestral grounds in the North-Western Mashriq, extended their dominion over both the Land of the Two Rivers as well as the Land of the One River (Couroyer, 1974; Bietak, 1988). Kings like Hamurabi of Babylon, (‘Ammu-raafi’, which literally means “the god ‘Ammu establishes in tranquility”, from a root /r f’/), could easily be made into the stuff of legends. I will however leave them, our august Raafi'im / Raafi'in, to their rest, and I will conclude by paraphrasing A.T. Clay:

- *It is highly probable that when excavations are conducted in the area centered on Mount Lebanon, such as in the Hermil and the Akkar, light will be forthcoming that will show that this is the very ancient and central seat of Amoritic culture.*

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