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*xšnaoθrahe ahurahe mazdā*

Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

Front Cover: Obverse of the 6th Century BC "Babylonian Map of the World" (*Imago Mundi*). © The Trustees of the British Museum

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**Special Issue: Discussions in Assyriology**

**Edited by Magnus Widell & Parsa Daneshmand**



## Discussions in Assyriology

Magnus Widell (University of Liverpool)

Parsa Daneshmand (IHAC, Northeast Normal University / UCL)

### Introduction

On January 16<sup>th</sup> this year, a group of scholars working on the history and languages of the Ancient Near East (ANE) convened virtually in a small and somewhat informal conference, which we after some initial hesitation decided to call “Discussions in Assyriology.” This special issue of DABIR contains selected papers presented at the conference, which brought together some 40 students and scholars from around the world, mostly from Asia and Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Discussions in Assyriology represents a new initiative, aimed at the discussion and dissemination of ongoing research on the ANE in China and beyond. The modern study of Assyriology and the ANE had a relatively late start in China, and until the turn of the twenty-first century, almost all research in the field was centered around either the Institute for the History of Ancient Civilizations (IHAC) at Northeast Normal University in Changchun, or the “up-and-comer” Department of Oriental Languages and Culture at Peking University, with its long and distinguished traditions in ancient Chinese studies.<sup>2</sup> Aside from

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1- Attendance to the conference was open to the public and free for all participants and speakers. Due to the different whereabouts of the speakers (see below), the event had to be scheduled from 06:00 a.m. to 13:00 p.m. (UTC), a time that unfortunately would have discouraged wider participation from colleagues and students residing in the Western Hemisphere.

2- See Zhou, Wu & Lin 1986; for the rapid development and growth of Assyriology in China over the last 20 years, see now Liu 2020: 286-287; and Wang, Piccin & Günther 2021: 191-198.

random (or planned) encounters during indispensable research trips to IHAC, which housed the country's only research library in Assyriology/Hittitology (and a Xerox machine, conveniently placed immediately next to the library's monograph section), the small community of ANE scholars in China would routinely converge, as a somewhat marginalized coterie at the large annual congress organized by the China Ancient World History Research Association, an organization that was established in 1979.

The situation has changed dramatically over the last 10-15 years, with many second- and third generation ANE scholars now holding permanent positions in universities across the country. Substantial investments by these universities in research infrastructure, typically with generous increases to library budgets, coupled with the growing importance of online resources in the field, have changed the academic landscape in the country.<sup>3</sup> In short, developments within both the field of ANE studies and higher education in China, have made it possible for Chinese scholars and students to move much farther afield from the traditional centers of Assyriology and related fields.

Discussions in Assyriology is intended to serve as a focused forum for this growing community of ANE scholars and students, and we particularly encourage papers highlighting prospective lines of inquiry, next to more finalized studies. More specifically, the conference aims to offer established scholars as well as graduate students in the fields of Assyriology, Sumerology and Hittitology an opportunity to present their ongoing research, and establish professional links within China and abroad. Although there is a pronounced international component to the conference, with several international contributors and English being the working language of the conference and the subsequent publication, an important aspect of Discussions in Assyriology is to provide a platform for scholars and students based in China or affiliated with Chinese institutions and/or research projects.

An important role of Discussions in Assyriology is also to support and help students and younger scholars at an early stage of their careers with the sound and timely publication of their contributions in peer-reviewed international journals. We firmly believe that Open Access (OA) contributes to the excellence of all scholarly work, and ensures its widest possible dissemination and impact, and we are delighted to present the first proceedings of Discussions in Assyriology in this special issue of the journal DABIR.<sup>4</sup> We would like to thank Professor Touraj Daryaee, editor-in-chief of DABIR, as well as executive editors Drs. Shervin Farridnejad and Judith A. Lerner, for all their support and encouragement to publish the proceedings in the journal. A final copy of the volume was proofread by Mss. Emily Craig and Julia Trim (both University of Liverpool), generously assisted by the Research Support Fund of the School of Histories, Languages and Culture at the University of Liverpool.

3- Liu 2020; for the impact of online resources on the field of Assyriology, see Englund 2015.

4- In accordance with the ethical principles and publication policy of *DABIR* (see <https://sites.uci.edu/dabirjournal/ethics/>; accessed on 2 June, 2021), the contributions in this Special Issue have been assessed using a double-blind peer-review process, and we would like to thank all our readers for their hard (and often unrewarding) work, and for helping us making this volume possible.



### Discussions in Assyriology – Brief Retrospection

Not all the talks presented in the conference have been included in this volume, and several contributions published here differ rather significantly from their original format in our meeting. For these reasons, a very brief retrospection of the conference may be of some interest to the readers.

The first paper of the day was delivered by **Xianhua Wang**, who talked about ancient Near Eastern maps and cartography. Following a comprehensive overview of the extant Mesopotamian maps, Wang focused his talk on the cultural contexts of Mesopotamian map making, and different methodologies for interpreting and decoding these ancient maps and their Sumerian/Akkadian legends. Following Francesca Rochberg's recent study on Mesopotamian maps as an expression of terrestrial and celestial order,<sup>5</sup> Wang believes that the earliest Mesopotamian maps laid out architectural and topographical features or regions on a physical landscape, which would be either terrestrial or celestial in nature. According to Wang, the validity of this module can be observed in the well-known "Babylonian Map of the World" from 6<sup>th</sup> century BC ancient Sippar.<sup>6</sup>

**Magnus Widell** discussed the administrative and archival function of Ur III deliveries/receipts broken up in separate installments. Texts with such installments provide evidence in support of the hypothesis put forward by Piotr Steinkeller, that a large proportion of the Ur III texts were drawn up (or at least completed) *post factum*, at a time and (in all likelihood) location that differed from when/where the transactions they recorded would have taken place.<sup>7</sup> The evidence further suggests that such texts in many cases would have been written up to a week, or several weeks, after the transactions occurred. This observation has some implications for our understanding of the administrative and archival procedures of the period. It is possible to keep a clay tablet wet (and inscribable) over an extended period, simply by wrapping it in a moist linen cloth, and it is therefore possible that a single tablet documenting multiple installments could have been inscribed over a longer period. However, experiments have demonstrated that the necessary wrapping and re-wrapping of the tablet with the wet cloth (which requires regular re-dampening) will result in a gradual abrasion to the tablet's inscription, and it would not have been practical for the administration to keep tablets wet and inscribable for more than a few days.<sup>8</sup>

**Xiaoli Ouyang's** paper focused on the nature of votive gifts from women attested in the Ur III texts from ancient Umma. The majority of the votive gifts were presented to the city's patron deity Šara or the goddess Inanna. The votive gifts are often referenced in the texts as (divine) mu-ku<sub>x</sub> (DU) deliveries: mu-ku<sub>x</sub> (DU) + divine name, which may be understood as a truncated form of the full expression mu-ku<sub>x</sub> (DU) a-ru-a + divine name. The paper highlighted the fact that several votive gifts of this kind consisted of an object referred to as nam-nimgir-si and of children designated as dumu-kar-ra, and Ouyang's contribution to the present volume expands on this topic by offering a more detailed investigation of the dumu-kar-ra. Based on the Ur III records from Umma, Ouyang is able to demonstrate that these children "of the quay" (kar-ra) referred to foundlings – perhaps from the city docks – brought up within the city's temple organization.

The first session of the day was concluded with a paper by **Zhiyun Guo** on the seemingly very successful peace treaty (the "Eternal Treaty") between the Hittite King Hattusili III and Ramesses II, who ruled Egypt

5- Rochberg 2012; see also Reddeman 2018.

6- Horowitz 1988; see further Rochberg 2012: 32-34.

7- Steinkeller 2004.

8- See Widell 2021.

for 66 years (1279-1213 BC). In her paper, Guo offered an important overview of the treaty, with a discussion of the extant evidence pertaining to her topic. Based on a thorough classification and analysis of the exchange of letters between the two kings, Guo argued that a more nuanced understanding of the treaty is necessary, and that future studies should incorporate a wider range of contemporary data.

A short break for coffee was followed by presentation entitled “*Ordo Verborum* and Nuances of *Verba Dicendi* in Narrative Frames of Akkadian Literary Texts” by **Michela Piccin**, focused on direct and indirect speech in Akkadian. The direct/indirect speech was either introduced by a *verbum dicendi*, such as *qabûm* or *zakārum* “to say,” or by a fixed formula of saying, such as *pīam/pām epēšum* “to speak (up).” Piccin’s paper offered a systematic study of the syntax and style of *verba dicendi* and saying formulae in Akkadian literary texts, with a particular focus on the mode of insertion of direct and indirect speech in the narratives of the Epic of Gilgameš and the Erra Epos. The quantitative and qualitative analyses of *verba dicendi* and specific formulae introducing direct/indirect speech offer new insights into the nuances of meaning, revealed by the frequency of use in the two texts. Piccin’s contribution to the volume is intended as an introduction to her work on *verba dicendi*, and will be followed by a more comprehensive treatment of the subject, which will appear elsewhere.

The next paper by **Changyu Liu** focused on foreign policy in the Ur III period, and the state’s (alleged) geopolitical expansion in the northeastern parts of the state, as well as the northwestern regions. Contemporary administrative texts, along with royal inscriptions and Ur III year formulae, offer an insight into the state’s alternative strategies to establish economic and political dominance in these two areas, which included military operations and armed conflict, but also trade and diplomacy. The paper investigated the mostly peaceful expansion and development in the northwestern regions of the state, as opposed to the more aggressive policies adopted in the northeast, which can be interpreted either as a manifestation of geopolitical and territorial expansion in the region,<sup>9</sup> or as evidence of more targeted military campaigns pillaging and securing spoils of war from the region.<sup>10</sup> Liu’s conference paper on military strategies in the northeast versus the northwest was presented in the context of a larger and ongoing project at Zhejiang Normal University on the Ur III military expansion, which is described in more detail in this volume, together with an outline of how the Ur III year formulae can (and cannot) be used in historical reconstructions.

In her paper “A Comparative Study between the Ur III Dynasty and Shang Dynasty,” **Xueting Chao** offered an overview of the opportunities and advantages offered by comparative studies of the Shang Dynasty in early China and the Ur III state, and was able to highlight a number of political, religious and cultural similarities between the two states. Both the Ur III and the Shang Dynasty were territorial states, with elaborate bureaucratic and administrative systems and centralized economies. In particular, our understanding of the Ur III perceptions of kingship may benefit from analogies with the Shang Dynasty. The transfer of power from one ruler to the next followed similar rules in the two states, with patrilineal and fratrilineal royal succession being well documented. Another similarity worthy of note was the development and coordinated state promotion of divine kingship and royal worship in both the Ur III and the Shang Dynasty, a relatively rare manifestation of royal power in subsequent Mesopotamian and Chinese civilizations.

9- E.g. Steinkeller 1991.

10- E.g. Garfinkle 2021.

In the final presentation of the session, before a short break for repast and more general discussions, **Parsa Daneshmand** talked about the role of divination and the decision-making process in Mesopotamia. Daneshmand explored in detail how the ancient priests would ask questions of the divine world, analyze, and interpret the answers, and ultimately how divination would influence judicial, political and military state policy. The paper particularly emphasized how specific yes/no questions were formulated through the observation of organs of sacrificial animals, and then addressed to a divine assembly. The favorable/unfavorable verdict of the divine assembly could only be reached through an open debate and consensus, thus lending further support to Thorkild Jacobsen's famous "primitive democracy" in early Mesopotamia.<sup>11</sup>

**Jacob Dahl** opened the third and final session with a presentation entitled "When Things Change, and When They Don't: on Change in Cuneiform Signs During the First 1500 Years of Mesopotamian Cuneiform Tradition." In his paper, Dahl offered a critique of François Desset's recent (and renewed) attempt at linking the linear-Elamite script attested in a handful of inscriptions dated to the late Old Akkadian period, with the proto-Elamite script attested in some 1,600 tablets, or fragments of tablets, traditionally dated to the final three centuries of the fourth millennium BC.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the chronological challenges involved, the paper highlighted the many problems associated with interpretations of (superficial) graphic similarities as unambiguous evidence of genetic script dependency.

**Jiarui Zhang's** paper was concerned with parallels and intertextuality in Sumerian literary texts, with a particular focus on imagery and metaphors used in Sumerian incantations and cult lyric (i.e., songs with the ancient classifications: *balaĝ*, *eršemma*, *eršaĥuga*, and *šu'ila*), and the two city lamentations: *The Lament of Ur (LU)* and *The Lament of Sumer and Ur (LSU)*. According to Zhang, previous research on intertextuality in ancient Mesopotamia has concentrated on Akkadian literature, with few studies focused on the Sumerian material. Using various specific examples of Sumerian imagery and metaphors, Zhang was able to demonstrate the importance of systematic study on intertextuality and parallel use of fixed expressions in Sumerian literary texts.

The final presentation of the day was by **Xiaobo Dong**, on the manufacturing of a kind of bronze weapon referred to as <sup>ur</sup>uda<sup>da</sup>gag-si-sa<sub>2</sub> zabar in the Ur III period. A few texts from the state's capital Ur (dated to Ibbi-Suen's 15<sup>th</sup> year) concerned with the <sup>ur</sup>uda<sup>da</sup>gag-si-sa<sub>2</sub> zabar offer important information on several aspects of the metallurgical technology of the Ur III state. The texts provide detailed data on the raw materials used in the weapons, and on the recycling of metals and the standardized tin to copper ratio in bronze of the period. Based on his analysis of the cuneiform texts and parallels to archaeological discoveries in the Royal Cemetery of Ur (ca. 2600 BC), Dong argued that the <sup>ur</sup>uda<sup>da</sup>gag-si-sa<sub>2</sub> zabar in the texts referred to a "standard bronze spearhead," which in all likelihood should be associated with the Ur III king and ritual/cultic activities of the state.

All papers were immediately followed by questions from the audience and/or shorter discussions on the various topics of the presentations.

11- Jacobsen 1943 and 1954.

12- François Desset has presented much of his research on this topic in his seminar "A New History of Writing on the Iranian Plateau," presented on December 14, 2020 in the Online Research Seminar Series "Early Urbanization in Iran: Development of the Urban Centers in the Iranian Plateau" hosted by the University of Padua. The seminar is currently (22 April, 2021) available at: <https://youtu.be/8o1ZOUhN3t8>. For references to previous research linking proto-Elamite with linear-Elamite, see Englund 2006-2008: 22.

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