

Preface: The Globalization of Knowledge in the Ancient Near East

J. Renn

This volume on the Globalization in the Ancient Near East offers a unique collection of insights into the exchange processes connecting different parts of the Western Eurasian world of the First Millennium BCE. These processes range from military conquest and trade relations to the spread of religious, artistic or scientific ideas. The Assyrian Empire, founded at the beginning of the millennium, was the first major empire in this part of the world, extending from the Levant in the West to the Persian gulf in the East. It was the heir of the great Mesopotamian civilizations and, in the second half of the millennium, was in turn followed by the Achaemenid Persian Empire which eventually reached Egypt in the West and the Indus valley in the East.

Globalization in this period involved political, economic and cultural dimensions and had long-lasting effects, some of which can be recognized even today, among them, the use of the alphabet and coin money. It becomes evident that the histories of the many regions and civilizations that are touched upon in this volume, extending from the Mediterranean world via Mesopotamia and Anatolia to Persia and India, cannot be considered in isolation but are much more intertwined than has hitherto been apparent.

Among the many strands of globalization described in the studies here assembled, we also recognize a distinct history of the globalization of knowledge. This history takes place against the background of numerous cultural achievements that had become a common property of many cultures in this part of the world by the outset of the First Millennium, among them agriculture, pottery, architecture with stone and brick, metal working, water management, urbanization and statehood including warfare, sophisticated administration, writing, literature, art and the beginnings of science. The globalization processes described in this volume build on these achievements.

In spite of extensive warfare and periods of destruction and decline, such as the so-called Dark Ages of Ancient Greece from 1200 to 800 BCE, the knowledge behind these achievements was spreading in a way that eventually contributed to their long-term stabilization and further evolution. Indeed, when one empire or state collapsed, many of its traditions and achievements were nevertheless con-

tinued by newly emerging power structures or by local residues that were less affected by the central power. Trade networks, local forms of social organization, as well as local technological and artistic traditions turned out to be much more resilient than the empires themselves. Globalization was due both to extrinsic processes carrying new forms of societal cohesion (such as that of an empire by force and violence) into new areas and due to intrinsic processes that are marked by the voluntary adaptation and transformation of local resources (such as literary traditions) into more universal cultural assets.

We can thus observe processes of sedimentation of knowledge in the sense of a gradual accumulation of collective action potentials embodied in technologies and artifacts, social institutions including empires, as well as networks of trade relations or legal frameworks, writings and oral traditions. Some of these representations of shared knowledge have the potential to be reactivated, even after long periods of interruption and oblivion, eventually giving rise to “renaissances” of seemingly forgotten or marginalized traditions, which are then profoundly transformed in the process. Others may be definitively lost with the breakdown of the specific knowledge economy on which they depended, or they simply survived in isolated niches from which they could then later be reactivated, albeit with an altered appearance.

The globalization of knowledge in the Ancient Near East during the First Millennium, however, was not just an intermittent cumulative process of the exchange and diffusion of local developments within a much wider sphere of circulation, connecting for instance the literary world of India with the cuneiform traditions of Mesopotamia, or the Anatolian cult of the Great Goddess with Greek religious traditions. These exchange processes also involved an active appropriation of the transferred cultural achievements on the part of the “receivers,” characterized by their transformation and recontextualization. This process not only gave rise to cultural hybridizations, as has often been emphasized, but also to profoundly new forms of cultural abstractions, many of them still with us today, from the idea of a democratic state, via a universalist religion, to coin money and alphabetic writing (with roots in the preceding millennium). All of these achievements, essential to the modern world, result from the translation and recontextualization processes that took place in the Ancient Near East.

The First Millennium may therefore be characterized as a period of the secondary globalization of knowledge. Indeed, after the globalization of primary technologies and cultural techniques that took place after the Neolithic and urban revolutions, we now witness societal experiments recombining these resources to create new forms of social cohesion, such as the democratic Greek polis or the monotheist transformation of Judaism. These have not emerged in isolation, but rather constituted creative reactions both to intrinsic developments and to external

influences and challenges, such as the “Oriental” influences at the beginning of the Greek polis, or the Assyrian threat to the Jews at the end of the eighth century.

Living through a collective history and looking back on it through the available cultural memory offers a society the possibility to position itself within a historical continuum. This may also stimulate learning processes and give the option to change this history in the future. The intrinsic development of a society may thus give rise to a reflective dimension that is intimately connected to its means of cultural expression and of cultural memory. In the First Millennium, the availability and spread of writing, of literary and artistic traditions that covered not only one’s own but also other people’s history, had become an important component of this cultural memory. Taking the option for change, however, was and is typically the reaction to an external challenge provoking the mobilization of these internal resources.

A striking example is the emergence of monotheism as a response to the challenges of Judaism embodied in the physical threat and ideology of the Assyrian Empire. Another striking example is the emergence of the Greek polis from a transformation of Near Eastern models of urbanization under the influences of the early Greek colonization and the expansion of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The realization of such innovations, finally, is dependent on the freedom to sustain them for some time, undisturbed by the prevailing power structures. They thus typically emerge at the margin of such structures rather than at their center.

The history of the Ancient Near East in the First Millennium BCE comprises several turning points of human history, in particular the rise of the first large empires and of the first world religions. The present volume makes evident the extent to which these turning points are the product of an early globalization of knowledge.

Jürgen Renn, Berlin, 9 June 2014