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Review of:

**Matthews, R. 2003. *The Archaeology of Mesopotamia: Theories and Approaches*. London: Routledge. 256 pages; 21 line drawings, 12 b&w photos. ISBN 0415253179. Paperback £15.99.**

‘The Archaeology of Mesopotamia’ and ‘theories and approaches’ have traditionally been separate concerns, making this a welcome attempt to review the two in concert. Matthews freely admits in the Preface that it is an uneasy relationship, noting that “[a]s a discipline, Mesopotamian and Southwest Asian archaeology has not been renowned for its critical awareness or self-reflexivity, but if this is a failing it is one that it shares with many other regional archaeologies of the world” (p. xi). The aim of the book is to correct this bias and survey some of the key issues of the discipline. An ulterior motive is perhaps also to show that as regional archaeologies go, Mesopotamian archaeology is exceptional, covering some momentous social changes. The emergence of agriculture, states and empires each receive a chapter, followed by one considering the everyday lives of people, a topic which tends to be overlooked when the big issues are considered. These are sandwiched between opening chapters which consider the historical and theoretical background and methods of the discipline, and a final chapter addressing future directions (as they seemed a year ago). As a critical survey of the discipline it is a new departure for the literature concerning this fascinating – but currently politically charged – region of the world.

The traditional Mesopotamian archaeologist should have a gin and tonic to hand before reading the opening chapters. As Matthews points out from the start, “[t]he history of Mesopotamian archaeology as a discipline is rooted in the entrepreneurial and colonial past of Western powers” (p. 1). He, however, argues that to dismiss the discipline as a colonial enterprise is to overlook the often creditable contributions of archaeologists with good intentions, whatever circumstances they were working in or perpetuating. Nor does he ignore notable figures such as the Arab historian Ibn Khaldun, or the first Iraqi archaeologist, Hormuzd Rassam, who dug with the same abandon as his European colleagues. Rather than including the portraits of the usual suspects such as Layard – Rassam’s mentor at Nineveh – in Arab dress, Matthews chooses an eloquent picture of a “large hole made by de Sarzec and Parrot” in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to illustrate his theme (p. 10). It is a balanced assessment, but when even the term Mesopotamia can be dismissed as a colonial imposition, as Bahrani does (p. 5-6), one realises that a critical assessment of Mesopotamian archaeology risks demolishing any claims to practice it.

If Mesopotamian archaeology can be seen as an elaborate colonial construct, then its theoretical foundations are built in sand, in more ways than one. If Mesopotamian archaeologists were beginning to doubt themselves earlier on, Matthews’ summary of the theoretical framework is hardly more reassuring:

For the foreseeable future it is likely that most archaeologists working in and around Mesopotamia will continue to research within an inexplicit framework built of culture history and anthropological archaeology lashed together with bindings of common sense and assorted approaches of cultural anthropology at appropriate points.

(p. 26)

Methodology fares little better under Matthews' scrutiny, as he dashes the reader's hope of solace with the observation that even recent excavations have lacked a research agenda, but rather "stagger from season to season without much in the way of clear strategic goals" (p. 27). By this point the reader might suspect that the title of the book contains more than a hint of irony, and is certainly in need of a second gin and tonic. It is here that Matthews reminds us why we study the archaeology of Mesopotamia: to answer the 'big questions' such as the emergence of agriculture or the state. Solid ground is in sight, but not before Matthews introduces the example of Çatalhöyük to illustrate some contemporary approaches. In many ways it is an exemplary research project, revealing the different 'lenses' of archaeological enquiry, explained by someone who was there to scrape the first house plans into view. Even this example of good practice raises the dilemma of whether to sacrifice western methodology in favour of multivocality: even methodology is not politically neutral.

The inexplicit theoretical framework identified above seems to determine the next three chapters, as we follow the development from agriculture to states to empires, the anthropological tradition of band-tribe-chieftdom-state not far from the surface. Matthews, however, shows that within this framework there are still relevant issues for a generation which looks for the symbolic aspect of agriculture rather than seeing it in purely economic terms, or the applicability or otherwise of a world-systems approach to the Uruk phenomenon. The study of empires seems less developed, but Matthews seeks to place it on an archaeological footing, reinforcing the point that archaeology can complement Assyriology as much as follow it. Implicitly following an evolutionary trajectory, however, inevitably leaves bits out, and the penultimate chapter, about people's pasts, attempts to cover post-processual approaches, household archaeology and finally nomads. Their notable omission from the rest of the book is perhaps as much a reflection of the prevailing research agendas as Matthews' success in gathering a representative sample.

Even though Matthews has shown that there is a vigorous, developing discipline in the course of the book, another gin and tonic is required for the final chapter. Matthews suggests that the British education system results in a guaranteed ignorance of the Mesopotamian past, and a lack of understanding of the history of British involvement in Iraq or the Near East. This is a theme that Matthews is drawn back to: a consideration of the future of the discipline must inevitably look back to the colonial past and also engage with the post-colonial present, where "many of the behaviour traits of Western archaeologists currently active in Southwest Asia are more invidious and truly colonialist than those of the dedicated colonial professionals of a century ago" (p. 202). Matthews can see a future where collaboration with local archaeologists in their own

language is the basis for a fruitful relationship. But like the Assur dam project, where such collaboration might have blossomed, Mesopotamian archaeology has been put on hold for the near future.

The final illustration shows an aerial photograph taken in 1918 of Turkish fortifications scarring the Iraqi landscape. It ostensibly serves Matthews' point that archaeology could also address the recent past, of war and mass graves, to useful effect. Interspersed throughout the book, there are three more such photos, taken immediately after World War I, which point to the shifting historical currents underlying the discipline. Trenches of a different sort, archaeological rather than military, are visible at Assur, while the photos of Najaf and Samarra are simultaneously useful archaeological documents and the epitome of the synoptic imperial gaze, looking down on an occupied country's heritage. But they are not simply products of the past, found in a dusty archive in the former imperial core, when even now the Royal Air Force (RAF) operates in Iraq, and Najaf is not in the news for its archaeology. Standing alongside Matthews' highly readable and informative text, these photographs are a constant reminder of just how troubled the archaeology of Mesopotamia is. If there is a way forward, this book points a way through the Mesopotamian minefield.