Universiteit Leiden
The Netherlands

Henri Frankfort and the Development of Dutch Archaeology in the Near East

Meijer, D.J.W.; Rogge S.

Citation
Meijer, D. J. W. (2009). Henri Frankfort and the Development of Dutch Archaeology in the Near East. *Zypern Und Der Vordere Orient Im 19. Jahrhundert*, 189-198. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/14242

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License: Leiden University Non-exclusive license
Downloaded from: https://hdl.handle.net/1887/14242

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Diederik J.W. Meijer

Henri Frankfort and the Development of Dutch Archaeology in the Near East

The present contribution is about the Dutch archaeologist Henri ("Hans") Frankfort (fig. 1), and about the influence he has had on the archaeology of the Near East, internationally and in the Netherlands. Although he was a Dutchman, and studied in Amsterdam and Leiden, he spent most of his active life abroad. One could say that the ca. 30 years of his activities in archaeology have made the Near Eastern side of that discipline mature. No mean claim, I know, but I think a true one. Frankfort devised a trend-setting chronological scheme and wrote a great number of books, many of which are still used as handbooks, both about finds and about their interpretation, and also about culture history – yet a modern handbook like Renfrew and Bahn's *Archaeology* only has one minor reference to him, and, e.g., Bernbeck's *Theorien* not a single one.[1]

Henri Frankfort was born in Amsterdam in 1897 and died in London in 1954. His all too short life has been described in varying detail in two recent publications. First, in 1995 the late Maurits van Loon published a small but important book containing Frankfort's letters to a friend, from which the writer emerges quite differently from what one might expect after reading his scientific production; secondly, David Wengrow published an eloquent article in 1999 which deals with Frankfort's intellectual positions.[2]

Frankfort studied Dutch Language and Literature in Amsterdam, but also Ethnology and Hebrew, which he soon dropped, however. His liberal Jewish background probably contributed to his interest in the Ancient Near East, but only after reading the books of William M. Flinders Petrie was he really hooked on that subject. He went to London to study with Petrie in 1921, and accompanied him to Egypt (Qau al Kebir, 1922). He was in Greece in 1924 and 1925,[3] and from 1926 to 1929 he excavated in Egypt, with John Pendlebury at Amarna, Abydos and Armant. At Amarna he was noticed by James Henry Breasted, the well-known American Egyptologist and instigator of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

---

1 Renfrew – Bahn 2004, 426; Bernbeck 1997.

2 Van Loon 1995, Wengrow 1999.

3 In Greece Frankfort worked on pottery from various excavations.

Fig. 1: Henri Frankfort in the early 1950s.

Breasted was extremely impressed by Frankfort's energy and quick intelligence, and suggested he take upon himself the organisation and directorship of a new Oriental Institute project in Iraq. Thus began a very important period in Near Eastern archaeology: the Diyala excavations, northeast of Baghdad, constituted the first regionally oriented research project, later imitated by Robert Braidwood in the Amuq. Four major sites (Tell Asmar-Eshnunna, Khafaje-Tutub, Işçali-Neribtum and Tell Agrab) yielded excellent stratigraphical as well as typological means for a wide-ranging chronology from ca. 3500-1500 BC, which is still virtually unchanged today, and the most important one in use for Mesopotamia.

Frankfort assembled a team of specialists for this undertaking, among them architects, archaeozoologists, palaeobotanists, ceramologists and philologists; he was keenly aware of the need for cooperation if one is to understand the ancient world. This started in 1929! His position, which even today may be termed modern when seen against the work of some colleagues, is well demonstrated by his 1933 acceptance speech at the occasion of his professorship at the University of Amsterdam: *"First we have to consider finds that are not artefacts, but which give us information on Fauna, Flora and available raw materials. The extent of the information based on such material goes further than one might suppose. Thus, animal husbandry is connected with many-sided cultural complexes [...]."*[4]

4 Frankfort 1933, 13.

Such remarks, which attest to a well-thought out ecological background for archaeological interpretations, must be compared with much more recent ones from colleagues of the same generation, in order to show how much ahead of their time they were. Both his well known contemporaries Anton Moortgat and André Parrot also expressed themselves on what archaeology is: Moortgat writes in 1971(!): *"Die vorderasiatische Archäologie [...] läßt [...] das andere Grundelement abendländischer Kultur, den Geist des Alten und Neuen Testaments mit seinem gesamten religiösen und allgemeinmenschlichen Erbe wieder aufleben, gelegentlich überraschend anschaulich in ihrer erstaunlichen Wiedergewinnung und Wiederbelebung altorientalischen Daseins, vor allem durch die Ausgrabung alter, monumentaler Tempel und Paläste sowie gottverbundener, vergeistigter Bildwerke."*[5] And a modern archaeologist would also raise his eyebrows at André Parrot's remarks from 1976: *"[...] small tells – and of those there are many in the entire Orient – but most often these artificial hillocks only hide ancient villages of little importance [...]."*[6]

Both quotations date some forty years after Frankfort's remarks, and may justly be called outmoded. They sound as if nothing had developed after Alexander Conze's nineteenth century definition of archaeology as dealing with *"alle in räumliche Form hineingeschaffenen Menschengedanken"*. Against them, Frankfort in that acceptance speech of 1933 defined archaeology as *"the science that is devoted to the explanation of the material remains of antiquity in their reciprocal connections"*. And these connections he saw as social connections, although he does not use that term. Another of his contemporaries, the famous V. Gordon Childe, did, on the contrary, notice this "modern" tendency in Frankfort's work, and he appreciated it in his *In Memoriam* for Frankfort:[7] *"Archaeology has often been regarded as a technique and is liable to remain an auxiliary discipline, its documents to be mere illustrations to written records. It is perhaps Henri Frankfort's highest contribution to the social sciences to have realized that it is itself a source, and to have so distilled history from archaeological data as to convince even skeptical colleagues."*

The road via which Frankfort acquired his insights and formed his ideas led along many and diverse literary sources. The works of Alexander Conze, William M. Flinders Petrie, Johan Huizinga, Max Weber, Emile Dürckheim and Lucien Lévy-Brühl are among them. All those who knew him commented on his extensive erudition and were awed by the energy and ease with which he passed this on during lectures and classes. He was an energetic teacher: in an article on Robert Braidwood's life it is said: *"During the academic years from 1938 until the end of World War II, when the Braidwoods were graduate students at the*

5 Moortgat 1971, 8.

6 Parrot 1976, 112. Perhaps I may add a personal recollection: when still a student, I asked Parrot in 1972 what was hidden in the small pointed tell across the road from Mari, he answered: *"oh, rien que des maisons"*, i.e. *"oh, nothing but houses"*.

7 Childe 1955, 369.

University of Chicago, they participated in a seminar conducted by Bob Braidwood's dissertation professor, Henri Frankfort. The legendary Frankfort seminar, still a vivid memory that was often evoked during the 1950s-1960s by the Braidwoods and other Oriental Institute personnel who had survived it, met weekly for nine months each year: from the beginning of fall term to the end of spring term. The goal Frankfort set for the class was to begin at the beginning of the archaeological record as then known in the Near East (Middle Paleolithic to late Upper Paleolithic [Late Pleistocene] and the Natufian of the Mt. Carmel rockshelters [variously regarded as Mesolithic or early Neolithic]) and continue to 2000 B.C. This experience, together with his dissertation research on early deposits underlying the Amuqmounds, provided the data for Braidwood's production in 1945 of what he called 'the gap chart', a chronological diagram he drew up as a pedagogical device that highlighted a significant lacuna (gap) spanning several thousand years between the last mobile Paleolithic hunter-gatherers camping in rockshelters, and the first appearance of the earliest agropastoral villages, such as those represented by the Amuq A phase, for example, and the site of Hassuna in northern Iraq."[8] As a result, the students there eventually wrote monographs that still offer important overviews of various regions of the Near East.[9]

Frankfort saw it as one of his main tasks to understand the mentality of the ancient Mesopotamians. To those who were educated when processual archaeology was just coming into fashion, his methods to achieve that goal may seem a little old-fashioned, and they would now perhaps seem to be more at home in a post-processual world. Under the influence of Lévy-Brühl's philosophy, which ascribed to the early human cultures an entirely a-logical thought pattern (and which has since then come under heavy fire) Frankfort published a book in 1949, with Chicago colleagues and with his first wife who had great influence on him; it was called *Before Philosophy: the Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*. In its first chapter ("Myth and Reality") and the last one ("The Emancipation of Thought from Myth") he treats this purportedly different thought of ancient peoples, and uses the term "mythopoeic" for it, which may be translated as *myth-making*. What he meant to say was that the Mesopotamians of course lived their lives consciously, but that they saw their place in the world differently from us, whose thought pattern is much more abstractive and individualized: we have an *I-IT* relationship with the world around us, the ancient Mesopotamians rather had an *I-THOU* relation; the latter presupposes a closer tie with, e.g., forces of nature, reified and often deified.

For Frankfort, however, in his quest for understanding the ancient mentality, this difference did not lead to Wittgensteinian negativism which says that 'if lions could speak, we would not be able to understand them' (that is, it is impossible to 'enter' into another world). On the contrary, for him the difference forces us to

8 Watson 2006, 8-9.

9 See, e.g., Perkins 1949 and McCown 1942.

make the Mesopotamians' mythological thought our own – and here archaeology is very useful, because it provides the artifacts and the artistic products like sculpture and especially Mesopotamian cylinder seals necessary for the understanding of the myths we know from the cuneiform texts. Therefore sculpture and seals always remained important for Frankfort – not in a 19th-century art-historical fashion, but directly, to help understand a mentality. He published widely on them, and these books, as mentioned, remain handbooks until this day. Moreover, his method was almost Popperian in its strict adherence to finding fault with unclear or ambiguous propositions. Not only in describing excavation results, but also when treating abstract notions his scientific writing is severely methodical.

Another famous name in disciplines dealing with the ancient Near East is that of Benno Landsberger. He accepted a chair in Leipzig in 1926 with a lecture called "Die Eigenbegrifflichkeit der babylonischen Welt". In it he dealt with the same problem that kept Frankfort busy: how can we enter into the ancient world in order to understand it. Faced with this question two ways are open to us: either Wittgenstein's negativistic 'do not speak of what you cannot speak of', or a more positive and hopeful approach. In the latter, again there is a choice, and here Frankfort and Landsberger differ slightly.

Landsberger wanted to achieve his goal (*"die babylonische Kultur in einem lebendigen Zusammenhang mit den übrigen Kulturwissenschaften zu erhalten"*) through the awareness that *"dieser Zusammenhang besteht ausschließlich in der Einheit des Gegenstandes, d.i. des menschlichen Geistes"*. Another quote from Landsberger: *"Dem Forschenden muß aber ein reiches System der möglichen Lebensbegriffe zur Verfügung stehen [...]. Voraussetzung dafür ist die Vertrautheit mit dem Wesen der Sprache als Sprache, der Religion als Religion, des Rechtes als Recht. [...] Die so gewonnenen Eigenbegriffe müssen nun verbunden werden zu Systemen [...]. Nur durch Konstruktion vom Begriffssystem aus können wir zur Kultur gelangen. Ohne diese höhere Mathematik der Eigenbegriffe [...] kann keine geistige Einheit erwachsen."*[10]

It is clear that Landsberger does not think the Mesopotamian culture to be as different as a lion is from us; the sameness of the human character for him is a given, and in this way he differs from the position of someone like Lévy-Brühl – as did Frankfort, but in a different way. Landsberger's road was a linguistic approach to the conceptual world of the Mesopotamians, while Frankfort attempted a better understanding through the iconographical expression of myths and epics. Both distanced themselves from Lévy-Brühl's rather pessimistic stance, the one through language, the other through art; both held that we 'share enough human-ness' with ancient peoples to learn to understand them.

It is significant that David Wengrow's essay on Frankfort, subtitled *A Missing Chapter in the History of Archaeological Thought*, appears now, in what may

10 Landsberger 1965, 3. 4-5.

still be called the post-processual archaeological era. For this latter current is concerned exactly with human motivation found in thought, myth and manifested ritual rather than the processual preoccupation with politico-economic issues. The processuals got their inspiration, as is known, from the writings of such scholars as Gordon Childe and Grahame Clark, and concerned themselves with important things like domestication, urbanization and conflict-management. Writing about such issues, urbanization and physical and conceptual centers, Frankfort remarked: *"One may say that the birth of Mesopotamian civilization, like its subsequent growth, occurred under the sign of the city"*; he continued: *"The city sets its citizens apart from the other inhabitants of the land. It determines their relations with the outside world. It produces an intensified self-consciousness in its burghers, to whom the collective achievements are a source of pride"*[11]; then about the ziggurats and temples of the main city-gods: *"The huge building, raised to establish a bond with the power on which the city depended, proclaimed not only the ineffable majesty of the gods but also the might of the community which had been capable of such an effort."*[12] These passages can be read as post-processualism *avant la lettre*.

The two currents processualism and post-processualism are the main archaeological paradigmata of the last 45 years, as is well known. Robert Braidwood, mentioned above, played an important role in the first of these developments in the archaeology of the Near East. His strict and implicitly falsificatory scientific method he inherited from the Frankfort seminars, and he put it to good use in his work on domestication and early village life in Matarrah, Jarmo and Çayönü.

Lewis Binford, the guru of processualist archaeology, reacted rather strongly against Braidwood – Binford, who himself, in his earlier work, was a positivist as well as a behaviorist.[13] His rather partisan writings set the "New Archaeology" rolling, and proved to have much influence during the later sixties and the seventies, also in Great Britain. There, after David Clarke and Colin Renfrew, a reaction to this processualism set in under Ian Hodder and his students Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, who suggested that more attention be paid to human mental rather than socio-economic motivation.[14] Dutch mainstream archaeology (at the time still divided in "followers" in Prehistory departments and initial skeptics in so-called Archaeology departments) followed the Anglo-American developments, but in, e.g., Germany, France or Italy this happened somewhat later. In those countries, and to a certain extent also still in the Netherlands, archaeological practice and thinking suffered from the great divide between Classical Archaeology on the one hand, and the other archaeologies on the other. The mentality of the classical tradition is well-illustrated by

11 Frankfort 1951, 51.
12 Frankfort 1951, 55.
13 Cf. Binford 1972, Introduction and *passim*.
14 E.g., Hodder 1986; Hodder 1990; Shanks – Tilley 1987.

this quote, again from Anton Moortgat: *"Die klassische Archäologie bemüht sich, zusammen mit der Klassischen Philologie, [...] um das materielle Erbe des einen Trägers unserer abendländischen Kultur, um das Ideal einer klassischen Geisteswelt nämlich, deren Wesen in den beiden Begriffen 'edle Einfalt' und 'stille Grösse' von J.J. Winckelmann für alle Zeiten treffend gekennzeichnet wurde."* 15

I find it striking that, although the cooperation between "prehistorians" and "historical archaeologists" in the Netherlands has been rather better than in some of the countries just mentioned, even including Classical archaeology, little of Frankfort's heritage can be noted. One would expect more in view of his semi-post-processual ideas; as Wengrow aptly expresses it: a missing chapter.

Perhaps part of the cause of this lack of attention to Frankfort is to be sought in the views of Frankfort's immediate successor in Amsterdam. After Frankfort had relinquished his chair in 1939, in 1940 his successor, the Dominican priest Petrus van der Meer, must have consciously taken another course: in his acceptance speech he never even mentioned his predecessor, and he proves himself to be of a very different mien. His speech bore the title *The Task of Philosophy and of Positive Science in the Study of Near Eastern Culture*. I quote one of the more typical phrases: *"Culture is that which is produced through human action, under the guidance of his intellect, in order to fill in Nature's lacunae [...]"*, which may be taken as a step back into the 19th century (and is, by the way, a remarkable thing to say for a Dominican Father!).[16] In the Netherlands both processual and post-processual archaeology have exerted much influence, in the Prehistory departments (mostly concerned with the past of the Netherlands and surrounding areas) and then gradually also elsewhere. Childe, Braidwood, Binford, Clarke and Hodder are household names for all theoretical gurus. Frankfort's name does not occur, neither in the writings of an archaeologist who is world-famous in the Netherlands (Albert Egges van Giffen, Frankfort's contemporary), nor in those of Willem Glasbergen or Tjalling Waterbolk or, for that matter, Henk Franken – all of them famous for field work as well as theoretical treatises.

Another reason for this virtual non-existence of Frankfort's influence may be the fact that he worked mainly outside the Netherlands, and had no prominent students.

Things have recently changed a little. When the late Maurits van Loon changed his career from Dutch diplomacy to Archaeology, he did so in the USA. After studying under Edith Porada in New York, he became assistant professor in Chicago, and worked with the Braidwoods, Helene Kantor, Pinhas Delougaz and others, who had all taken part in Frankfort's seminars or worked with him on excavations. Yet van Loon's overriding interest for the time being remained the "object and art side" of archaeology. It was remarkably enough only when he was appointed to the Near Eastern Archaeology chair in Amster-

15 Moortgat 1971, 7-8.
16 Van der Meer 1940, 4-5.

dam and came into contact with the Dutch variety of the *New Archaeology* that he devoted much more energy to what was then (the 1970s) the mainstream, i.e. processual archaeology. Slightly irritated by the often shallow lingo of some of the processualists, he instilled in us, his students, a healthy skepticism towards their excesses, as well as an awareness of iconography as an important source, even for matters socio-economic. It is during his lectures rather than in writing that van Loon acknowledged a debt to Frankfort (whom he never met) – also because van Loon's writings were practical rather than contemplative.

Apart from the reasons mentioned above (his "expatriatism" and his successor's views), perhaps part of the reason for Frankfort's relative inconspicuousness in Dutch archaeology may also be found in the general timeframe. Post-World War Holland was too busy rebuilding, and more attention was given, in science in general, to "new" currents like Wiener's *Cybernetics*, von Bertalanffy's *System Theory*[17] – and thus a better feeding ground existed for processsual archaeology. Moreover, Frankfort's ideas were most often based on examples from Egyptian and Mesopotamian archaeology and texts, they were not always simple, and hence had little resonance in a land where these fields were scantily represented anyway.

The chronological framework which Frankfort devised still stands; his *Cylinder Seals* (1939), his *Stratified Cylinder Seals* (1954), his *Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (1954) remain top-quality handbooks; his *Kingship and the Gods* (1948) and his *Before Philosophy* (1949) may, I think, be read with profit by every archaeologist of whatever specialization. It is high time for a revival. And, typically, Maurits van Loon was the one to publish Frankfort's letters to the friend of his youth, from which he emerges as one who was deeply aware of an inner driving force, for him related to, or part of, a mystical presence, as the following quote from one of the letters to "Bram" may illustrate: *"But to our mind the miracle of Greek art is inseparable from the miracle of the Greek landscape. It cannot be described or pictured either, my good old friend,*[18] *but must be experienced in the perfect beauty of the mountains, the boldness of the sky and the scent of the grey-green herbs. Just beyond the sanctuaries of Delphi, there is a cleft in some vertical rocks where water sings and icy winds rush down from the mighty Parnassus, and even today, if someone goes there in reverence and silence, God will speak to him. And there is so much in that wonderland [...]."*[19]

This is different in tone from the scientific prudence emanating from the introduction to his *Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (1954): *"The general reader may find that the interpretation of individual works, and the historical connexions [*sic*] between distinct schools and regions, are sometimes substan-*

17 Wiener 1948 and 1954; von Bertalanffy 1968.

18 Both Frankfort and van Regteren Altena were 28 years old at the time ...

19 Van Loon 1995, 38.

*tiated with more detail than he requires. But conclusions drawn from discoveries so recently made cannot hope to command general assent unless they are well founded. A more apodeictic [*sic*] style would, moreover, have given a false impression of finality."*

Literature

Bernbeck 19979 = Reinhard Bernbeck, *Theorien in der Archäologie* (Tübingen/Basel 1997).

Binford 1972 = Lewis R. Binford, *An Archaeological Perspective* (London 1972).

Childe 1955 = V. Gordon Childe, Henri Frankfort: 1897-1954, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 41, 1955, 366-371.

Frankfort 1933 = Henri Frankfort, *De Archeologie en de Geschiedenis van het Nabije Oosten* (Amsterdam 1933).

Frankfort 1951 = Henri Frankfort, *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East* (London 1951).

Hodder 1986 = Ian Hodder, *Reading the Past* (Cambridge 1986).

Hodder 1990 = Ian Hodder, *The Domestication of Europe* (Oxford 1990).

Landsberger 1965 = Benno Landsberger, *Die Eigenbegrifflichkeit der babylonischen Welt* (Darmstadt 1965, reprint of Islamica 2, 1926, 355-372).

McCown 1942 = Donald E. McCown, *The Comparative Stratigraphy of Early Iran* (Chicago 1942).

Moortgat 1971 = Anton Moortgat, *Einführung in die Vorderasiatische Archäologie* (Darmstadt 1971).

Parrot 1976 = André Parrot, *Clefs pour l'archéologie* (Paris 1976).

Perkins 1949 = Ann Louise Perkins, *The Comparative Archaeology of Early Mesopotamia* (Chicago 1949).

Renfrew – Bahn 2004 = Colin Renfrew – Paul Bahn, *Archaeology: Theories, Methods and Practice* (London 2004; first ed. 1993).

Shanks – Tilley 1987 = Michael Shanks – Christopher Tilley, *Social Theory and Archaeology* (Oxford 1987).

van der Meer 1940 = Petrus van der Meer, *De Taak der Philosophie en der Positieve Wetenschap bij de Studie van de Cultuur van het Nabije Oosten* (Amsterdam 1940).

van Loon 1995 = Maurits van Loon, *"Hans" Frankfort's Earlier Years, based on his letters to "Bram" van Regteren Altena*, translated and edited by Maurits van Loon (Leiden 1995).

von Bertalanffy 1968 = Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *General System Theory. Foundations, Development, Applications* (New York 1968).

Watson 2006 = Patty Jo Watson, Robert John Braidwood, 1907-2003, in: *Biographical Memoirs* (Washington 2006).

Wengrow 1999 = David Wengrow, The Intellectual Adventure of Henri Frankfort: A Missing Chapter in the History of Archaeological Thought, *American Journal of Archaeology* 103, 1999, 597-613.

Wiener 1948 = Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: or the Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (Paris 1948).

Wiener 1954 = Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings. Cybernetics and Society* (New York 1954).

Dr. Diederik J.W. Meijer

Faculty of Archaeology, University of Leiden, Reuvensplaats 3, 2311 BE Leiden (Netherlands)

d.j.w.meijer@arch.leidenuniv.nl