Decentring the archaeology of West Asia: reconsidering early trade networks and social complexities

Düring, B.S.

Prof.dr. B.S. Düring

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Universiteit Leiden

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Prof.dr. B.S. Düring

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Mevrouw de Rector Magnificus, geacht faculteitsbestuur, zeer gewaardeerde toehoorders,

Archaeologists have been enormously successful in achieving increasingly detailed knowledge about the human past. Especially from the 1960s onwards a range of new scientific technologies combined with rigorous and systematic archaeological research, has resulted in great progress in our data and our capabilities.[1] However, I argue that the development of archaeology in general, and that of West Asia in particular, is constrained by two pervasive and problematic myths. These myths simplify and compress the past and have formed the basis for our studies, despite much empirical evidence to the contrary. I will argue that to overcome these two myths it is crucial to decentre the archaeology of West Asia and practice a more inclusive study of the past. To illustrate this decentred approach I will focus on the rise of exchange networks in the third millennium BCE in West Asia.

The first myth is that specific regions were uniquely important for the development of human societies. Classic examples of such regions are Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece.[2] These regions were seen as the centers of civilisation, and surrounding regions were regarded as peripheral. Further, these central regions were cast in a sequence, in which 'the torch of civilisation' was passed from its original cradle in West Asia, to 'classical civilization', and finally to the 'modern west'.[3]

The second myth of archaeology is that the key developments in our past occurred during relatively brief periods of rapid transformation. Gordon Childe, arguably the most influential archaeologist of all times, identified a series of past 'revolutions' including the 'Neolithic Revolution', the 'Urban Revolution', and eventually the 'Industrial Revolution' from which the modern world sprang and which has led to our current ecological crisis.[4]

Today I would like to discuss the problems that these two myths - that specific regions were uniquely important and that key transitions occurred as 'revolutions' - cause and I will put forward an alternative approach. Central to this approach is the concept of 'decentring'.[5] In short, this is the idea that we should reject any form of centring or essentialism, in which any particular region or period is classified as constituting the key to what happened in the past. This perspective has three major implications for the archaeology of West Asia, which concern: first, for how we work; second, what we study; and, third, where we work. I will discuss each of these implications in turn, and after that I will present the case study of exchange networks in the third millennium BCE.

First, how do we practice archaeology? The archaeology of West Asia was initiated by European explorers in the nineteenth century working with the support of major powers such as Britain, France, and Germany.[6] The idea was to reveal the world in which the Bible and classical civilization had emerged: the perceived double roots of western civilization. The first archaeological projects were little more than looting expeditions, the success of which was measured by the number of objects retrieved and brought to the museums of European capitals. Only gradually did archaeology become a serious discipline in which careful stratigraphic excavation, analysis of the assemblages extracted, and detailed publication became increasingly important.

Today the archaeology of West Asia remains dominated by archaeologists from western countries (Europe, the USA, Canada) both in the field and in publications, although in some countries of West Asia, such as Turkey, Israel, Iran, and Jordan, a strong tradition of national archaeology has also emerged. International organizations focusing on ancient West Asia, such as the *International Congress on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East*, the *Recontre Assyriologique Internationale*, and the *American Society for Oriental Research*, organize events only in Europe or the USA and their boards are almost exclusively filled with European and north American scholars.[7] Thus, the critique of Edward Said in his book *Orientalism,* in which he characterized scholars studying the east as appropriating a constructed other, remains relevant

today.[8] This starts with seemingly trivial things. For example, the term 'Near East' which remains popular in the study of ancient West Asia betrays a continued and problematic eurocentrism, like the idea that some periods or regions in the archaeology of West Asia are more relevant for 'our' development and others are better left to local archaeologists. The questions: why we do research; who does the research; and how we disseminate that research, need to be asked. It is high time to further decolonize archaeology in West Asia and work in partnership with local researchers and communities to investigate our shared past.

A second type of decentring that I think is long overdue relates to what we study in the archaeology of West Asia. The discipline remains rooted in a 'revolutions model' of the past in which key transitions, such as the emergence of farming or cities, occurred during relatively brief periods. The consequence of this 'revolutions model' is that extended periods are considered as 'empty time', in which nothing of interest occurred. In European history a classic example of such a supposedly empty time period consists of 'the Middle Ages' - the supposedly blank period between the Roman Empire and the Renaissance.[9] The Middle Ages were, of course, far from empty, including for example the Christianisation of northern Europe. In the archaeology of West Asia there are likewise a multitude of periods – often lasting several thousands of years – that have been considered not pertinent to the 'story of (western) civilization'. These include the Late Neolithic, the Chalcolithic, and any period postdating the Roman Empire.

Archaeologists working in West Asia and research funding organisations across Europe and beyond continue to have an extreme bias towards the first farmers, the first cities, the first states, and the first empires. This bias has serious implications in that our knowledge of the past is markedly uneven – for example, we have a lot of data for the first phase of farming, but much less for the several millennia between the start of agricultural subsistence and the emergence of the first cities.[10] As a consequence, the period between about 6000 and 3000 BCE in West Asia has seen very limited research across large parts of this region, and sites dating to this period where often excavated by accident rather than on purpose.

This is a problem, because, the 'revolutions model' of the past is actually not supported by our evidence. For example, the emergence of farming is a long drawn out process that starts long before the Neolithic and continues long after, with the constant addition of new crops and animals to our agricultural systems. Many of the key crops of ancient West Asia, such as olive and grape were domesticated thousands of years after the first farming communities are attested,[11] and the addition of new crops and animals continues up to the present, with for example kiwi fruits, grapefruit, and cranberries brought into cultivation relatively recently.[12] Thus, the transition to farming is an extended process rather than a threshold event, and in archaeology we can see many developments in farming systems, for example with the introduction of the plough and irrigation technologies, as well as periods in which farming and the degree of sedentism decreased markedly.

The idea that the past can be reduced to a few threshold events that are followed by stable periods of consolidation – in which no significant developments occured – is thus no longer tenable. For example, in between the earliest farming societies and the earliest cities many significant developments took place, including the emergence of dairy products,[13] wine and olive cultivation,[10] textile production technologies,[14] and metal extraction and casting technologies,[15] to name only a few developments of major importance.

The third type of decentring I argue for revolves around where we work. I think we need to reject the idea that important developments in the past occurred mainly in key regions portrayed as 'cradles of civilization'. A model in which significant developments only occurred in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece, and in which surrounding lands are cast as largely passive recipients of progress, is no longer

viable. More and more data are emerging that many crucial developments took place in regions traditionally classified as peripheries.

A good example for this shift in regional perspectives is the development of farming. While before the second world war the idea was that agriculture first emerged in the lowlands of Egypt and Mesopotamia, subsequent work – starting with seminal research by Robert Braidwood at Jarmo and Çayönü and continuing to the present – has established that farming first took shape in the foothills of Taurus and the Zagros, in the Levant (the so-called Fertile Crescent) and in central Anatolia, and that various crops and animal species were locally domesticated within a variety of regionally specific cultural trajectories.[16]

This pattern, in which important developments occurred outside the traditionally perceived 'cradles of civilization' is something that is attested more broadly. For example, the development of metallurgical know-how occurred largely in the mountainous regions of Iran, Anatolia and the Caucasus, where both metal ores and fuel were present, rather than in the Mesopotamian lowlands;[18] the domestication of crucial tree crops such as olive, fig, and grape, occurred in the Levant and in the Caucasus;[11] the rise of seafaring technologies occurs in the Arabian Gulf, the Levant, and the Aegean;[17] the domestication of dromedary camels and the development of palm garden oasis agriculture occurs in Arabia;[18] and the first alphabetic scripts were developed by Levantine societies.[19] Therefore, a perspective that foregrounds regions such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, or Greece, as uniquely important in crucial developments in the past, misrepresents the interconnected nature of ancient societies in West Asia and beyond, in which all regions have a role to play.

So far I have made the case that we need to break free from two pervasive myths in archaeology and that it is crucial to decentre the archaeology of West Asia in three ways: first, by confronting the Eurocentric and colonial roots of archaeology in this part of the world and the practices of appropriation and exclusion that are associated with it; second, by debunking a 'revolutions model' of the ancient past, in which significant changes occurred only during brief threshold periods, with long empty periods in between; and third, by shifting our focus away from a few supposed cradles of civilization towards a perspective in which societies were interconnected and significant developments occurred often in regions that were traditionally considered peripheral. Thus, decentring involves a move towards a more inclusive analysis of past societies.

To illustrate my approach I will now turn to what I think is one of the most fascinating phenomena in the ancient world, which is how we can understand a series of boom and bust cycles in which connectivities and complexities increase and decrease. These are evident in demographic proxies,[13] indicators for social complexity,[14] and in the volumes of long-distance exchange networks.[15]

The existence of long-distance trade networks in West Asia can be traced back at least to the end of the Ice Age, in the so-called Epipaleolithic, in which we find obsidian from central and eastern Anatolia up to 2000 kilometers away from their source in the Levant and the Zagros, and these networks continue into the subsequent Aceramic Neolithic.[20] By contrast, in the Ceramic Neolithic, that follows after, from about 7000 BCE, there is much more limited evidence for interregional exchange networks. Subsequently, in the Ubaid period (ca 5300-4700 BCE), we find Ubaid ceramics across much of the Arabian Gulf, which is possibly evidence for the earliest maritime exchange networks for which we have evidence.[21] About a millennium later, in the Late Uruk period (ca. 3300 BCE) a significant expansion of Uruk assemblages occurred out of southern Mesopotamia, which was linked at least in part to an expansion of trade.[22] After the demise of the Uruk networks in the early third millennium BCE, there is another phase of increased interregional trade, that has been labelled 'the second urban revolution',[23] starting around 2600 BCE, which came to an end around 2200 BCE. The period

between 2000 and 1200 BCE, comprising of the Middle and the Late Bronze Age, is generally regarded as another period of increased long-distance trade and complexity, and witnessed the rise of the second generation of imperial states in West Asia.[24]

If we simplify matters considerably, we appear to be dealing with a cyclical development in West Asia, in which periods of increased interregional trade lasting several hundreds of years are alternated with periods in which such exchange networks are less visible.[25] These changes appear to have been correlated with changes in the degree of social complexity, urbanism ratios, and population levels. The scale of these trade networks increases over time, starting with regional networks, focusing for example on the Arabian Gulf in the Ubaid, and by the third millennium BCE, included large parts of Eurasia and Africa. In this period, we can trace materials such as amber from the Baltic, lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, copper from Oman, and tin from Tajikistan being transported over thousands of kilometers.[26] How and why these long-distance exchange networks arose remains poorly understood.

The emergence and demise of these exchange networks has been analysed with a series of related approaches in the past decades. In the 1980s *core – periphery* models were popular, which were then replaced in part by *world system theory*, and in more recent years the term *globalization* has become popular.[27] All of these theories are predicated on the idea that the motor behind the emergence of long-distance trading networks is the development of dominant complex societies, located in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Indus on the one hand, and the emergence of subsidiary resources supplying economies in the peripheries around these economic core societies, on the other.[28] Once in place, these relations of economic domination are reinforced by how the system operates, and after a period of crisis the economic relations of the preceding period will often re-emerge. Typically, there is a considerable degree of determinism in these accounts, for example in that centers develop in alluvial regions capable of supporting high population densities, and in that the demise of globalization episodes is often linked to climate changes, epidemics, and mass migrations episodes.[29]

The dominant discourse on past 'globalisation episodes' is thus highly deterministic, and starts from a false dichotomy between cores and peripheries that is inaccurate for ancient West Asia, and, most importantly, completely ignores the people and societies that were creating connections and exchanging things. Like in the modern world 'globalisation' is portrayed as a force of nature that people have to deal with, rather than something that is the result of social activities and choices.[30]

Yet, it is clear that exchange networks in ancient West Asia could only have worked on the basis of incentives that motivated people to participate. While Mesopotamian elites might have been able to create systems of coercion in the southern alluvium, in which large workforces became dependent on food rations and had to work in what was probably the world's first class society,[31] these Mesopotamian elites had no real power over people in the mountainous regions of Iran or Anatolia, or small scale societies in Arabia or Cyprus. Thus, if we want to understand how and why trade networks arose, looking at the demand for materials in densely populated urban lowlands is not a sufficient explanation. Instead, we can ask why people in adjacent regions participated in the production and exchange of goods and for whom. For example, we have much evidence that the complex skills necessary for extracting metals from ores and metal casting were developed in the mountainous regions of West Asia, and that the objects produced were primarily consumed by societies in these upland regions. It appears that the Mesopotamian lowlands were *not* at all central in the emergence of metallurgy and in the exchange networks of metal objects.[32] Therefore, a decentred approach is required in which we investigate local cultural trajectories and try to reconstruct why and how societies engaged in exchange networks.

Chalcolithic Cyprus (4000-2400 BCE) is the perfect example of the point that the development of and engagement with trade networks can only be understood in the context of local cultural trajectories. While around the island we see the development of complex urban societies engaging in long distance trade networks, Cyprus remains staunchly unique in its cultural traditions, including villages composed of roundhouses, subsistence based on horticulture and hunting, and pottery and figurines that are distinctly Cypriot. This does not mean, however, that Chalcolithic communities on Cyprus were disconnected from the surrounding regions. In Chalcolithic settlements and graves, we find objects such as faience beads and metal artefacts made of Anatolian copper that were clearly imported to the island, as well as objects that imitate Anatolian prototypes such as particular types of beads and figurines. Foreign objects, were thus selectively appropriated by Chalcolithic communities, whereas a lot of other things were not.

In the subsequent Early Bronze Age (2400-1900 BCE) in Cyprus, we see a broad adoption of objects and technologies from Anatolia, including new domestic animals, such as cattle, donkey and new breeds of sheep, the plough, new textile and cooking technologies, metallurgical know-how, and pottery assemblages. This has previously been interpreted as evidence for the migration of Anatolian populations to Cyprus,[33] but a critical analysis shows that, once again, a selective repertoire of objects and practices of Anatolian origin occur in EBA Cyprus, and these objects were embedded in practices distinct from those in Anatolia. Thus, for example, Anatolian style drinking sets occur in collective rock cut graves, whereas in Turkey graves were single and do not normally contain drinking sets consisting of pitchers and cups. Thus, once again, we are dealing with Cypriot societies engaging on their own terms with materials and technologies from neighbouring regions, by culturally appropriating foreign things.

Likewise, at the other end of West Asia, in eastern Arabia, the emergence of complexity in the third millennium BCE has often been linked to the export of copper to Mesopotamia and India.[34] However, the emergence of complex settlements, elaborate burial tombs, and copper metallurgy, once attributed to Mesopotamian colonists because of the occurrence of imported vessels of Jemdet Nasr type in graves structures,[35] can only be explained as an indigenous cultural trajectory that was made possible by the development of irrigation technologies and the adoption of date palm oasis agriculture, which provided the resources that made the development of monumental buildings and graves possible, and fed the people working in copper production.[36] Therefore, if one wants to understand how and why people in eastern Arabia became connected to long distance trade networks in which substantial quantities of copper were exported, the analysis has to start from the study of local trajectories rather than the demand in the urbanized lowlands of Mesopotamia and India, a demand which moreover could easily have been met by other producers outside eastern Arabia, given that copper is abundantly present throughout West Asia.

I argue that if we want to understand how large trade networks emerged in prehistoric West Asia an analysis of local trajectories such as those on Cyprus and Oman is essential. Without a consideration of these local trajectories the analysis of past trade networks becomes a projection of modernist economic theories to a world where they do not fit, and consequently we will not be able to explain why and how things happened in the past. Decentring the archaeology of West Asia will be challenging and time consuming, and needs to be tackled by inclusive research teams, but it will provide us with a much richer and a more accurate understanding of past societies in ancient West Asia and allows us to bring people back into our understanding of past boom and bust episodes.

It is for this reason that my research currently includes fieldwork projects investigating prehistoric sites dating to some 5000 years ago in both Cyprus and Oman, with the aim of mapping out local trajectories of social changes and understanding how and why these societies engaged in broader

exchange networks. This work has been undergoing for some eight years and has started to yield exciting data on societies and trade networks in the third millennium BCE.

In our excavations at the Chalcolithic site of Chlorakas-*Palloures,* undertaken jointly with the University of Cyprus, we have been finding important new evidence on the earliest period in which cast metal objects occurred on Cyprus, in the form of a cache of objects left behind in a complete jar in one of the houses, which included the oldest currently known copper axe from the island. This axe was produced of copper that we can source to the Taurus mountains with some confidence, using lead-isotope analysis.[37] This imported object provides an important piece of the puzzle of how Cypriot societies started to connect with broader exchange networks, and that at first, they were mainly interested in objects with which they were already familiar but made in new materials: axes and beads, which could be both easily integrated into existing cultural practices, and be used to mark social distinctions. It seems that imported objects from within and beyond the island where used in a society in which some people were trying to attain higher status, as is most evident in some very large houses that were created to assert social and economic power.[38]

Likewise, in the Wadi al-Jizzi Archaeological Project, which investigates the hinterlands of Sohar in Oman to document archaeological landscapes that are vanishing at an alarming speed, we have been finding numerous imports dating to the Bronze Age in small rural settlements engaged in small scale copper production. These include imports from the Indus region and Bahrain.[39] In order to better understand these rural Bronze Age societies in Oman, and how exchange networks might have been important to them, we have started small scale excavations at a very promising site. Through such fieldwork projects in Cyprus and Arabia, with my research team I hope to shed more light in the coming years on the exciting widening of social and economic networks that occurred in the third millennium BCE across West Asia and how people outside the traditionally perceived core regions in Cyprus and Oman began to participate in these networks.

I am coming to the final part of my inaugural speech, in which I would like to decentre myself and this moment. Although, this event today is very much a *rite de passage*,[40] the road to my current achievement started decades ago in 1995 when I first came to study archaeology here in Leiden, and in my journey in archaeology I have had many fellow travelers, mentors, friends and supporters, to whom I owe a great depth.

The Board of Leiden University and the Board of the Faculty of Archaeology have supported the institution of my chair and I am grateful for this and would like to especially thank the dean of our Faculty, Professor Jan Kolen. Next I thank my colleague Professor Peter Akkermans, who from the moment I returned to Leiden with a postdoc in 2008, has supported me tremendously, in my career, in my research on Tell Sabi Abyad, in my field work, and has made space for me to grow.

My gratitude also goes out to my PhD supervisors: Dr. Diederik Meijer and Professor John Bintliff. Diederik has taught me to think about the broader meaning of archaeology and has kindled my interest in the comparative analysis of past societies. John challenged me to critically think about my theories and data, and your critiques of fashions in archaeology remain refreshing. While reflecting on my mentors I would also like to thank Professor Ian Hodder. For someone so famous you have been remarkably supportive throughout the years and your work remains a constant source of inspiration.

Some words for my fellow travelers. I great enjoy various long-term collaborations with various friends some of which started out as my students. Here, I should mention Victor Klinkenberg, who first joined me in fieldwork at Barcin Höyük when I was doing my PhD and has stuck with me through the years, in various fieldwork projects and a PhD, and who is currently my field director at the Palloures excavations in Cyprus. I hope we will continue to travel together for a long

time to come. Likewise, I am very happy to work on a daily basis at the Faculty of Archeology with Aris Politopoulos, my former student who has now far surpassed me as a teacher and is now helping me to improve my teaching skills.

The Palloures field work is indebted to many colleagues and friends, but I would like to specially mention Harry Paraskeva, Ellon Souter, Lily Graham- Stewart, Holly Kunst, Maria Hadjigavriel, Ian and Vicky Cohn, Bo Schubert and Catriona Ewing. In the Oman fieldwork project, I am indebted to Sufyan al Karaimeh, Nasser al-Hosni, Eric Olijdam, Sam Botan, Jordy Aal and Rita Kremer.

I am blessed with several amazing PhD students, and it has been a pleasure to work with Tijm Lanjouw, Riia Timonen, Roberto Arciero, Maria Hadjigavriel, Nathalie Brusgaard, and Burcu Yildirim. Although you may not realise it, I have learned more from you than you have from me.

I exist as an academic to train the next generation of archaeologists. In truth, working with students in classes, seminars, on thesis topics and in fieldwork has been invaluable. There are too many of you to mention here, but you know that I cherish you.

Last, I come to my loved ones. My parents, Stefan and Nesrin, many thanks for your support throughout the years, and trying to understand the decidedly obscure things I have been doing. Finally, Marianna, Iris, Camilla, you have had to put up far too often with me being absent in some foreign country doing fieldwork or at home working away at some project. Thank you for everything.

Ik heb gezegd.

Noten

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Prof.dr. Bleda Serge Düring

2022-	Professor Archaeology of West Asia, Leiden University
2018-2022	Vice-Dean Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University
2015-	Director Chlorakas-*Palloures* Excavations (Cyprus)
2014-	Director Wadi al Jizzi Archaeological Project (Oman)
2013-2022	Associate Professor in Archaeology, Leiden University
2012-2016	PI ERC Starting Grant on the Archaeology of the Early Assyrian Empire
2011-2013	Assistant Professor in Archaeology, Leiden University
2009-2011	Director Cide Archaeological Project (Turkey)
2008-2011	Veni Postdoctoral Fellow, Leiden University
2007-2008	Talent Postdoctoral Fellow, University College London
2006	PhD in Archaeology, Leiden University (awarded *premium erasmianum* prize)
2001	MA in Archaeology, Leiden University

Universiteit Leiden