

# THE MELAMMU PROJECT

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## **“Introduction”**

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The Melammu Project investigates the continuity, transformation and diffusion of Mesopotamian culture throughout the ancient world. A central objective of the project is to create an electronic database collecting the relevant textual, art-historical, archaeological, ethnographic and linguistic evidence, which is available on the website, alongside bibliographies of relevant themes. In addition, the project organizes symposia focusing on different aspects of cultural continuity and evolution in the ancient world.

The Digital Library available at the website of the Melammu Project contains articles from the *Melammu Symposia* volumes, as well as related essays. All downloads at this website are freely available for personal, non-commercial use. Commercial use is strictly prohibited. For inquiries, please contact [melammu-db@helsinki.fi](mailto:melammu-db@helsinki.fi).

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## INTRODUCTION

The past few decades have seen the general reversal of a trend that began more than two centuries ago. Specifically, this trend involved the intellectual climate that fostered the belief that Hellenic civilization (and by extension, European civilization) was a totally independent, Indo-European development that owed little or nothing to its “oriental” forebears. This trend grew out of a combination of developments that provided a framework in which such a paradigm could flourish.

Among these developments was the separation of philology and theology in the 18th century so that historical and intellectual developments no longer had to be explained through a theological (specifically Judeo-Christian) background. This effectively isolated European intellectual development from the Near Eastern religions with which such developments had previously had to be connected.

Another development was the discovery in the 18th century that Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit were “sprung from some common

source, which, perhaps, no longer exists”<sup>1</sup> (now called Proto-Indo-European) and with it the foundation of the new discipline of comparative or historical linguistics. The discovery of the Indo-European language family provided a “scientific” basis on which “Indo-European” linguistic and intellectual developments could be separated from “Semitic” and ancient Egyptian ones which were then considered “degenerate” before there could have been any influence on early Greek culture or thought.

This paradigm, in which the “ancient world” was Classical Greece and Rome whence “Western Civilization” sprang fully formed from the head of Zeus, held sway for about 200 years despite the explanations of the ancient Greeks themselves, usually expressed in a mythological context, that they had adopted much of their knowledge from Near Eastern and Egyptian sources. While there were those who worked outside this paradigm, pointing out connections between early Greek thought and culture and earlier oriental parallels, they were for the

<sup>1</sup> These words are taken from the Presidential address of Sir William Jones (1746-94) to the Bengal Asiatic Society in 1786. The passage that contains these words is often quoted in introductory textbooks of comparative linguistics or Indo-European studies and so constitutes the “creation myth” of the discipline (for a brief, non-specialist discussion see D. Crystal *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* [Cambridge 1987], 296). Jones came to India as a judge, but soon developed an interest in Sanskrit philology. Sanskrit and its similarity to Latin and Greek had been known in Europe since the age of exploration in the 16th century, but earlier philologists had tended to see Sanskrit as the parent of Greek and Latin. It was Jones who first pointed out the likelihood that all three, along with other European languages, were descended from some no longer existing language. His

ability to do this, however points to a third development, which is more a trend in 20th century education, that has tended to keep the paradigm alive and this is the decline of Classical studies as a prerequisite to education. There was a time in the not too distant past when anyone reaching the university level, let alone pursuing an advanced degree, would have been expected to have already read the Classical authors in the original. Familiarity with Greek and Latin was simply the mark of an educated person. As a result of the trend not to require the mastering of the Classical languages as a prerequisite for higher education, many scholars no longer carry the detailed knowledge of Classical civilizations that would be necessary to seeing connections between their own discipline and the Classical world around with them as part of their intellectual baggage.

most part not in the mainstream of Classical studies and their ideas too often fell on parched ground. During this period, the disciplines that had once been side-by-side, such as Biblical studies and Classical studies, became more and more isolated. Similarly, the fledgling disciplines of Egyptology and Assyriology, created by the decipherment of the hieroglyphic and cuneiform scripts in the 19th century, remained isolated from Classical studies (but certainly not from Biblical studies) because the paradigm said that the Ancient Near East had nothing to tell us about the origins of Greek culture and thought.

But as data accumulate, eventually a bad paradigm will be recognized for what it is. By the second half of the 20th century enough material had accumulated in the fields of Assyriology and Egyptology for even the casual observer to notice that there was something wrong with the paradigm that denied any oriental influence in the background of early Greek culture. Although there were classicists who were beginning to broach this problem earlier, two works that appeared during the 1980's, one dealing with Mesopotamia and the Levant by W. Burkert in 1984<sup>2</sup> and the other dealing with Egypt by M. Bernal in 1987,<sup>3</sup> were both provocative and controversial and more or less blew the lid off the pot that had already begun to seethe.

Since that time there has been a veritable explosion of information on possible connections between Greek (and Roman) civilization and those of the Ancient Near East. Scholarly conferences have been held on various aspects of the topic, and books and articles in journals and Festschriften have

joined the conference papers in a profusion of "newly discovered" links between the Ancient Near East and Classical civilization that have actually been available for centuries or decades but which have been ignored or denied because the paradigm excluded them from consideration.

In an attempt to bring some order to this welter of newly published information, Simo Parpola, an Assyriologist with a background in Classics, visualized the concept, not of simply a bibliography of recent studies, but of a database of documented links between Assyria and the Classical world that would be made available, not just to scholars, but to the world at large through the Internet. To Parpola, Assyria was a natural focus for the Mesopotamian end of the chain because he is a specialist in the Neo-Assyrian period, and it is during this period that the first contacts between Mesopotamian culture and the emerging Greek ethnos are documented. As a specialist who has concentrated on the Neo-Assyrian language and on the culture, religious thought, and royal ideology of ancient Assyria, he realized that Assyria, although always linguistically and ideologically distinct from Babylonia in the south, was nevertheless the heir to all of the preceding millennia of Sumero-Babylonian culture and that the Assyrian empire was the vessel through which this culture was carried toward the west.

The Assyrian empire was the conduit through which Mesopotamian culture flowed in antiquity. And this channel remains to this day. In the 150 year history of Assyriology, the single most important tablet find with respect to the culture of ancient Mesopotamia remains the discovery of As-

<sup>2</sup> *Die orientalisierende Epoche in der griechischen Religion und Literatur*, *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Heidelberg 1984) (English translation published as *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the*

*Early Archaic Age* by Harvard University Press in 1992).

<sup>3</sup> *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. Vol. I: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece (1785-1985)* (London 1987).

surbanipal's library in the ruins of Nineveh in the early days of the discipline. Without the collected works of literature, history, wisdom, and scholarship preserved in the library of this Assyrian king, our knowledge of Babylonian culture, religion, and science would be a mere patchwork of scattered finds from various sites. Again, as in the past, Babylonian culture has been transmitted through Assyria.

To implement his vision and to put the paradigm of no contact to rest once and for all and to put an end to the isolation of disciplines that should be acting in concert, Parpola invited a number of colleagues in various fields whose published work indicated that they already rejected the paradigm to a conference in Finland. The results of this conference are reported in this volume. But while Parpola was determined to lay the ghost of the broken paradigm of no contact between the Ancient Near East and the Classical world, he also thought to break another similar paradigm that has grown up in Assyriology. Assyriology has persistently ignored the modern-day Assyrians through a paradigm that says that they have nothing to contribute to our understanding of ancient Assyria because the modern Assyrian language is not descended from

ancient Assyrian but is rather a dialect of Aramaic and their claim of descent from the ancient Assyrians is not a continuous tradition but is a fairly recent one (based on a millennium-scale). In Parpola's view (as it should be in everyone's), this paradigm has no more a priori validity than the one concerning contacts between the Ancient Near East and the Classical world, and before being accepted it should be investigated scientifically. For this reason, he also invited representatives of modern Assyrians and of Syriac studies to the conference and to participate in the Project.

At the first meeting of the invited participants, it was decided that Parpola's view, visionary as it was, was too narrow, and that Assyria's influence was felt not only in the Levant and Mediterranean, but also toward the east, in Iran, India, and even as far as western China. Further, it was decided that, although Assyria and Babylonia were distinct entities, the mutual influences of one on the other were too pervasive to separate. And so what was originally conceived of as "The Intellectual Heritage of Assyria in the Classical World" became "The Intellectual Heritage of Assyria and Babylonia in East and West," and the Project was christened MELAMMU (see below, p. xxi).