



Of highland-lowland borderlands: Local societies and foreign power in the Zagros-Mesopotamian interface



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 January 2016

Revision received 2 July 2016

Accepted 9 September 2016

Available online 19 October 2016

Keywords:

Narratives of civilization

Highland-lowland interaction

Kassite

Late Bronze Age

Sirwan Regional Project

Khani Masi

ABSTRACT

Narratives of civilization are spun from the juxtaposition of a civilized self with that of a barbarous other. Such an opposition is never more easily constructed than from the distinctiveness of lowland and mountain topographies, environments, and life-ways. Studies of highland-lowland relationships across different periods, places and disciplines also place the two realms in conceptual opposition and only rarely engage in depth with the interaction that must underwrite all negotiations of identity. We can trace the first attested construction of such a dichotomy in the texts and iconography that detail Mesopotamia's interaction with the Zagros highlands in the later third and second millennia BCE. The recent opening of the Kurdish Region of north-east Iraq to international archaeological research now provides us with the opportunity to investigate Bronze Age communities located in transitional and highland landscapes and their relationships with the lowlands.

In this paper we take a critical approach to the conceptualization of highland-lowland interaction in the past and in modern scholarship and formulate a bottom-up, archaeological approach for the investigation of highland-lowland encounters. Drawing on our recent work in the Upper Diyala/Sirwan river valley, we present crucial new settlement and material evidence, which challenges traditional interpretations of the region as a homeland of mountain tribes and begin to write a more balanced, local account of socio-cultural development and external interaction between this borderland region and a series of Bronze Age imperial powers.

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1. Introduction

Transitional landscapes that bind together distinctive geological, topographic and environmental zones are places of connectivity in economic, cultural and socio-political terms. The encounters of such borderlands fluctuate over time and range widely in scale and nature from short-distance movement, supra-regional trade and imperial conquest. Yet they also result in, perpetuate, and deliberately or subconsciously become part of particular modes of life, informing both local identity and external perception.

Some of these themes have long been concerns, for instance, in research on maritime networks of contact and interaction in the Mediterranean (Braudel, 1972; Horden and Purcelle, 2000; van Dommelen and Knapp, 2010; Broodbank, 2013), feature in borderland and frontier studies (Lightfoot and Martinez, 1995; Anzaldúa, 1987), related post-colonial discourses and ethnographies of

encounter (Faier and Rofel, 2014) as well as longstanding debates surrounding identity, its negotiation and material expression (Barth, 1969). Landscapes connecting uplands and lowlands, the communities of such transitional and highland regions, and the form and nature of their external relationships, by contrast, have received comparatively limited scholarly interest beyond the ethnographic present or the very recent past (Ives, 2001; Mathieu, 2011).

The Middle East presents a region which is topographically dominated by imposing mountain chains and a documented history of highland-lowland interaction reaching back to the Epipalaeolithic, when wide-ranging exchange networks began to distribute obsidian originating from highland Anatolian sources across the Levant and Mesopotamia (Chauvin and Chataigner, 1998). Narratives of civilization, the stories of how social hierarchies, urban centers and states first developed and expanded, however, place the locus of these developments firmly in the region's most prominent lowland plains. This is because our understanding of ancient Mesopotamia as the proverbial 'cradle of civilizations' derives predominantly from lowland-centric, text-informed

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self-representations that perceive of, and represent its hilly flanks through the tinted glasses of elite political economy and imperial ideology. Mesopotamian texts and iconography habitually caricature transitional and highland communities as unruly mountain dwellers on the one hand, or portray them as the losers of military encounters and subordinates on the other. A dearth of archaeological work in many mountain regions of the Middle East and in the strategic landscapes that connect highlands and lowlands and formed the loci of their encounter, means that ancient stereotypes have translated almost seamlessly into modern scholarship. Their dichotomous rhetoric has as yet to be tempered with more direct evidence of the societies in question and a bottom-up and materially informed perspective of the range of relationships that ultimately produced lowland and highland identities.

The western Zagros region of modern-day Kurdish north-east Iraq and western Iran, and in particular the upper reaches of the river valley known in Arabic as the Diyala and in Kurdish as the Sirwan,¹ presents a particular case in point. The Diyala river flows from its headwaters in north-west Iran through the western-most outliers of the Zagros range before it forms a wide floodplain and joins the Tigris south of modern Baghdad (Fig. 1). The river valley, thus, channels movement between the fertile Sharezor high-plateau around the modern city of Suleymaniya and the lowland plains of southern Mesopotamia. The Diyala plains just north of the Jebel Hamrin, the western-most outlier of the Zagros range, served as the artery of major historic route systems, including the Achaemenid Period (550–330 BCE) Royal Road and the medieval Silk Road known as the Khorasan Highway. A more northerly route, via the Abbassan and Zohab valleys, connects to another branch of this long-distance route network.

Unsurprisingly, expansive Mesopotamian polities from at least the third millennium BCE as well as those of Elam in highland Iran sought to exert influence and control over this strategic thoroughfare. Yet, despite the evident historic significance of the Middle and Upper Diyala valley, the area is almost entirely unexplored in archaeological terms. A cultural and socio-political *tabula rasa*, the region has had to accommodate the hypothetical 'homelands' of a series of little-known Zagros groups, which Mesopotamian texts refer to as Gutians, Lullubi, and Kassites. At the same time, the region is habitually bypassed in more detailed discussions of Bronze Age political geography (e.g. Frayne, 2008).

The opening of the Kurdish Region of Iraq to international archaeological research in the past five years following a decades-long hiatus due to the political situation during the Saddam-regime provides us with the opportunity to explore these and many other long-standing questions of ancient Near Eastern history anew and from a different regional and thematic angle. Equipped with matured and more nuanced conceptual frameworks for inter-cultural encounters, alongside a host of new or dramatically improved field and analytical methods, this return of archaeological research also allows us to engage with broader, cross-cultural issues in highland-lowland research.

Some of the earliest encounters between emergent Mesopotamian states and contemporary highland societies took place in the Zagros-Mesopotamian interface. We can trace from the late third millennium BCE through text and image the construction of a civilized Mesopotamian self that is pitched against a Zagros, highland antithesis. Our archaeological work in the Upper Diyala valley,² which connects the lowlands with the highlands and throughout much of its history takes on the character of a political and cultural borderland, allows us to begin to explore in more depth

and from the bottom-up the development of local social organization and cultural tradition as well as the practices and modes of interaction that, at least in modern academic discourse, Mesopotamia's rhetoric of alterity has tended to obscure.

In this paper we examine the Zagros-Mesopotamian interface during the later part of the Bronze Age, with a particular focus on the second half of the second millennium BCE in the Upper Diyala valley, for which we present new archaeological evidence. We begin with a critical discussion of key themes in the conceptualization of highland-lowland encounters and argue for a bottom-up, archaeological approach to their investigation. We then review the culturally specific ideological construction of highland-lowland alterity in Mesopotamia, which shaped ancient perception and representation, as well as more recent scholarly engagement with questions of 'civilization' and 'the state'. Moving into our study area of the Upper Diyala valley, we present new data illustrating distinctive patterns in regional settlement, urban form, and ceramic technologies of the mid- to late second millennium BCE. This multi-scalar approach to the reconstruction of local social organization and cultural identity enables us to explore the nature and intensity of the region's external relationships, in particular with the powerful states of Bronze Age Mesopotamia. It also permits us to draw broader conclusions regarding the encounter of highland-lowland borderlands and their range and admixture of potentially subtle cultural expressions of connectivity and distinctiveness.

2. Approaching highland-lowland encounters

Mountains, their ecologies, and their life-ways were declared a 'global concern' at the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit (UNCED, 1992), the result of a growing alarm over mountain resource over-exploitation and climate change, their detrimental impact on highland biological and cultural diversity, and the recognition of the inevitable knock-on effects on surrounding lowland regions. Before then, mountains were often regarded as a peripheral issue of national importance to a handful of mostly poor countries (Mathieu, 2011). When considered in a highland-lowland interaction context, however, about half of the world's population is affected in one way or another by what happens to and in the mountains (Mathieu, 2011; Ives, 2001). Since 1992, there has been a surge of research on mountain issues, including the foundation of several research centers and academic journals. Much of this work, however, focuses on the present and the very recent past and, with the exception of a handful of seminal ethnographies and political histories, mountain research rarely tackles head-on the social and cultural questions of highland-lowland encounter. Among those most influential are Edmund Leach's (1970) work in the Burmese highlands, James Scott's (2001, 2009) historical syntheses and political sciences perspective on the same region and Ernest Gellner's (1969) work in the Moroccan Atlas.

The deep-time and long-term perspective of highland and transitional societies and their external relationships as well as the dramatic chronological expansion of highland and transitional landscape histories that archaeology can contribute to this growing inter-disciplinary field remains largely untapped both conceptually and in terms of field practice. In part this is due to archaeology's traditional lack of interest in the investigation of highland regions. Archaeological research in the mountains brings with it a whole host of methodological and physical challenges (Glatz et al., 2015), but it is the fundamental social and cultural distinctions that are being drawn between highlands and lowlands in ancient as well as more recent philosophical and scholarly discourse that are responsible for this vertical disparity in our knowledge. Fernand Braudel, the father of Mediterranean studies of interaction,

¹ The river is best known in archaeological circles as the Diyala and we shall henceforth refer to it in this manner.

² The Sirwan Regional Project is directed by the authors in cooperation with the Garmian Directorate of Antiquities and Heritage at Kalar.

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