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CAROLINE JANSSEN Ghent

At the Banquet of Cultures: Mesopotamia's Heritage in Arabic Times

In regions like Mesopotamia with its heterogeneous population, ideologies of tolerance and universalism were useful tools to unite the different ethnic groups.¹ Such ideologies are an intercultural phenomenon *in se*, and vital to societies with complex histories and foundations. A common language, political ideas and religion are important ingredients to create a feeling of togetherness. In this paper we explore the idea that such ideologies can be transplanted from one empire to another, and that they can cross linguistic, political and even religious boundaries.²

The imperial ideology of the Sasanians encouraged the study of scientific and religious texts, irrespective of their land of origin. Their translation project made

of Persian a language of sciences and universal knowledge. They developed an ideology which connected the translation movement to the study of the Avesta, and thus to Zoroastrianism; yet Abbasid rulers successfully transformed it into an Arabic cause, thus laying the foundation of the flourishing of sciences in the Islamic world. In this contribution, some evidence is gathered which shows that the intellectual heritage of Mesopotamia, enriched by the study of foreign cultures (Greece, India), was not rejected at the moment of the Islamic conquests but was quite influential during the second half of the first millennium AD. Sasanian values and ideologies were incorporated into the cultural program of the Abbasid rulers in Baghdad.

I. Mesopotamia's past

1. The legend of the Babylonian barrel

A legend handed down by medieval Arabic authors tells us that when the

Muslims set out to conquer Mesopotamia, they asked the Persians about the wonders of the land. One of these was that Babylon had several magical objects, one of which was a large barrel. When

¹ The author/year system is used in the footnotes, except for the first reference.

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² We were much inspired and enlightened by D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture. The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsid Society* (London & New York, 1998). By placing the Arabic translation movement in a perspective much wider than the title of his work suggests, he laid valuable foundations for those who are interested in the Babylonian/Persian heritage in Islamic times.

the king organized a banquet, every guest poured out his own drink into it, but when later at night drinks were served from it, everyone received what he had brought. We can take this image as a metaphor for Mesopotamia's past, where so many people had sat at the banquet of cultures, yet cultures had kept a number of distinctive features all along.³ Mesopotamia is in fact an early example of a multicultural society, where people of different stock and backgrounds, (semi-)nomad invaders and settlers, had placed their cultural marks, and had contributed to the prosperity, intellectual development, highlights or downfall of the region. It is thanks to this often fruitful exchange that the region saw the birth and development of cities, writing, administration, magic, religions, and last but not least, of sciences.

2. The world order

From early times onwards Mesopotamia's population had been of mixed origins and linguistic affiliation. From those times on the region had given birth to states and empires, that united peoples and superimposed themselves over the diverse tribal groups, or at least tried to keep them under control. By creating states rulers increased the possibilities of production and trade.⁴ The accumulation

of wealth became highly organized and professionalized. The empires installed a 'world order' which allowed economy to prosper, by creating a stable and secure environment for the population.⁵ In the early states, economic benefits served as a cement of the nation.

In order to do so, states need a good organization: the army, the administration, postal services, legal institutions etc; or as F. McGraw Donner eloquently put it: "*Troops to put down opposition and enforce judgments and regulations, administrators to assess and collect the taxes on which the state relies (among other things, to pay its troops and other officials), legal specialists to elaborate and enforce the state's law – this is the stuff of which states are made.*"⁶

In a multicultural society minorities and even majorities can be suppressed, but such a system is not the most efficient way to rule. An empire based on force will collapse as soon as the balance of power shifts. However, if people believe they take part in the great enterprise of civilization, feel protected and share political and economic interests, they will be motivated to 'stand united,' also in adversity. Much less force and expenses are needed. The people must be convinced that they enjoy a peaceful and prosperous life (which is what the majority of people want) thanks to their government, and this is where ideology comes in. The idea of participation can

³ C. Janssen, *Bābil, the City of Witchcraft and Wine. The Name and Fame of Babylon in Medieval Arabic Geographical Texts* (Ghent, 1995), 73; 83; 87; 200ff.

⁴ Ideas around the dynamics of empires are developed by K. Ekholm & J. Friedman, "'Capital' Imperialism and Exploitation in Ancient World Systems," in M.T. Larsen (ed.), *Power and Propaganda. A symposium on Ancient Empires (= Mesopotamia, Copenhagen Studies in Assyriology 7)* (Copenhagen,

1979), 41-58.

⁵ B.K. Gills & A.G. Frank (eds), *The World System. Five hundred years or five thousand?* (London & New York, 1993 [1996], 149ff place these developments in the perspective of 'World History' and look into the economic foundations of the ancient Mesopotamia.

⁶ F. McGraw Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, 1981), 39.

be real or originate from 'a false consciousness,' as Liverani expressed it.⁷ It can be a tool to suppress and exploit, or to make a socially balanced state, in which people share (part of) their wealth and bring each other to prosperity. Economical and political stability are prerequisites to achieve this level of civilized life. Ideology and propaganda are the means to make the people cooperate, even if it is against their own direct advantage.

Very early on Mesopotamia's rulers had understood that military excellence and economic development were not the only means to keep the empire together; royal inscriptions testify to the fact that an imperial ideology, based on religious foundations, was an important tool to convince people to accept their world order. The people of Mesopotamia had to believe that the imperial organization was a sublime achievement of civilization itself. Perhaps the world order found its most eloquent expression in the arts.

Very early the idea was developed that laws, taxes and decisions of the government were to be respected not only because the ruler was able to use force and procure economic benefits, but also because he had a divine mission to lead his people into prosperity. Mesopotamian law collections such as Hammurabi's famous Code, were preceded by an ideo-

logical statement, the Prologue. In it, the divine order came first, naturally followed by the king's historical role in the divine plan. Furthermore, the king was depicted as someone who truly cared for his people. It was a clear ideological foundation of power.⁸ In the Epilogue sanctions are formulated against those who violate the cosmic order by acting against the royal prescriptions, or by modifying or destroying the Code.⁹

3. The creation of the multi-nation state

Maps of e.g. the Third Dynasty of Ur, Hammurabi's kingdom, the empires of the Mitanni, Hatti, Egypt, Babylonia and Assyria show how large territories in the region were united under one rulership.¹⁰ Maps of trade contacts and warfare show the impact the states of Mesopotamia had far beyond the borders of the alluvial plain.¹¹

The first imperial states can be found in Mesopotamia from the second half of the third millennium onwards, and with them came ideologies that justified rulership and the unification of regions. But it is in Achaemenid times, when the Persian region was united with the Fertile Crescent under Iranian rule, that the

⁷ The latter term is taken from M. Liverani, "The ideology of the Assyrian empire" in M.T. Larsen, (ed.), *Power and Propaganda. A symposium on Ancient Empires (= Mesopotamia, Copenhagen Studies in Assyriology 7)* (Copenhagen, 1979), 298.

⁸ M. Liverani, 1979, 297ff gives an insight into the mechanism and aims of imperial ideologies. In his view, which is based on the example of the Assyrian empire, imperial ideologies are dreadful tools 'to present exploitation in a favourable light for the exploited.' We do not necessarily see them in the light of the establishment of injustice and exploitation; solidarity is also sometimes accepting something against one's direct interests, and ideologies can help

establish such behaviour.

M. Liverani also makes some sharp observations on the role of religion in propaganda and power (301f).

⁹ *RIA*, s.v. Gesetze, p. 244b-246a.

¹⁰ See e.g. M. Roaf, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East* (New York & Oxford, 1990), 102 (Ur III); 120 (Hammurabi's kingdom); 134 (the empires of the Mittanni, the Hatti, Egypt and Babylonia); 140 (Middle Assyrian empire), 179 (the Assyrian empire in the late 8 century BC), etc. to visualize these empires.

¹¹ See e.g. M. Roaf, 1990, 113 (showing the Old Assyrian trade routes); 116 (the world of the Mari letters), etc.

foundations were laid for a 'world empire,' connecting East and West in a way never seen before.

The empire stretched from the Mediterranean to the Indus region, and included up to 20 provinces ('satrapies'). These regions were united in a multi-national state, in which local traditions, religions and forms of administration were preserved. They were subjected to a yearly inspection by 'the king's eye.'¹² The unification, combined with a respect for local traditions and cultures, created a framework for a peaceful interchange between the distant regions.¹³

Cyrus, who had conquered Babylon, had laid the foundations of the Achaemenid empire and its imperial culture. He was apparently very convincing in his role of a 'benevolent ruler,' according to the different segments of the Middle Eastern population.¹⁴ The Babylonians, the Jews,¹⁵ even the Greek agreed upon this.¹⁶ In Babylonia, local administration was conducted as it was before, and the economic life was not disturbed by Cyrus's conquest.¹⁷ The fact of servitude was masked, and Cyrus won the loyalty of the population.¹⁸

Religious groups met with tolerance and benevolence: not only did Cyrus support his tribal gods near Pasargadae, but he also restored the temple of Jerusalem

for the Jews and returned the captive gods of Babylon, Assyria and Elam.¹⁹ He was a model ruler for the multicultural society. Herodotus mentions that the Persians called him a father, because his innate kindness always inspired him with plans for the well-being of his subjects.²⁰

In the collective memory of the Middle East the Achaemenid period was remembered as a period of prosperity and high civilization. For the Sasanians, the later Iranian rulers whose ambition it was to resuscitate the past and integrate it in their own imperial ideology, the times of the 'first Persians' stood out as an era of harmony and wisdom, of glorious days.²¹

The model of rule imposed by Cyrus, with his moderate taxation and religious tolerance, impressed both the inhabitants and the neighbours of the empire, both contemporary and later generations. Even if it was never an easy job to rule such an empire, and internal struggles occurred, it lasted for 150 years, until Alexander the Great conquered an almost intact Persian empire. Only a few years after Alexander's unexpected death however it fell apart; by then, the infrastructure allowing fruitful exchanges between East and West was seriously damaged.²² According to Arab historians, a period of 'lesser kings' followed.²³

¹² A.T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago 1948 [1959]), 59.

¹³ M.G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam. Conscience and History in a World Civilization, 1: The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago & London 1974 [1977]), 118.

¹⁴ M. Roaf, 1990, 204.

¹⁵ A.T. Olmstead, 1948 [1959], 49.

¹⁶ M. Roaf, 1990, 204.

¹⁷ A.T. Olmstead, 1948 [1959], 77.

¹⁸ A.T. Olmstead, 1948 [1959], 71.

¹⁹ A.T. Olmstead, 1948 [1959], 71.

²⁰ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 243 (= book III 91).

²¹ R.N. Frye, *The Golden Age of Persia* (London, 1975 [1993]), 1.

²² M. Roaf, 1990, 215.

²³ C. Janssen, 1995, 150.

II. The heritage of Mesopotamian culture in Sasanian imperial ideology

1. The legend of Alexander the Destroyer

It is no wonder that for the heirs of the old Mesopotamian civilizations, Alexander the Great was not 'the one who brought civilization to the East,' as he was once perceived in some western versions of history. In Arabic sources, many of which are derived from Persian accounts, his role is even quite ambiguous. According to some legends he was the one who destroyed Babylon, who destroyed civilization itself, whereas others put him on an equal rank with Solomon himself, Alexander and Solomon being the two prototypes of pious kings. All depends on the segment of the population from which the legends came.²⁴

One of the Alexander legends is related to the downfall and even extinction of scientific scholarship in the ancient Middle East. It tells that Alexander the Great (doubtlessly here a symbol of Greek civilization) came and stole the scientific works of Mesopotamia. He had them translated into Greek and then wiped out the traces of their origin. By his pillage of Mesopotamia he created 'the Greek miracle.' The scientific knowledge of Mesopotamia had been recorded in the texts of the Avesta and Zand, copies of which had been carefully stored in the Royal Treasury and the Fortress of

Archives. Alexander is said to have destroyed these texts, after which he had the local scholars killed, so that all who knew about science and its origin were dead. Some scholars however managed to escape and tried to save what they could. Thus the ancient knowledge of Mesopotamia was scattered over the world. After that fateful event, 'learning was obliterated in Iraq,' as the Abbasid astrologer Abū Sahl b. Nawbaḥt put it.²⁵

But the ancient Middle East would reemerge on the scientific stage under Sasanian rule, thanks to the so-called 'translation movement.' This is at least how Sasanian ideology represented the past.

2. The Sasanian translation movement

Translation activities had existed in Mesopotamia from very early times onwards: bilinguals, lists of words and expressions helped the Akkadians to understand Sumerian texts, and letters refer to interpreters used to communicate with people such as the Cassites. Important texts were translated or recreated in the many languages of the ancient Near East. But the Sasanians ventured upon a larger enterprise: a translation movement, which was a deliberate attempt to assemble knowledge from different regions and

²⁴ C. Janssen, 1995, 147-185 gives examples that illustrate that 'double roles' are not the privilege of Alexander alone, but that all the kings representing episodes from Babylon's past were similarly 'double faced.' Heroes to some, they were sworn enemies to

others. For Alexander in particular see p. 181ff.

²⁵ For versions of this story in Persian sources such as the Zoroastrian *Dēnkard* and the *Book of Nativities*, and in Arabic translation (Abū Sahl b. Nawbaḥt), see D. Gutas, 1998, 34-45.

make Persian its vehicle. Although this is probably a scholarly development, it was linked to the imperial ideology of the rulers who patronized the scholars. The later Arab historians and their Persian sources depict the translation movement as a well-planned action, carried out in a most systematic way, step-by-step, by several kings: Ardashir is said to have collected religious texts, Sabur non-religious texts, and Chosroes I Anushirwan would have decreed that these texts had to be studied and discussed for the benefit of mankind.²⁶

The Alexander legend was used, in the imperial ideology, to justify this ambitious project, which involved a remarkable openness to intellectual achievements of foreign cultures. If Alexander the Great had destroyed the perfect knowledge of the 'first Persians,' was it not the task of the Sasanian rulers to undo his evil deeds? If the scholars had fled to the four corners of the world, in a desperate attempt to save the sciences from destruction and themselves from being slaughtered, was not all the knowledge in the world, irrespective of its present whereabouts, of Persian origin? Was the project not just the re-translation of the wisdom once contained in the sacred Avesta, or at least of knowledge derived from it, hence a moral obligation for the

pious kings? When they translated texts from Greece, India, and maybe even China, was it not their own intellectual heritage they resuscitated?²⁷ Thus, the Sasanians constructed a new identity and meanwhile gave impulses to the rebirth of scientific life, making their empire a meeting place of different cultures and Persian the language of a universal science.

The translation movement laid the foundation of a study of universal knowledge, and showed a great respect for values and ideas of the different cultural strata of the empire and beyond. In this period there were academies and libraries, and a great diversity in opinions and beliefs. In the heart of the empire, revolutionary ideas about social justice and movements of religious syncretism surfaced.

What is important for our discussion is that the imperial ideology encouraged the study of different cultures and made the translation of texts a national cause. Thus the foundations were laid for scientific development. The project was protected against xenophobic reactions of the religious establishments by anchoring the foreign texts to the original culture of Persia and linking them to the corpus of the Avesta through the 'Alexander the Destroyer' legend.

III. Ideologies crossing the linguistic and religious border

1. The translation movement under Islamic rule

The Sasanian empire came to an end by the conquests of the Arab Muslims, which came without any doubt as a sur-

prise for the superpowers. The Arabs had been present in the confines of the empire since a long time, as cuneiform sources and reliefs on the palace in Niniveh attest. But they had never founded an empire or posed a serious

²⁶ D. Gutas, 1998, 34-45.

²⁷ D. Gutas, 1998, 34-45.

threat to the rulers. Once united under impulse of Islam, the Arab Muslims were extremely successful and rapidly annexed vast territories once belonging to the Byzantine and Sasanian empires. As a consequence they all of a sudden became masters of the former multi-nation empires with their strong intellectual and administrative traditions – traditions that had had little appeal to the Arab nomads so far. They had not developed law codes, established academies, and had even only recently developed an own script.

When they became rulers, they did what previous rulers had often done. Local administration and institutions were almost left intact, at least in the first century of Islamic rule. For almost a century the administration in the former Byzantine and Persian regions continued to be conducted in Greek respectively Persian. Even in matters of religion the impact on the masses of the population was limited in early Islamic times. The conquests were not set up as a mass conversion project. Islam itself was not conceived as a new religion (the God of Islam was the God of Jews and Christians) but as the 'seal' of prophecies.

But what attitude had the Muslims to adopt versus the scientific and speculative sciences cherished in the Middle East – and so unfamiliar to the Arab tribes? How did they react to the scholars of the Persian academies and libraries, and how did the guardians of Mesopotamia's heritage respond to Muslim rule? What was to happen to the intercultural exchange of ideas and beliefs, which had been so central to the Sasanian ideology? Could the new rulers 'take over the sciences of the communities that had domi-

nated before them,'²⁸ as was thought by the Brethren of Purity in the tenth century, or would they reject them?

It is important to observe that the Muslim conquerors did not have final answers to these and other questions when they arrived in Iraq. It would take several centuries before the debate of the relationship between Islam, the sciences and philosophy would be fully developed.

Islam itself was still in its formative years and we must realize that much of what we consider as unalienable features of this religion were still a matter of reflection or debate, or did not even exist, in the first centuries of Islamic rule. To the elements under construction belong the *šarī'a* (Islamic law), orthodoxy, and the impact of the prophetic traditions.

To come back to our questions, initially, it seems, intellectual life was not seriously affected. The first conquerors, in their newly founded garrison cities, were not sufficiently embedded in Greek and Persian culture to worry about this issue, while the conquered people were not too much involved with Islam on a fundamental level. Only gradually they started to communicate on an intellectual level. A confrontation of both traditions, either resulting in a rejection of religion or science, or an attempt to harmonize them, was unavoidable in the long term, but seemed not to be important in the beginning. In the early days of Islam, the conquerors and the conquered lived in the same region but in a different universe. The first step towards each other came through language (when Persian scholars started to write in Arabic, the language of those in power), not through religion. Many early authors of Arabic

²⁸ *EP*, s.v. *Ikhwān al-Šafā'*, 1073b.

texts were of Persian origin. By the time the opposition between the scientific approach and religion became an issue, large parts of the heritage had already been translated to Arabic, and many ideas had become part of Islamic culture itself.

The Andalusian historian Ṣā'id, who lived in the 11th century AD, confirms that in the beginning of Islam, the Arabs '*cultivated no science other than their language and a knowledge of the regulations of their religious law, with the exception of medicine,*' and that the Umayyad dynasty, which ruled the empire from Damascus, did not bring any change in the situation. Only when the centre of power shifted to Mesopotamia, under Abbasid rulership, things changed. In the words of Ṣā'id: '*people's ambitions revived from their indifference and their minds awoke from their sleep.*' It was the caliph al-Manṣūr, the founder of Baghdad, whose name was associated with this process of 'awakening.' He is believed to have had a particular interest in philosophical knowledge and astrology, the old science of Chaldaeae.²⁹ In the course of history, the Abbasid rulers, who were strongly influenced by the Persians, placed themselves in the line of rulers of the 'World Empire'³⁰ and patronized the sciences, as the Sasanians had done before them. Arabic geographers from the Abbasid period often suggest that there was a feeling of continuity, e.g. when they refer to Iraq as 'the land of Babylon,' and idealize the days of the Persian kings.

The spirit of the translation movement was kept alive, and with it, universalist trends. The Bayt al-Ḥikma (House of

Wisdom) is doubtlessly the most famous exponent of this movement, as D. Gutas has demonstrated, but other evidence can be found. We first show how the broader cultural context in which D. Gutas placed the House of Wisdom influences its appreciation, then we give further examples of the survival of the old ideals from texts on Bābil (ancient Babylon) and the 'Case of the Animals' by the Brethren of Purity.

2. The case of the Bayt al-Ḥikma (the House of Wisdom)

The history of the House of Wisdom is usually represented in the context of the Islamic empire. The authoritative *Encyclopaedia of Islam* depicts it as a short-lived institute that was founded by the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn, at the beginning of the ninth century, while it mentions that its library had already been there under his father Harūn ar-Rašīd. The *Encyclopedia of Islam* adds that its foundation took place '*undoubtedly in imitation of the ancient academy of Djundaysābūr,*' and that its main activity was '*the translation of philosophical and scientific works from the Greek originals.*'³¹ According to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, the influential Barmakids were the motor behind the translations, the caliph al-Ma'mūn is just believed to have given a new impetus to the movement. The recently published *Encyclopedia of Arabic literature* gives a similar report.³² The Barmakids belonged to a family from Ḥurasan, once probably linked with a Buddhist shrine. Their ancestors were

²⁹ The full passage is translated by D. Gutas, 1998, 31.

³⁰ M.G.S. Hodgson, 1974 [1977], I, 280.

³¹ *EP*, s.v. Bayt al-Ḥikma, 1141a.

³² *EAL*, s:v. Bayt al-Ḥikma, 145-146.

ministers of the Sasanian empire, or so it was believed.³³ After al-Ma'mūn, the centre was closed down, and its collection may have passed into private hands.³⁴ In this representation, the House of Wisdom becomes a marginal phenomenon in Islamic history.

This is however not a fact but the result of too narrow focusing. Misconceptions abound. It is Dimitri Gutas who drew the attention to these facts after a study of the translation movement. He gives textual proofs of the continuity of intellectual life between Sasanian and Islamic culture. He corrected the picture sketched in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* by a thorough analysis of Persian and Arabic sources, and by using an interdisciplinary perspective.

First, he placed the House of Wisdom in the context of the translation movement in Abbasid times, then linked this movement to its fore-runners from Sasanian times. Second, he demonstrated that the House of Wisdom was not erected for the study of Greek texts, but that translations from Persian were its main activity. This makes the link between the Sasanian translation movement and the Arabic translations even stronger. He further formulates the hypothesis that the House of Wisdom institutionalized translating from Pahlavi into Arabic. As far as the Greek heritage was concerned, they were part of the corpus the Sasanians had recovered and translated into Pahlavi.³⁵

The following picture now unfolds itself. Under the Abbasids parts of the former establishment were successfully integrated in the new empire and with their integration and participation in the government the exchange of knowledge

and views became more common. The attitude of the Muslims towards the sciences shifted from indifference to keen interest. While traditionalists from the religious establishment and Arab partisans may have been opposed to the influx of foreign ideas, Abbasid rulers turned the translation movement into an Arabic cause. Not only did they encourage the study of philosophical and scientific texts; they made Arabic the language of science for the Islamic world, and thus laid the foundations of the development of sciences in the Islamic world, which soon achieved high levels. The old ideology had stripped itself from its religious associations, and had chosen a new language of expression, in accordance with the new balance of powers. A new empire had taken the torch of civilization.

It is thanks to the merits and insights of Abbasid caliphs such as al-Ma'mūn that the connection between the sciences of antiquity and Islamic culture got solid foundations, and that they blended into a new civilization. The Abbasids have transformed Arabic into a language of sciences, by adopting the principles of the translation movement. Indeed, as the Brethren of Purity observed, they took over all the sciences that had preceded, and this at a time when a new concept of law and justice was being developed.³⁶

But the support of sciences and philosophy, the study of texts outside the framework of Islam put them in a vulnerable position. The ideology behind the translation movement is one of inclusion, which is the cement of a large empire. However, when the empire started to disintegrate, claims of defenders of 'pure Islamic values' became more and more

³³ *ET*², s.v. al-Barāmika, 1033.

³⁴ *EAL*, s.v. Bayt al-Ḥikma, 146.

³⁵ D. Gutas, 59-60.

³⁶ *ET*², s.v. Bayt al-Ḥikma, 1141a.

prominent, undermining the ideology of the cosmopolitan freethinkers and scholars.

The tensions between the different segments of the population surface in the accounts on Babylon.

3. The death of Babylon

Babylon had since long been in ruins when the Muslims conquered Iraq; the location and identity of the site was known, and the physical appearance of its remnants intrigued them. They knew the stories that surrounded the ruined city (that there were seven cities with magical objects; that it was built by giants; that it was haunted; but also that it had been the capital of a large empire, etc). Babylon figured on the maps of the Classical geographical school of Iraq, probably because the geographers used older Persian prototypes and the ruins had still some meaning to the Muslims (it was referred to in the Qur'ān as the place of the fallen angels Hārūt and Mārūt, and Christians and Jews came there to visit 'Daniel's pit').³⁷ The site still served as a landmark.³⁸

The Arabic texts show that scholars such as al-Bīrūnī and al-Mas'ūdī had good (if not always entirely correct) notions of Mesopotamian history. E.g., al-Mas'ūdī divides its history into the periods of the kings of the 'Suryanūn,' who were the first to keep records of reigns and astronomical observations; the kings of Mosul and Niniveh; the kings of Babylon; the first Persians (up to Darius); the 'lesser kings in whose days

there was no 'strong man' and factiousness reigned' (something the scholars such as al-Mas'ūdī apparently disliked); the second Persians (i.e. the Sasanians) and the Greeks and the 'Rūm' (Romans/Byzantine rulers).³⁹

The city of Babylon was believed to have been constructed by mythical personalities of the Iranian past such as Bi-yūrāsib, or Nimrūd, or the Canaanites, and so on. The city is said to have been destroyed by Alexander the Great, or according to others, by Chosroes.⁴⁰ The same amount of confusion and contradiction surrounds its rulers, many of which are 'double-faced.' Nimrūd, Nebuchadnezzar and Alexander the Great occur as great kings (builders, protectors etc.) *and* as great evildoers (destroyers of temples and cities).⁴¹

Legends surrounding the ancient city show that some realia of the old world were preserved in the collective memory. Thus the texts mention that the kings used a 'magic map' enabling them to use rivers as a weapon against people 'who refused to pay taxes,' and they refer, albeit in a fantastic way, to the river ordeal.⁴²

When we investigated the legacy of the ancient city in Islamic times, we were struck by the number of references made to it. But above all we were surprised to see the variety of the stories connected with it. It soon became clear that the stories did not belong to one tradition, but to different strata of the society (the Persian cyclus, the Jewish heritage, ...). The choice of its founder and the destroyer, the appreciation of the ancient rulers, and the stories are undoubtedly linked with

³⁷ C. Janssen, 1995, 104; 187ff.

³⁸ C. Janssen, 1995, 91-111.

³⁹ C. Janssen, 1995, 150.

⁴⁰ C. Janssen, 1995, 147-185.

⁴¹ C. Janssen, 1995, 157-185.

⁴² C. Janssen, 1995, 202f. (magic map); 206 (river ordeal); translations of the different versions of the tale of the seven cities can be found on pp. 73, 83f and 87.

the strata of the population from which they originated. It is in order words ideological history. What different people told about the city, depended on their view on Mesopotamia's past.

In the course of the tenth century, some, hostile against the Persian nostalgia, minimalized its significance for the present times: 'hardly anybody knows where Bābil is'⁴³; 'Bābil is a place' (full stop)⁴⁴ and the Palestinian al-Muqaddasī even said that one should stop calling Iraq 'the land of Bābil' 'because true Arabs had never named it that way.' He did some research to prove his case.⁴⁵

This vehemence can only be interpreted as a reaction to the persophiles who used its name to conjure up an ideal world: that of the ancient Persian empires, when Mesopotamia was full of harmony, tolerance and justice (or so they claimed). In the words of al-Mas'ūdī:

'The central climate is the climate in which we were born, be it that the days have separated us from it. We are now at a long distance from it, and in our hearts a deep longing for it was born, the more so since it was our fatherland and birthplace. This is the *iqlīm* (climate) of Bābil, and this *iqlīm* was splendid under the Persian kings (...). (All) this (was true), when this climate was (still) characterized by (qualities) such as the great number of resources, the mildness of its land and the opulence of its life, and the possession of the 'Two Tributary Streams' (...), the Tigris and Euphrates, the totality of the nations in it and when the evil ones kept far from it. It was the center of the earth, the climate of the sun, which stood in the middle of the

seven climates, and the ancestors used to compare it to the world as the heart compares to the body, because (all) the concepts stem from the people of this land (...) because of their wisdom in (all) matters, precisely as does the heart.

(...) It hurts me [to perceive], in which condition the vicissitudes of fate have lead me because of my separation from this capital (...).⁴⁶

The description of the climate of Bābil (here the old *kišwar-iqlīm*, not to be confused with the Ptolemaic climates)⁴⁷ conjures up a world of peaceful coexistence and prosperity. It is Ērānšahr, the heart of the old Persian empire, whose kings were 'like the most precious pearl in a necklace' (al-Mas'ūdī).⁴⁸ This open veneration of the Persian empire can only have existed in the Abbasid empire, because it was felt that Abbasid rule was conducted in the same spirit.

The Iraqi geographers left many descriptions of this 'climate of nostalgia.' There is no doubt that Babylon became the symbol of the old world order, the civilization of the Iranians. It is a land of tolerance, moderateness, prophets, wisdom. For al-Mas'ūdī this society was continued under Abbasid rule, when Baghdad flourished as the intellectual center of the Islamic world. Then he puts a precise date to the desintegration of the world, namely in 332 AH (943/944), when the Buyids challenged the caliphate and captured Baghdad, reducing Iraq to a provincial status. In the tenth and eleventh century factiousness grew and the empire started to fall apart. The ideal of the universal empire, ruled from Bagh-

⁴³ al-Muqaddasī (10th century AD), see C. Janssen, 1995, 36.

⁴⁴ az-Zamaḥṣārī (12th century AD, in a geographical dictionary), see C. Janssen, 1995, 67. Although of Persian origin, he is known to have opposed the Persian partisans of the *šū'ūbiya* movement, and to have

defended arabophony.

⁴⁵ C. Janssen, 1995, 37.

⁴⁶ C. Janssen, 1995, 125.

⁴⁷ See C. Janssen, 1995, 114-115.

⁴⁸ C. Janssen, 124.

dad, was shattered.

According to D. Gutas, the translation movement as such died out by the end of the first millennium. However he stresses that this does not necessarily mean a decline of scientific production.

Still, there is a shift, we believe: a new order was about to emerge. By now, the different segments of culture were blending. The translation movement had translated philosophical and scientific ideas into Arabic, hence into the language of the religious establishment. The boundaries between the conquerors and the conquered had been blown up, there were no longer two universes. Whereas in the first millennium the diverse intellectual traditions were more or less organized in separate streams (natural sciences, Islamic scholarship, philosophy) they became more and more intertwined from the tenth, eleventh century onwards.⁴⁹

The confrontation between the sciences and religion could no longer be avoided in a climate in which orthodoxy had crystallized and defenders of a pure, traditionalist Islam had started to attack the freethinkers and cosmopolitan spirits.

For pure scientists, intellectual freedom is of the essence, and compromises are not possible. For pure believers, religion cannot be compromised. But this causes factiousness, which tears apart the Islamic world, and divides the *umma*, the Islamic community. In the new world order, some of the greatest thinkers will try to reconcile philosophy, science and religion, but they face harsh problems.

The Brethern of Purity (Iḥwān aṣ-Ṣafā') witnessed the process of the decline of old universalist values and the

attack on the science and rationality, and were alarmed.

4. The case of the animals

Some thirty or forty years before the end of the first millennium AD, a more or less enigmatic group of people from Basra calling themselves the 'Brethern of Purity' started to write essays. Their collective pseudonym is a clear reference to the fables of Kalīla wa-Dimna, a text of Indian origin which was translated into Arabic through Persian. In their 51 *rasā'il* (essays) they drew up the balance of civilization. They presented an overview of all the areas of knowledge, including themes related to mathematics, philosophy, physics, psychology, law, religion and magic. They defended the study of science and religion in a universalist spirit. Strange as it may seem to us, they felt it was necessary to hide their identity, but claimed to have had a broad support in all the strata of the society (kings, vizirs, artisans, merchants, etc.).

The collection contains a charming piece of fiction, the 'Case of the Animals.' The animals complain that the humans are cruel to them and abuse them. Because the humans lack respect for their nature and sensibilities, they revolt. A complaint is filed before the king of the Jinns. All kind of animals plead their case (sheep, pigs, camels, worms, insects, ...); humans try to invalidate their arguments.

The kernel of the story is truly of ancient Mesopotamian spirit: it is a debate between the animals and humankind, both claiming superiority. But it is much

⁴⁹ See M.G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam. Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 2: *The*

Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods (Chicago & London, 1974 [1977], 152ff.

more than the traditional Sumerian 'debate-of-the-tamarisk-and-the-palmtree'-type of story; in this debate between humans and animals, the entire cosmic order is at stake.

The text is very pleasant and vivid, with all the animals boasting their qualities and degrading human beings. It is almost a piece of theatre, and full of humor, e.g. when the pig complains that he is confused: should he complain about the Christians, who eat his flesh, or about Jews and Muslims, who refuse to do so?

But the reader may not be deluded by the entertaining character of the text: the authors stress that serious issues are at stake. What are these 'issues'? One can see different levels of interpretation. The piece can be read as a social fable (about class struggle and as a criticism of the socio-economic system) or as an 'ecological fable' (about animal rights, the relation of man to nature, and the ecological system).⁵⁰ But whoever thinks its main issue is the defense of the oppressed will be puzzled by the ending. For no matter how much sympathy the animals gain, no matter how lucid their arguments are, they lose their case. The modern reader will feel disappointed by this seemingly 'unhappy ending.'

Yet if we want to interpret this text, we have to understand what happens at the end and why. First of all, the animals complain not only against the human species, but against civilization itself, a point of view that can hardly be defended by the Brethern. Second, the relationship between mankind and animals is clear in the Qur'ān, and the Brethern cannot openly overturn the meaning of the verses without falling into heresy. But in fact, the lawsuit is not decided on these

grounds. The most important element in the interpretation is not that men win, but who among the humans has the final word. For the man who convinces the Jinns to decide in favour of humanity, is not *n'importe qui*. He is the personification of the ideal of a truly cosmopolitan man; he is a Muslim ('Arabic in his religion'), of Persian origin, and a true scholar; he unites in him the best of all the great civilizations:

"Then rose the experienced scholar, the sharp-witted man of culture and refinement, the discerning one; Persian in his lineage, Arabic in his religion, Hanafite in his concept of law; Iraqi in his refinement, Hebrew in lore, Christian in his way of acting, Syrian in his ascetism, Greek in sciences, Indian in understanding, Sufi in conduct, regal in character, divine in his vision, godlike in cognition, eternal."

This man, it is clear, is the ultimate product of the translation movement. The fact that he wins, is, believe it or not, a true happy ending.

It is such a man who, according to the Brethern, has the right to rule the world. They tried to shape a model of an ideal Muslim, open, tolerant, even a syncretist. They opposed the opposite tendency, to shape an Islam focused on the model of the prophet's life and deeds, hostile to 'un-arabic ways.'

It must be remarked that in the *Case of the Animals*, where time and again the principles of a sound justice are explained, not a single reference is made to the *hadīth* corpus. This pillar of Islamic law, this return to 'truly Arab ways' and connection to the 'original islam' of the Arabian Peninsula, does clearly not belong to their ideal justice. The non-

⁵⁰ See the title of L.E. Goodman's translation, *The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of*

the Jinn. A Tenth-century Ecological Fable of the Pure Brethern of Basra (Boston, 1978).

mentioning of *hadīth* is a deafening silence in a time where Islamic jurisdiction is founded on the Qur'ān and the model of the life of the prophet. Moreover, not the *fuqahā'* (specialists of Islamic law), but men and animals freely quote and interpret evidence from the Qur'ān to plead their case. The Jinns never say they do not have the right to do so. Finally, although coranic evidence is used, the Torah and philosophers are quoted with similar authority.

With their ideals of tolerance and interculturality, the Iḥwān balance on the verge of heresy. They may have had good reasons to choose a pseudonym and only to trust 'true friends.' The empire was rapidly desintegrating, and times of factiousness made it more and more dangerous to seem unorthodox. The Iḥwān were worried and asked their readers to open their eyes and breast and heart.

5. The Babylonian barrel in the second millennium AD

Universalist ideas, a truly cosmopolitan civilization, is a sound foundation of a stable empire. It is also a solid ground on which scientific progress can be made. Different cultures can challenge each other's view, and reach new levels of understanding.

The ideology of universalism is vulnerable though, when factiousness becomes more rewarding than unification. Then ideologies of 'inclusion' will have to compete with those of 'exclusion'; the ideal of togetherness and religious tolerance are challenged by new ideals of righteousness and orthodoxy which does not allow deviations. In the complex

history of the peoples and ideas living in the Middle East, the dynamics of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion,' of togetherness and difference, have played an important role in the development of ideologies.

In my opinion, the vision of the world as expressed by among others the Iḥwān aṣ-Ṣafā' is a great achievement of world civilization. It reflects the cosmopolite world of the Islamic empire, with Mesopotamia as its heart, a wholesome civilization, capable of great achievements. Yet it did not survive as such.

By the end of the first millennium, the translation movement, which had started under the Sasanians and was continued by the Abbasids, came to an end, and with it the ideals of antiquity. Baghdad, the daughter of Mesopotamia, gradually lost its position as the pulsating heart of the Islamic empire in the course of the tenth and eleventh centuries. The desintegration of the empire weakened its position, and it got a final blow in 1258 AD, when it fell in the hands of the Mongols.⁵¹

The ideals and ideological heritage of antiquity, the ideals of tolerance and openness to foreign cultures had flourished under Muslim rule, and had contributed to the greatness of Islamic cultural and intellectual life, but in the first centuries of the second millennium AD, they lost their direct impact. In this period (and not at the times of the Muslim conquests) the last pagan centers of worship were closed. The ancient cultures became an endangered species, or rather mutants. They were absorbed in a new world order. Arabic had become the language of religion, philosophy and science, a language mastered by the conquerors and the conquered alike; in fact,

⁵¹ See A.G. Frank & B.K. Gills, 1993 [1996], 176.

the distinction had ceased to exist. From now on they lived in the same universe and understood each other. The three ways of understanding the creation and cosmos were no longer organized in separate streams.

At the banquet of cultures an other drink was served. Everyone had poured out his own drink he had brought from home, but in the barrel of Baghdad, they had mingled, and something new made the world drunk, as the Sufis would say.

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