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The Mediterranean: The Asian and African Roots of the Cradle of Civilization

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Abstract

In Antiquity, the regions encompassed by the Mediterranean Sea were extremely fertile allowing rapid prosperity. This wealth combined with the easy communication between banks contributed to a rich and successful transmission of knowledge, especially during the 1st millennium BC, which turned the Great Sea the core of Ancient History. Later, the Mediterranean civilization was acknowledged as the fundamental political, cultural, artistic and religious substratum for the construction of the so-called Western world. Yet, it was in Egypt and Mesopotamia, during the 4th and 3rd millennia BC that many of these foundations were first set. The Ancient Mediterranean world was not *just* influenced by its African and Asian neighbours but was in fact defined by a profound communion, at all levels, between these different regions. In the twenty-first century, however, many European countries still insist in portraying themselves as direct heirs of the combined Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian traditions, disregarding their African and Asian roots. As a result of this flawed self-perception, a gap between Europe, Africa and Asia came to be, bearing deep consequences to the present. With this contribution, we aim to reclaim the importance of these other legacies to the construction of the cradle of the civilization.

Keywords: Mediterranean Sea, Egypt, Mesopotamia, transfer of knowledge, political and religious creations, cultural interactions

1. Introduction

The importance of the Mediterranean as fundamental for the construction of the so-called Western world, throughout centuries, is well established both in society and in academia.¹ When one looks into Ancient History, it becomes clear that the political, scientific, artistic and religious developments accomplished in the Mediterranean basin during the 1st millennium BC were, and still are, systematically acknowledged as structural for the composition of the European identity in particular and the Western world's in general. This notion can easily be attested by making a quick survey into the contemporaneous political, cultural and mass media discourses² [1]. Moreover, if one looks into the contents of the *curricula* currently taught in the compulsory education of the vast majority of European countries, one quickly realizes that regarding ancient past, the focus is on the events that took place in the 1st millennium BC Mediterranean world. The classical and the Judeo-Christian traditions are, thus, impregnated in the self-perception that the modern European citizen has.

Yet, the question about what and who forged an identity should not be addressed lightly neither should be simplified by taking into account just one or two contributors. Identity and its construction is one of the most complex and intricate subject matters not only on what concerns humanities and social sciences but also regarding the individual comprehension of one self. That is why we should always search further, both in time and space, to achieve a deeper and more concrete understanding of our roots.

Thus, this chapter represents a synergetic contribution for this wider goal, understanding the multiplicity of roots that contributed to the construction of the Western civilization by taking into account the interaction between Asia, Europe and Africa in Antiquity. The importance of the Mediterranean Sea will not be diminished. On the contrary, we hope to stress the prominence of the Great Sea, which witnessed the rise of so many cultural worlds, besides the classical ones, such as the Egyptian, the Mesopotamian, the Cyprian, the Cretan, the Anatolian and so on. We hope to stress the need to focus present-day attention on the understanding of the multiple features and traits that were already linked to this Sea in the past.

To achieve this purpose, we decided to structure our argument in several intertwined topics, such as the geographical, the political, the scientific, the cultural and The religious ones. But first, we should start by stressing what we already postulated above: for us, the world encompassed by the Mediterranean Sea is wider than its natural banks: the cradle of civilization was (and still is) the conjunction of African, Asian and European cultural backgrounds.

¹When one talks about the importance of the Mediterranean in academia, it is only natural to recall the work of one of the great historians of the twentieth century, Fernand Braudel, who dedicated years of his research to the understanding of this Sea, throughout time.

²For instance, we can find in the UNESCO website page dedicated to the Acropolis, the following: «On this hill were born Democracy, Philosophy, Theatre, Freedom of Expression and Speech, which provide to this day the intellectual and spiritual foundation for the contemporary world and its values» [1].

2. The geographical context, once and again...

The invention of writing is the moment traditionally evoked to stipulate the beginning of Antiquity. The first writing systems were developed in Mesopotamia and in Egypt,³ by the end of the 4th millennium BC [2–4]. This fundamental invention, which revolutionized human thought,⁴ as Bottéro referred to [5], did not happen by chance. On the contrary, the invention of writing was prompted by the progressive urbanization both territories were experiencing at that time, which entailed the rise of a hierarchized society and a centralized political power, led by the **en**⁵ and by the pharaoh,⁶ respectively [6–8].

To understand the urbanization process and its political developments, one must turn to the geographical characteristics of both Mesopotamia and Egypt since the historical context is always deeply influenced by the geographical one [9].

Mesopotamia is, first of all, a geographical concept, since its etymological root, from the Greek, means “between the rivers” [10]. Thus, in Antiquity, the eye of the Greek beholder understood the basilar importance of the rivers to the birth of this civilization: the Tigris and the Euphrates, and also their tributaries, such as the Khabur or the Diyala, among others⁷ (Figure 1).

These multiple fluvial courses combined with a mild climate allowed for an exceptional environment, which prompted the establishment and growth of human communities: the presence of an abundant native fauna and flora; the existence of an abounding fertile land, favouring the development of agriculture and husbandry; and a quick contact between regions, since the main rivers were navigable. Moreover, the natural borders were extremely permeable, allowing for a simple and rapid communication with adjacent regions, and even beyond, thus motivating commercial and cultural exchanges. The Taurus and the Zagros mountains, in the north and east, the Syrian and Arabian deserts, in the west and southwest,

³The earliest records of writing in Mesopotamian and in Egypt are dated to *circa* 3200 BC. In the first case, there are several tablets with some inscriptions, which were found in the *Eanna* precinct, at the site of Warka, ancient Uruk, dated to the Late Uruk period, level IV (3300–3100 BC). These inscriptions were focused in fixating basic information about the economic life of the city, namely in what concerned taxes and crops. As for the first records in the Egyptian writing, they consist of inscriptions in pottery dated to the Naqada III A-B period (3200–3000 BC), which were found in the tombs of the dynasty 0 (Necropolis B, Tomb U-j, Umm el-Qa’ab, Abidos), and also dated to the beginning of the dynasty 1.

⁴“L’écriture lui permet de transcender l’espace et la durée (...) le discours écrit seul peut fonder toute une tradition, non seulement dans l’ordre de la connaissance pure, du savoir, de la croyance, mais tout aussi bien dans l’ordre du goût et du plaisir de communiquer, disons dans l’ordre littéraire. Voilà porque j’ai dit que l’invention de l’écriture a révolutionné la pensée humaine (...)» [4].

⁵There is still a profound discussion among scholars regarding the titles of the Mesopotamia city-state leaders for the end of the 4th and during the 3rd millennia BC. Recognizing that there are more than one designation (**en**, **lugal**, *ensi*), we prefer to use the term **en** for the first centuries of Mesopotamian history.

⁶Contrary to the Mesopotamian **en**, **lugal** or *ensi*, which were considered human, though an exceptional one, the Egyptian pharaoh was considered divine.

⁷It must be underlined that, throughout centuries, Mesopotamian inhabitants never referred to themselves as such. Instead, their own designation was defined by social or familiar kinship, political-ideological ties, religious or cultural affinity. However, the term which corresponds to the notion of “country” existed both in Sumerian (**kalam**) and in Akkadian (*mātu*).



Figure 1. Mesopotamian territory and its main cities, courtesy of the Oriental Institute of Chicago.

and the Persian Gulf in the south allowed a myriad of contacts, direct and indirect, with Anatolia, the Iranian plateau, the Oriental Mediterranean Coast, Egypt, Oriental Africa and even the Indian Ocean.

Thus, several routes were developed very early in time. Some are attested as early as the 5th millennium BC, but it was during the 4th and 3rd millennia BC that the majority of them met an extraordinary growth. Through them, the Mesopotamian communities were able to acquire the goods they were lacking, such as lapis lazuli from the region of present-day Afghanistan, African gold from Egypt, copper from Cyprus, silver from Anatolia and so on. We should stress the importance of the Siro-Palestinian cities, such as Ugarit or Byblos, as mediators in these contacts established between Mesopotamia, Egypt and the rest of the Mediterranean world, diachronically [11]. The “in between the rivers” region was, hence, a platform that connected different worlds, cultures, goods and people.

With such geographical characteristics, not only was the territory particularly attractive for the establishment of human communities but it also reunited the necessary conditions for

the development of the urbanization process. Since this geographical context was so rich and wide, the first cities, which arose in this region during the second half of the 4th millennium BC, did not feel the need to be unified in a centralized state. Every single one could survive and thrive on their own. So, the political model that we find in these ancient times in Mesopotamia, and which was maintained throughout the following centuries, was structured on city-states, governed by the **en, lugal** or *ensi*. This situation originated profound rivalries between each Mesopotamian urban centre. Throughout the 3rd millennium BC, the cities became systematically defiant of one another, in search for more glory and power. Yet, in the twenty-fourth century BC, the territory was finally unified by Sargon of Akkad, who set a new model of governance: the imperial one. Still, in the centuries to come, the logic of urban independence was so strong that every attempt of unifying the Mesopotamian city states did not last long [12].

Egyptian geographical context was likewise exceptional: the fortune of being crossed by the Nile [13], with its regular floods, which impelled Egyptians to keep a controlled calendar of the river rhythms very early in time, turned its banks extremely fertile. Again, this allowed the development of both agriculture and husbandry, making the area along the banks a natural place for the establishment of human communities. Soon, the urbanization process began, paralleling the one in Mesopotamia.⁸

This prosperity, however, was accompanied by a latent threat: the floods, though regular, were extreme and violent, forcing communities to work together, namely in the construction of channels and dikes. Moreover, Egypt presented natural borders that were well defined, which enclosed the territory. At the same time, these natural barriers protected its communities from the hostile exterior: the Nile falls, in the south, were an obstacle to who wanted to penetrate the Nilotic country from the Sub-Saharan territory, and the deserts in the east and west, sheltered Egypt from direct neighbours. In the north, the territory opened itself to the Great Sea, with the Delta region displaying increased levels of prosperity when compared to the south. The Mediterranean aroused the curiosity of the Egyptian mind, with the promise of new discoveries, adventures and exchanges with the ancient world (**Figure 2**).

Despite the existence of this northern challenge, the weight of the main geographical characteristics was heavier and presented them as determinant in the Egyptian choice for a political model: the monarchy, led by the pharaoh. One can say that contrary to the Mesopotamian geography, the Egyptian one encouraged political unification in a centralized state that embraced the whole territory since its origins. At the end of the 4th millennium BC, the southern Egyptian cities, like Hiérakonpolis, Abydos, Nagada and Tarkhan, searched the unification of the land in order to make the better of the geographical conditions. Hence, the pharaoh emerged as a charismatic divine figure which materialized the central and unified force of the Nile. From then on, there were three major political periods in the history of this civilization, where unification was the rule (Old, Middle and New Kingdoms). The moments of political fragmentation were short, in the *longue durée*, and always considered as a chaotic disruption to the primeval order [12].

⁸Though the urbanization process happens roughly at same time in both territories, it must be stressed that the early Egyptians city-states were smaller both in population density as well as in extension.



Figure 2. Egyptian territory and its the main cities, courtesy of the Oriental Institute of Chicago.

Due to the proximity and intimate contact with the Mediterranean world, both Egyptian and Mesopotamian political models spread along the Great Sea, naturally adapting themselves to those different contexts. Throughout centuries, we identify not only Phoenician and Greek city-states⁹ [14, 15] but also Hellenistic monarchies in Anatolia and in Rome [16, 17]. And even though the imperial construction [18] appears in Mesopotamia and Egypt later in time (with the government of the Akkadian dynasty, between the twenty-fourth and twenty-second centuries BC and during the New Kingdom period, between the sixteenth and eleventh centuries BC), one must say that this political model, which was fully developed by the Persians, Alexander the Great and the Romans, also had its roots in these ancient civilizations.

The Mediterranean was the determinant point of connection for all these historical actors, promoting the circulation of people and goods, which led to the natural circulation of ideas, whether political, cultural or religious. We should note that the already above-mentioned contacts established since the 4th and 3rd millennia BC, between Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Siro-Palestinian powers, was a model systematically replicated throughout time, integrating new and different identities. During the 2nd millennium BC, Egyptians, Cretans and Aegeans developed an intense activity along the Great Sea. In the following millennium, it was time for the Phoenician and the Greek protagonism, the former exploring the Western Mediterranean, that is North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula, and the latter spreading its activity from the Black Sea to the Red Sea [19]. The colonization process was, thus, initiated with the establishment of their *emporía* [20, 21] which led to a natural rivalry between the two powers¹⁰ [22], accompanied by the emergence of pirate activity (**Figure 3**).

On the other hand, the construction of great empires was set in motion. Carthage, the Phoenician colony in the North of Africa, started out by occupying a strategic place as the first port of the Western Mediterranean [19]. From the sixth century BC onwards, the Carthaginians invested in their military force in order to control the remaining of the Phoenician city states. A maritime empire was, thus, established. Simultaneously, the Greek victory over the Persians, in the year of 480 BC, in Salamis, allowed the establishment of Piraeus as the main port of the Eastern Mediterranean. Sometime later, during the second half of the fourth century BC, Alexander, the Great, built an extraordinary empire, linking Greece, Anatolia, Phoenicia, Egypt, the Syro-Palestinian coast, Mesopotamia, the Iranian plateau and reaching as far as the Indus valley.

Alexander, driven by the will to expand the Greek values further away, worked on the ancient and well-established perception that the Great Sea offered a link to the whole ancient world [23]. Despite the political division of his empire following his death, Alexander's goal persisted: the Hellenization of the Orient was a work in progress. Alexandria, in Egypt, became

⁹Though there is still a profound debate among scholars concerning the city-state model, what we intend to emphasize is the importance of geography in the development of this and other political models. The connection between geography and history is underlined in Ref. [9], for the Phoenician and Greek cases.

¹⁰It is interesting to note, however, how these two powers, though politically and commercially rivals combined their cultural actions regarding one of the most important writing tools of the present day Western World: the alphabet. Its invention by the Phoenicians, as Helena Trindade Lopes noted [22], «resulted from a long historical process of maturation, which manifested for the first time in the passage from the 2nd to the 1st millennia BC. This alphabet would spread eastwards and westwards. The Hebrews and the Aramaeans used it to transcribe their own language and the Greeks, around 800 BC, adapted it to the needs of a non-Semitic language and vocalized it. From that moment on, the “genetic” relationship between the Phoenician alphabet and the Greek alphabet was completed. The former went its own way and the latter, via the Etruscan and Roman world, gave origin to our modern alphabet».

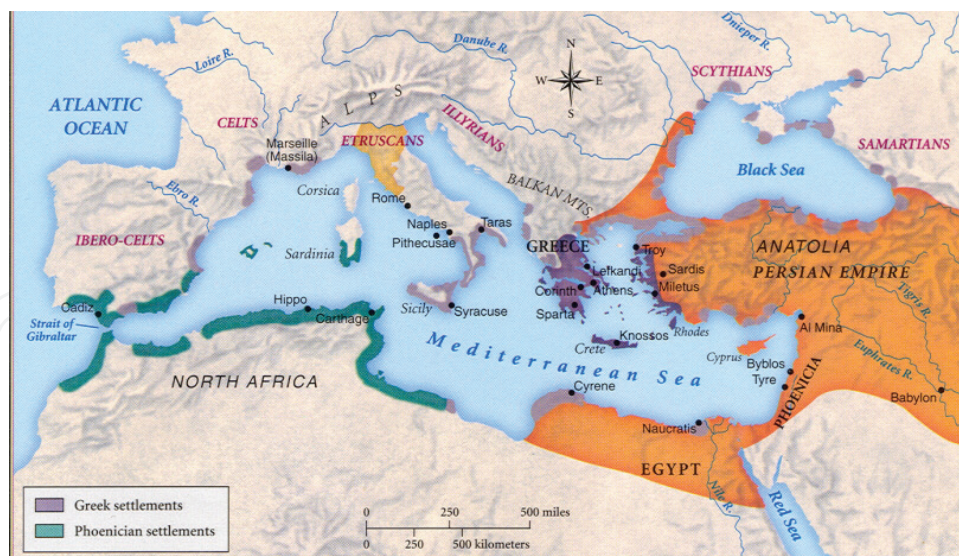


Figure 3. Mediterranean Greek and Phoenician colonies, courtesy of the Utah State University.

the cultural metropolis of the time, with its splendorous library and museum [24]. In the meantime, Cartagena was founded on the West, contributing to confirm the ethnic and cultural miscegenation of the Mediterranean.

Over this period, between the sixth and third centuries BC, Rome grew both in importance and in force within the Italian peninsula and Sicily, gaining effective control over the Greek colonies established there. In time, Roman power took over Greece, Spain and the Orient. With the government of Augustus, the Mediterranean finally met its destiny fully becoming the *Mare Nostrum*.¹¹

3. Cultural interactions

3.1. The scientific knowledge that preceded *logos*

Throughout millennia, the Mediterranean stood as the privileged scenery for the rise and fall of several and distinct political projects. The Great Sea not only witnessed antagonisms and wars but also dialogs and interactions. Because of its singular features, which enabled the contact between Africa, Europe and Asia, it was possible for different people from diverse backgrounds to come together and share the task of building the ancient world, creating and negotiating ideas, beliefs, and artistic canons. The Mediterranean can, thus, be seen as a place where human creativity was combined and launched for the future.

On what concerns the transfer of knowledge, once and again, Egypt and Mesopotamia had a crucial embryonic role, developing several principles that prepared the ground for the emergence of a strong and structured scientific thought.

¹¹It should be stressed that this expression was already in use during the Punic wars. However, as we hope it became clear, this notion was perceived much earlier in time, though not defined as such.

In Egypt, besides the incredible medical knowledge achieved [25], which were stimulated by the Nilotic fundamental cult of the dead, other breakthroughs were accomplished. The imperative need of establishing a calendar was felt by Egyptians not only in order to control the Nile but also to define the religious festivals. This led to remarkable advances regarding the knowledge about the firmament and the movement of the stars and planets. In fact, the beginning of the Egyptian year was defined by the presence of Sirius, *Sopdet*, in the sky, which happened in mid-July and was coetaneous with the annual flood of the Nile. To this first season, *Akhet*, two others would follow: *Peret*, which corresponded to the time of sowing, from November until mid-March, and *Chemu*, the harvest period, from mid-March until mid-July. Each season lasted for 4 months, comprising 30 days each. Annually, 5 epagomenic days were added, a period which was celebrated by the Egyptians as a moment where the mythical, remote past of their identity was remembered: the time when Horus fought his uncle Set for the divine right to occupy the Egyptian throne.

Likewise, the Mesopotamian sages also looked at the movements of the celestial bodies in order to set up a calendar for their religious and daily-life activities [26]. Astronomy was thus taking its first steps in the banks of the Nile, the Tigris and the Euphrates [27, 28].

Moreover, the Semites, whose presence in Mesopotamia is attested to the end of the 4th millennium BC, brought with them another particular interest that made their attention to be fixated in the sky: the search for divine messages, concealed by the deities in the natural world. One of their strongest beliefs was that deities painted nature with signs which bore their divine will, in order for communities to know it and more importantly, to act accordingly. This promoted the development of divination [29–31],¹² a phenomenon that, despite being completely immersed in the religious sphere, expressed a deductive thinking, which prefigured the scientific method [32, 33].

In fact, the Mesopotamian diviner, the *bārû*, was a highly qualified individual, extremely respected by the Mesopotamian society and, more importantly, by the royal court. As Caramelo stated, from the trivial to the most important decisions, Mesopotamians recurred to divination to obtain a protective, secured feeling on what concerned their actions [34]. These true sages spent years crafting the ability to scrutinize natural phenomena, studying and making advances regarding their predecessors' work. In order to decipher divine messages, whether in dreams, animal or birds behaviours, animal entrails, astronomical phenomena and so on, the *bārû* had to adopt a step-by-step process. This consisted of not only observing nature and gathering data but also refining, altering or expanding that same data (or the one previously collected). Consequently, the confirmation of the significances attributed to the divine sign was achieved.

On another level, the Rhind Papyr [35], for instance, displays valuable information regarding the development of the Nilotic mathematical thought. Egyptian mathematicians developed the application of fractions and equations [36], having a decimal and additive calculation system. This helped to solve many arithmetical problems, through the use of tablets. For instance, it was possible to calculate the surface of not only the square, the rectangle and the

¹²According to Seth Richardson [29], the first known Mesopotamian references regarding the divination techniques appear in the professions' list discovered in Tell Fara, ancient Šuruppak, and dated to *circa* 2600 BC. In the introduction of the same work, Amar Annus points out to the strong possibility that this technique was older than the written records which attest it, being known and transmitted by a previous oral tradition.

triangle but, curiously, also the surface of the circle. On the land “between the rivers”, the circle was also analysed and Mesopotamian mathematicians were able to divide it in 360° . Plus, they also developed the sexagesimal system, which divided time in hours, minutes and seconds, a system in use to the present day [37, 38].

Naturally, the knowledge presented above helped the creation of several architectonic works being the paradigmatic pyramid one of the most emblematic ones in what concerned the land crossed by the Nile. The Egyptian pyramid [39] was a magnificent tomb, understood as a “house for eternity”, with a geometrical shape and size that still today impresses anyone who has the fortune of beholding it.¹³

The earliest pyramidal complex known today is the step pyramid of Djoser. Corresponding to the first tomb completely built in stone, this complex is located in Sakkara and dated to the dynasty 3, *circa* 2670 BC. Its construction was supervised by Imhotep, the royal architect, whom in time was granted a higher place, a seat among deities [40]. It is important to stress the existence of this function in the Egyptian court, so early in time, since it shows the importance bestowed to artistic expressions by the Nilotic centralized power.

However, it was during the following dynasty, *circa* 2560–2540 BC, that the pyramidal shape achieved perfection with the construction of the Giza complex [41]. The three extraordinary pyramids of Khufu, Khafre and Menkaure still defy human comprehension, claiming their eternal seat, both in time and in space, just like it was intended by their constructors (**Figure 4**).



Figure 4. Khafre Pyramid and the Sphinx, picture by the author Helena Trindade Lopes.

¹³It must be pointed out that ancient Egypt produced other types of tombs, such as the mastabas and the *hypogea*.

The emblematic Mesopotamian building, though not a tomb, was also a sacred precinct, constructed “on high”—the ziggurat. This impressive monument was the highest structure in the Mesopotamian city, imposing its presence in the landscape. Unfortunately, most of the ziggurats constructed in Antiquity did not survive to the present day due in great measure to the perishable material used for its construction: the adobe. Yet, this singular monument is impregnated in the memory of the Western world, through the imagery of the Tower of Babel¹⁴ [42], which was broadly spread by the Old Testament tradition. Just like the Egyptian pyramids, the ziggurat construction was in debt of the mathematical and astronomical breakthroughs accomplished by the Mesopotamian sages [43]. Hence, as in so many other aspects, the Mesopotamian and Egyptian scientific minds were running side by side, making their way until they flooded over the Great Sea. The advent of rational thought took place, as it is well known, in Greece, during the 1st millennium BC. But its roots are older and deeper, hidden behind the mantle of myth, a concept so wrongly disapproved by time.

3.2. The genesis of divine imaginary

Hence, besides scientific knowledge and artistic expressions, Egypt and Mesopotamia also shared with the Mediterranean world their religious experiences. Their imagery and metaphorical language was systematized during millennia, acquiring a primeval binding dimension between humans and deities.

One of the most striking aspects of both the Egyptian and the Mesopotamian mythical framework has to do with divine creation [44, 45] and its parallels with the monotheistic vision that arose on the Mediterranean shores. For the *homo religiosus* that dwelt in the margins of the great ancient rivers, the divine was naturally multiple in its manifestations but not so rarely it admitted an uncanny intimacy with singularity [46, 47].

The cosmogonic views illustrate this closeness very well. In Egypt, the creation of cosmos was structured around two fundamental archetypes: the solar one, which displays different demiurges—Atum and Amon—and is organized by successive generations of deities, just like human lineage, and the Memphite one, elaborated by the priests of the city protected by Ptah, who bestowed the creative power to the Verb [48, 49]:

Ptah, the creator god of Memphis, conceived the cosmos in its different manifestations in his heart and realized it through the creative and operative force of the word. The doctrine of the creator verb, usually recognized from the biblical text (Gen. 1) and situated in a particular historical, geographical and temporal context, actually dates back to a time and a place which was very different, the Nile Valley [22].

Likewise, in Mesopotamia, two major cosmogonic views, the Sumerian and the Semite, expressed similar ideas. The first one revolves around the idea of a single deity, Namma [50], defined as the primeval mother, who engendered all the senior gods and goddesses, who, in

¹⁴Throughout centuries, this monument was the object of a tireless search by European travelers who crossed the region between the rivers. Regrettably, the monument was already lost, being visible only its negative. After the archaeological expedition on the site of Babylon, from 1899 onwards, several scholars presented hypothesis for the reconstruction of the ziggurat. Recently, Juan Luis Montero Fenollós and his team presented their perspective [42].

turn, gave birth to new and successive generations of divine beings.¹⁵ For the Semitic tradition, however, we find a divine primeval couple, Tiamat and Apsu, whose power of creation resided on sexual intercourse. Interestingly, this act was in close association with the notion that without the act of naming nothing fully existed, since, as it is stated in the Babylonian epic of creation, *Enūma-eliš*:

When skies above were not yet named / Nor earth below pronounced by name,
 Apsu, the first one, their begetter, / and maker Tiamat, who bore them all,
 Had mixed their waters together, / but had not formed pastures, or discovered reed-beds,
 When yet no gods were manifest / Nor names pronounced, nor destinies decree,
 Then gods were born within them. [51]

Moreover, these Sumerian and Semitic primeval deities were all understood as a matter, the primeval divine ocean,¹⁶ thus claiming water as the primal element that existed in the genesis of the cosmos. Likewise, in Egypt we find Nun, the primeval watery matter, where the demiurge was asleep, waiting to begin its creative task.

This conceptualization about the origin of the cosmos was, without a doubt, one of the major contributions that Egypt and Mesopotamia shared with Western civilization: the creative power of name, word and water. Naturally, the contacts between the different people that crossed the Mediterranean world, in its wider sense, as we started out by stating, helped this religious dialogue and interaction. We should remember and stress the presence *in loco* of Hebrews, both in Egypt (Exodus) and in Mesopotamia (Babylon Exile), as they would be the main protagonists of the biblical narrative, which was definitely a product of their own Mediterranean interactions. The Old Testament, an extraordinary religious and literary work that in time would become basilar to the construction of the Western civilization, via the Judeo-Christian matrix, once and again was fashioned over more ancient and, specially, multiple roots.

Yet, the religious dialogue between the divine multiple of Egypt and Mesopotamia and the divine one of the Bible does not end here. On another creative perspective, the anthropogenic one, it is also important to stress how clay/dust was already present in these civilizations. On what concerns the Egyptian view, man was modelled after the “dust of the earth” by Khnum, the potter god, recalling, again, the Jewish tradition recognized in Gen. 2.7’ [22]. On their side, Mesopotamian accounts state that when the divine assembly decided humanity should

¹⁵«Namma, the primeval mother who gave birth to the senior gods» ETCSL 1.1.2, 16 [50].

¹⁶Though these primeval Mesopotamian deities were understood as the divinized ocean, Namma, the Sumerian deity, was considered feminine, while the Semitic pair, Tiamat and Apsu, corresponded to the feminine salty waters and the masculine sweet waters, respectively.

be created, a mother goddess, assisted by the wise Enki/Ea, mixed up clay to fashion the first humans.¹⁷

We could keep on tracing and presenting more examples that display the profound interactions between these Mediterranean religious imageries. But, perhaps the most striking is the one that refers to the monotheizing proposal that Amenhotep IV-Akhenaton presented to the world in the fourteenth century BC. This “heretical” pharaoh, as he would become known in the Egyptian tradition, developed and imposed a notion that established Aton, the solar disk, as the singular, true deity [52, 53].

The similarity between the Hymn to Aten, the programmatic text of the “monotheistic” reform of Amenhotep IV, and Psalm 104 is another example of these constant “coincidences” that ancient history consecrated, demonstrating that the human beings of the past, just as today’s human beings do, travelled, and in doing so they took and brought with them ancestral values, derived from their dwellings, or singularities that they incorporated in their own traditions. The road, which was the Mediterranean, connected Egypt to the world and by doing so carried traces of this civilization to other spaces, other peoples, other cultures [22].

We should note that this monotheizing process happened during the period in which Egypt opened itself to the Great Sea, that is the New Kingdom. The second half of the 2nd millennium BC was defined by a strategical game played in the oriental shores of the Mediterranean, with discords and negotiations between two main powers: Egypt, with their African roots, and the kingdom of Hatti, originally from Anatolia. The Siro-Palestinian city states and kingdoms, such as the famous Kadesh, were caught in this cross fire. As for Babylon and Assyria, who were the major Mesopotamian forces at the time, both were naturally observing and waiting for the result of the confrontation between Egypt and Hatti due to their own political and commercial expectations.

On the first half of the 1st millennium BC, Assyria would transpose the natural borders of Mesopotamia [54], engulfing not only the Oriental Mediterranean but also Northern Egypt (Figure 5).

And why is this important for our argument? Because while the Assyrian empire was being built, after several centuries of political, commercial and military expeditions and interactions, its patron deity, Aššur, became so prominent among all other Mesopotamian divine beings that it is considered one of the most striking cases of a monotheizing process in Mesopotamia [55, 56].

In conclusion, the religious systems of these two ancient civilizations inspired conceptions of different and multiple generations of *homo religiosus*. Their models about the creation of the cosmos and humankind were built upon the figure of the Demiurge and upon a tension between the divine *one* and the divine *multiple*. The Mediterranean waters, in time, spread these religious archetypes throughout the whole ancient world. Received, adapted and transformed, these ideas persisted until the present, echoing in the Judeo-Christian tradition an ancient and distant past.

¹⁷There are several Mesopotamian manuscripts that refer to the creation of humans. Though they present some differences, due to the main goals of each composition, in all the divine creative act revolves around the above mentioned motifs. *Vide* these antropogonic accounts in Ref. [51]: Tablet I of *Atrahasis*, and Tablet VI of *The Babylonian Epic of Creation*.

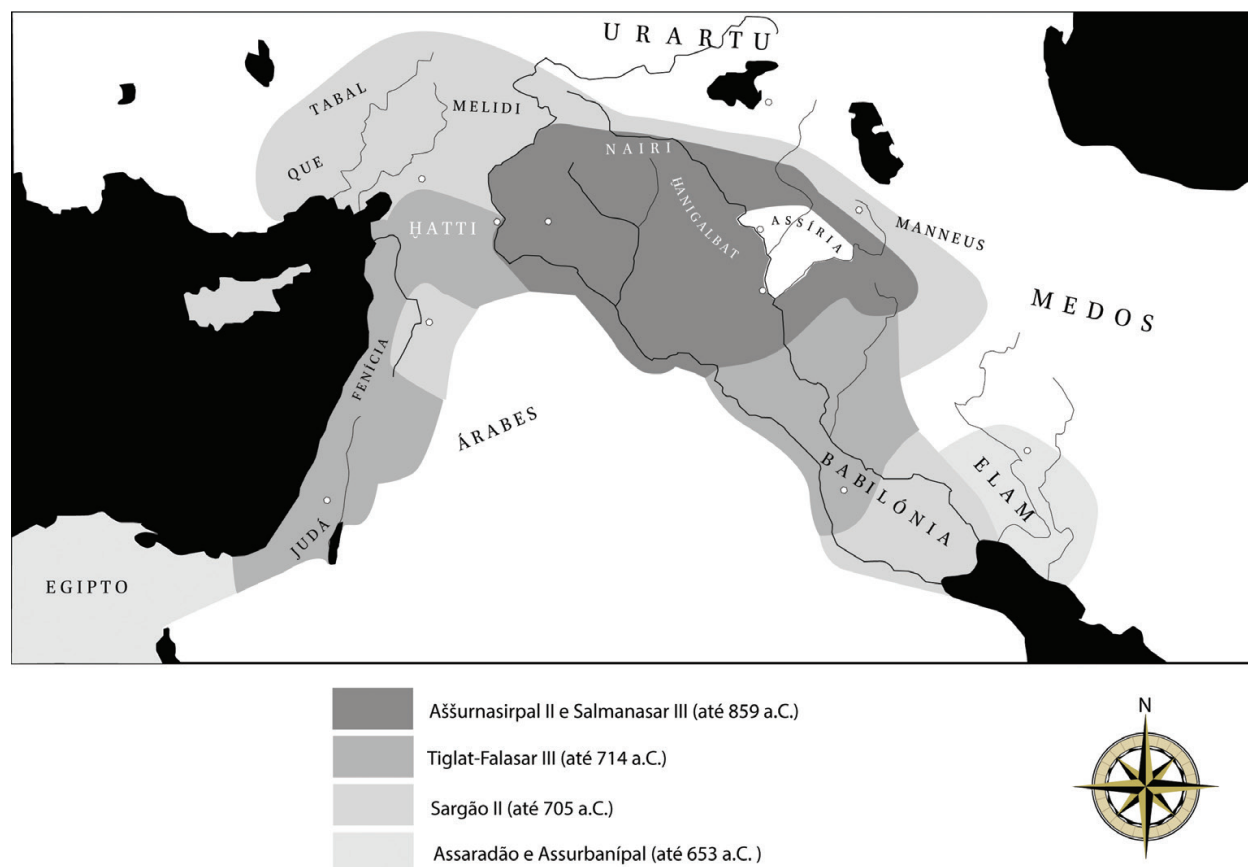


Figure 5. The Neo-Assyrian expansion map, between the ninth and seventh centuries BC, courtesy of Marcel Paiva do Monte.

4. The *boom* of cultural interaction

The cultural, scientific and religious vigour of these civilizations was transmitted, as already stated, to the Mediterranean world, especially the Greek one, which absorbed their traits with its natural depth. But because these first Greek academics recognized the reputation of the Mesopotamian and Egyptian knowledge, several Hellenic scholars travelled to these regions, or got in touch with their traditions through others, in order to learn and study these venerable and elderly sages.

That is why, during the fourth century BC, the astronomer, mathematician, physician and philosopher Eudoxus of Cnidus, who was contemporaneous of Plato, travelled to Heliopolis, the city of Re, the divine Sun of Egypt, to expand his astronomical knowledge. But Eudoxus was not the only Greek to visit and or to be influenced by Egypt and Mesopotamia: Thales of Miletus, Solon, Plato and Herodotus, to name just a few, are a small part of the highly esteemed scholarly Greek group which came across and absorbed these African and Asiatic cultural traits.

Egypt had a long tradition of transfer of knowledge within the temples. These complexes were not just the terrestrial dwellings of divine beings and, therefore, the central place for cultic

activities. They also integrated the so-called “Houses of life”, *per ankh*, which corresponded to scholarly centres, where knowledge was taught and scientific, literary and religious works were produced [57]. Some of these ancient Egyptian schools became very famous, within the Nilotic territory and beyond, such as the *per ankh* of Memphis, of Akhmim, of Abydos, of Coptos, of Esna, of Edfu and of Amarna, among others. The Teban school, for instance, was (and still is) known for the production of majestic works of art such as the scrolls of papyrus with passages of the “Book of the Dead”. Simultaneously, the temples also had the *per medjat*, which literally means “House of the papyrus’ scrolls”, which preserved the texts written by these ancient sages. We could use here the term “library”, not in the modern sense of a building or an institution but in the sense of a documental collection.

Mesopotamian schools, on their side, are attested since at least the late 3rd or beginning of the 2nd millennium BC. The **é.dub.ba** was the place where youngsters had their intensive formation years in order to become scribes. Despite the existence of older proofs, the extensive *corpora* retrieved in these ancient Mesopotamian schools are dated to the Old Babylonian period, *circa* eighteenth century BC onwards. These documents allow the understanding not only of the exercises of the scribe apprentices but also of the *curriculum* followed in the different **é.dub.ba** and moreover, the literary novelties that were developed there [58].

As for the collections of texts, we should stress the importance of the royal archives and libraries, where the Mesopotamian rulers kept not only their legal, social and diplomatic data but also literary, cultic and mythological works of art. Among the many libraries and archives recovered by the archaeologists in the sites of ancient Mesopotamia, perhaps the most famous is the library of the Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal, in his capital Nineveh [59]. During Ashurbanipal’s government, who ruled between *circa* 668 and 627 BC, the Assyrian empire extended to its maximum length, incorporating multiple territories and cultural expressions as stated above (**Figure 5**).

Ashurbanipal was a very well-educated ruler, who was particularly interested in creating an up-to-date royal collection of texts regarding multiple matters. Modern researchers identified and translated several letters from scholars of many cities within the Assyrian empire, responding to the king’s command: ‘Write out all the scribal learning in the property of Nabû and send it to me! Complete the instruction’¹⁸ [60]. From magic and ritual texts, to diplomatic and literary compositions, archaeologists found, between the 1850s and 1930s, over 32,000 cuneiform tablets in his library attesting, thus, the enormous effort of the king in order to collect and gather all the possible data of his time.

The Mesopotamian and Egyptian labour of collecting and preserving knowledge continued and developed in the centuries to come. The assembly of the museum and library of Alexandria constituted the culmination of these traditions [61]. From then on, scientific knowledge acquired a universal dimension as its growth was faster and its rhythm allowed taking a step further than its Egyptian and Mesopotamians predecessors: from empirical knowledge, it was possible to go forward to theoretical elaborations.

¹⁸Excerpt of the letter BM 45642 sent by the sages of Borsippa to the king Ashurbanipal.

The Ptolemaic rulers, just like Ashurbanipal, appealed to the sages of the whole ancient world in order for their library to reunite a “global” wisdom. Hence, from multiple regions of the Mediterranean, scholars arrived in Alexandria aiming to give their contribution for the concretization of the goal: Manetho an Egyptian from Sebennytyos; Callimachus and Eratosthenes from Cyrene, Libya; Hecataeus from Abdera, Thrace; Apollonius of Rhodes; Aristophanes of Byzantium, Northern Greece; Herophilos of Cos, an Aegean island; Archimedes of Syracuse, Sicily; Plotinus and Horapollon, Egyptians of Asiut and Akhmim, respectively, among many others.

Soon, other centres would join Alexandria, like the ones in Antioch, Pergamum, Athens or Macedonia, building a true network of scientific cooperation, all committed to spread the scientific knowledge. This trend persisted beyond the Hellenic world, surviving in the Roman and Byzantine periods, as attested, for instance, by the Fayum portraits [62]. This artistic *corpus* was discovered in Egypt, in 1888, by the British archaeologist W.F. Petrie. The portraits, which are dated to the early centuries of the Christian era, were painted in wooden plaques or linen cloths by the Greeks, who established themselves in the Nilotic territory. Alone, these portraits manifest the amalgamation that Fayum was at the time, reuniting the ancient Egyptian sarcophagus tradition and funerary masks, with the Greek and Roman pictorial techniques and fashion trends. In conclusion, this *corpus* represents the diachronic fusion of the Mediterranean.

Later, from the seventh century AD onwards, the Arabic power met the incredible cultural and scientific patrimony contained within the Great Sea, expressed in many languages and indebted of many backgrounds. The Arabs would translate, study and publish many of these ancient works, contributing for the preservation and, more importantly, for the diffusion of this knowledge.

During the Medieval times, the European Christian monks would carry on this work, copying these manuscripts in Latin versions. The advent of the press, in the Renaissance, allowed for all this knowledge to spread his wings and fly out of the monasteries, reaching a broader audience that grew exponentially in the following centuries.

Consequently, the ancient past of Egypt and Mesopotamia resounds in our present-day civilization, persisting in the multiple layers of the cultural transmission that took place in the last millennia. However, these echoes were filtered by the monotheistic visions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, at same time, they were chained by logic and reason. The ancient knowledge lost its magical and metaphorical essence. Likewise, modern Western societies lost the natural ability to dream and to be in full communion with the cosmos. The Western world lost the link to its Mesopotamians and Egyptians ancestors.

5. Recovering the Egyptian and Mesopotamian legacy

Who then, one could ask, could unveil the ancestral memory that the Classic and the monotheist traditions removed? The answer is not that difficult. It dwells in the free minds of the artists. They resisted logic and strict rules, they struggled to secured magic and dreams close-at-hand, they fought for giving back to society the ability to feel and aim higher.

One of the greatest contemporaneous painters, Anselm Kiefer [63, 64], presents the Mesopotamian and the Egyptian mythological and cultural framework as one of his major influences.¹⁹ Kiefer understands the impact these African and Asian roots had in the Classical and Biblical world, as well as in the Cabala. Thus, through his works, Kiefer tries to reconcile all these multiple layers, teasing the viewer with innumerable references. Like so many others, his goal is to wake modern society, to make it question its logical chains and to free itself so it can be, once again, reconnected to nature, to the cosmic universe. For Kiefer, knowing and understanding these ancient roots, which were reunited in the Mediterranean, offers the possibility of freedom, to imagine, to feel, and to be.

In his 1996 painting *Man under a Pyramid* [65], displayed in the Tate Gallery, in London, Kieffer tried to show the union between man and cosmos, which is symbolized by the emblematic Egyptian structure. In its own words:

Là, dans ce tableau, c'est moi, mais ce n'est pas seulement moi, c'est un gisant, un archétype. Ci-gît. Je suis un home d'aujourd'hui qui a des souvenirs précis des temps anciens [...] Je suis ici, composé de tous mes souvenirs qui remontent jusqu'aux dinosaures et même plus loin. Le future est lié au passé, mais pas mélangé à lui [66].

The pyramid, the “house for eternity”, as it was imagined by the ancient Egyptians, stands out in Kiefer’s work as a perfectly shaped symbol of the collective memory, where humans and cosmos are in a perfectly aligned communion.

To this case we could add other artistic contributions, within the fields of music, literature, cinema, dance...May we be allowed to remember just a few examples to better illustrate our argument: the operas by Rossini, *Semiramide* (1823); by Verdi, *Nabucco* (1841) and more recently, by Philip Glass, *Akhmaten* (1983/4), which present to the modern viewer, every time they are performed, a link to the strong figures and events of Egypt and Mesopotamia [67–69]. In the *Belles-Lettres*, we have the example of Thomas Mann’s *Joseph der Ernahrer* (1943), an *opus* which the author considered his masterpiece [70]. In the nineteenth century, within the Pre-Raphaelites movement, Dante Gabriel Rossetti painted *Astarte Syriaca* (1877), evoking the Mesopotamian goddess Inanna/Ištar in its Syrian manifestation [71]. In the world of cinema, we can name *Metropolis* (1927), directed by Fritz Lang, who conjugated the science fiction imagery with the famous Tower of Babel, thus creating a masterpiece of German expressionism.

And, of course, the unforgettable *Cleopatra* (1963) directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz and starred by the striking Elizabeth Taylor, which originated a ballet, *Cleopatra* (2011), directed by Claude-Michel with musical arrangements by David Nixon [72].

Curiously, despite all these artistic efforts, in so many fields, twenty-first century European countries, in general, still insist on a dated discourse, which portrays them as heirs of the Greco-Roman and the Jewish-Christian traditions only. This notion is systematically attested, when one watches the news, listens or reads political discourses, and enquiries students who are not enrolled in history courses. As a result of this flawed self-perception, a gap between

¹⁹We could, as well, mention others who were influence by this ancient past, like Paul Klee, Rauschenberg, or Basquiat. The choice on Kiefer is to stress a still alive and productive artist.

Europe and its African and Asian legacies came to exist, with deep consequences in our present-day political, social and most of all, humanitarian discourses and contexts.

The truth is that our Western world took its first steps in Egypt and Mesopotamia, with the first writing systems, the rise of the urbanization process and the consequent formation of the first political models and the establishment of long-trade interactions. History and all the other sciences had their genesis in the banks of the ancient Nile, Tigris and Euphrates. The inventive expressions of these ancient artists originated universal and paradigmatic symbols, like the pyramid or the ziggurat, and in these African and Asian lands arose the tensions between the divine multiple and the divine one, as mythological archetypes which were absorbed and appropriated by monotheism.

Time, that eternal and inexorable constructor, shifted the core of the ancient history to the banks of the Mediterranean, where these ancient pasts continued to be venerated. Through the commercial and cultural interactions accomplished by the Greek and the Phoenician colonization processes, through the conquests of Alexander the Great and, soon after, of the Roman power, the Mediterranean was extended and the transfer of knowledge deepened.

The Great Sea, thus, not only became a shared territory but also an arena of conflicts, wars and deaths. Above all, it was a wide and open space which challenged human mind, allowing adventures, dreams and utopias.

A deeper understanding of this ancient history, of these ancient roots, will allow the twenty-first century Western World to understand its cumulative identity, reconnecting modern society with their Middle Eastern and African backgrounds. And perhaps, the waters that once were the cradle of civilization, and are nowadays transformed in an immense graveyard of people, of souls, due to ignorance and prejudice against the alterity which *is* part of the Western identity, can once again shine, enlightening the paths of dreams and hopes for the modern world.

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