

The History and Future of Assyriology

by Catherine Valenti

A recent book traces the rich history of Assyriology, from pioneers such as Oppert and Grotefend, through the major institutions that have contributed to its development, to today's research projects. This is a portrait of a surprisingly contemporary science.

Reviewed: Dominique Charpin, *En quête de Ninive. Des savants français à la découverte de la Mésopotamie (1842-1975)*, Paris, Collège de France/Les Belles Lettres, 2022, 461 pp., €25,90.

In a refreshing departure, Dominique Charpin outlines the origins of his book not in the introduction, but in an afterword entitled "Explanations and Acknowledgements". As the author himself points out, readers eager to get to the heart of the matter often ignore a book's foreword altogether, or at best return to it only once they have finished.

So it is not until the end of the book that we learn that Dominique Charpin's *En quête de Ninive. Des savants français à la découverte de la Mésopotamie (1842-1975)* ("In search of Nineveh. French scholars' exploration of Mesopotamia (1842-1975)") stems from his teaching at the Collège de France and, more specifically, from a historiographical review of Assyriology undertaken after 40 years in the field. This is a fairly typical approach for many experts who, having reached the peak of their career, feel the need to take an epistemological look back at their field of research.

Even though he chose to end his analysis in 1975, when he embarked on the studies that led him to become one of the leading figures in French Assyriology, Dominique Charpin remains present throughout the book, in some places referring to a bibliographical tool that he himself used during his studies, in others to a master whose teaching he followed. This makes the work uniquely engaging, and in no way detracts from the expert account that unfolds over some 460 pages.

Champollion and the rest

The author's chronological approach is undoubtedly the most accessible format, allowing the reader to distinguish the major developments in the field. Firstly, there is the transition from the era of the pioneers (Part I) to the first stages in the institutionalization of Assyriology before 1914 (Part II), with the specialists trained from the 1860s-1870s onwards taking over from the first generation of pioneers, in particular the experts who first succeeded in deciphering cuneiform writings.

Dominique Charpin rightly notes that while Champollion, decipherer of Egyptian hieroglyphs, left his mark on posterity, the same cannot be said of the German philologist Georg Friedrich Grotefend (1775-1853), author of a dissertation published in 1802 on the deciphering of Persepolis inscriptions, nor of the German-born French Assyriologist Jules Oppert (1825-1905), who, in the second half of the 1850s, made significant progress in deciphering Assyrian.

It is true that the deciphering of cuneiform was a collective rather than a single undertaking, and that this writing system was used to transcribe a variety of languages, making its approach more complex. This first period, which, in the first and second parts of the book, takes the reader from the 1840s to the beginning of the twentieth century, is the one that has been most extensively dealt with by historiography, and is therefore the least original section of Charpin's book.

The Flood, versions 1 and 2

Parts III and IV continue the timeline, first for the interwar period (Part III), then for the Trente Glorieuses years from 1945 to 1975 (Part IV). Between the First and

Second World Wars, field excavations expanded considerably, at least on the French and British sides.

From 1919 onwards, Great Britain and France shared two key areas of influence with regard to research into the ancient Mesopotamian world: Iraq for the British; Syria and Lebanon for the French. Between the late nineteenth century and the First World War, the French had already excavated four Mesopotamian sites: Sipar, Tello, Kish and Susa. In the 1920s and 1930s, they added Ugarit and Mari in Syria, now under French control.

In France itself, the interwar period was marked by a high degree of institutional continuity in the teaching and promotion of Assyriology, with the Collège de France and the École Pratique des Hautes Études as the focal points and, to a lesser extent, the Sorbonne, the École du Louvre, the Louvre's Department of Oriental Antiquities and, more surprisingly, the Institut Catholique de Paris.

Indeed, after the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the discoveries of Assyriologists called into question one of the foundations of Western civilization by establishing that the Old Testament was partly based on Babylonian texts. For example, the Epic of Gilgamesh, a Mesopotamian epic tale written between the 18th and 17th centuries BC, includes a version of the story of the Flood.

Ecclesiastics are also over-represented among Assyriologists—a particularity that has never been studied as such, but will be the focus of a forthcoming publication by Dominique Charpin. Here, the author examines at length the clerics who have left their mark on the discipline, in particular Father Jean-Vincent Scheil (1858-1940), a French Dominican scholar, whose career at the École Pratique des Hautes Études is described by Charpin.

The role of women

Women began to make their presence felt in the interwar years, and this increased during the period 1945-1975 (part IV). The author rightly highlights the exceptional nature of women's presence for a long time: in France, they faced numerous obstacles to reach the highest levels of academic and scientific research.

The examples provided by Dominique Charpin, in particular the case of Élena Cassin (1909-2011) and Marguerite Rutten (1898-1984), show that it was only after the Second World War that women were able to gain access to permanent positions—an observation that is by no means specific to Assyriology.

The career of Elena Cassin in particular, who joined the CNRS just after the Second World War and ended her career there as director of research in the late 1970s, illustrates the institution's higher degree of flexibility: founded in 1939 and reorganized in 1945, it welcomed women researchers long before universities began opening their doors to them.

Mysteries remain

Part IV closes with a final chapter devoted to the international expansion of French Assyriology and the way in which French Assyriologists interacted with their counterparts in other countries. While this chapter is every bit as interesting as the previous ones, it nevertheless gives cause for regret: while the chronological approach used throughout the book makes it highly accessible and convenient for the reader, it also causes the book's themes to become somewhat fragmented.

This is true of the international perspective, which is addressed a number of times, although never in a comprehensive or continuous way, even though rivalries and/or collaborations between experts of different nationalities are the cornerstone of the history of archaeology, which evolved scientifically from the nineteenth century in a context of competition between the major Western countries—particularly France, Great Britain, Germany and the United States.

Similarly, the chronological structure results in a scattering of biographies of Assyriologists. Dominique Charpin's study is usefully supplemented by an index of modern names as well as the names of people from ancient times, divinities, places, peoples and institutions; however, a series of biographical notes is lacking at the end of the book, offering an overview of the careers of the many protagonists of the field cited throughout.

As the author reminds us, although his book fills a historiographical gap, particularly for the twentieth century, the history of Assyriology is still a work in progress. First, we have to look beyond 1975, a year that is more relevant to the

author's personal history than to that of the discipline—even though the years 1974-1975 saw the deaths, within a few months of each other, of two of the French masters of post-war Assyriology, René Labat (1904-1974) and Jean Nougayrol (1900-1975).

Second, because, since 1975, the focus of Assyriological studies has shifted from Mesopotamia, which had long occupied a key position, to the peripheral areas of Syria to the west, Anatolia to the north and Iran to the east. It is a science in the making, as the period of decipherment is far from over: Mesopotamia still retains some of its mysteries, which new generations of researchers are endeavoring to unravel today and will continue to do so in the future.

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