How wide is the Near East? Some reflections on the limits of "Near Eastern Archaeology"

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Abstract

The paper considers how the traditional focus of Near Eastern Archaeology, which was centred on Mesopotamia and the surrounding areas of Syro-Palestine, Anatolia and Iran, has been challenged, in several ways and for several reasons, by recent developments of the discipline, whose geographical limits have thus become increasingly vague. Examples are given of how recent field activities, by revealing deep and in some cases unsuspected connections with areas which are traditionally the object of different disciplines and have developed a different scholarly tradition, encourage a renewed interest on long-distance circulation and diffusion of raw materials, artefacts and ideas, but at the same time require a deep re-adjustment of our theoretical frameworks and even of our scientific background. Special attention is devoted to the new perspectives about interconnections within the northern portion of the Near East and between this and other cultural macro-areas (Central Asia, the Aegean, South-Western Europe and the Eurasian steppes) opened by field research in the highlands of the Southern Caucasus and Northern Turkey in the course of the last decades.

Keywords

Near Eastern archaeology, long-distance interactions, core/periphery, highlands and lowlands, raw materials, chronology, Anatolia, Iran, Caucasus, metallurgy

1. Introduction[1]

One of the questions a congress dedicated to "early-stage researchers and postgraduate students who work in various disciplines regarding the Ancient Near East and Eastern Mediterranean" should likely answer is: "Where are our disciplines heading to in the next future?". As for Near Eastern Archaeology, this, however, leads us to face another, more basic question, namely: "What is the ancient Near East now?" or, better said: "Are the scope and the limits of our discipline, as we traditionally conceived them, still reflecting the spectrum of our present field activities and research interests?".

This issue has a chronological dimension, as well, as one could easily argue that the traditional focus of our disciplines with the pre-classical civilisations of the "Near East" has also been challenged in the course of the last decades: let's consider for instance the inclusion of sessions devoted to Islamic Archaeology in the ICAANE congresses,[2] or the presence, in the very "Broadening Horizons 5" conference, of a session titled "West vs East: from Hellenism to the Roman expansion in the Near East".

I would like, however, to concentrate on the spatial dimension instead, and revise how the traditional geographical borders of "Near Eastern Archaeology" have been progressively challenged as field research opened new areas of investigation, to the point that we feel more and more uncomfortable with them, and that in some cases they have even become an obstacle to new and promising research approaches. Many of the issues I am going to discuss have recently been raised by other scholars; rather than illustrating original research results, my aim is, therefore, to provide a synthesis of recent trends of investigation.

2. Integrating new regions into Near Eastern Archaeology

Traditionally, Near Eastern Archaeology deals with an area roughly corresponding to the present "Middle East", with Egypt being the object of a separate discipline (Egyptology). Within this huge area, the main focus of research has long been the urban, literate civilisations of "Greater Mesopotamia", *i.e.* the Mesopotamian alluvium with its immediate surroundings. Iran, Anatolia, Syria and the Levant have been progressively integrated into the discipline, often as it turned out that they as well produced literate, urban cultures (*e.g.* Hittite Anatolia or, more recently, Early Bronze Age Syria after the discovery of Ebla in the 1970s) or, especially for the Levant, for their relevance to "Biblical studies".

More often than not, field activities have been driven to these "peripheral" areas by factors which are external to pure research questions, but depend on the chances of modern international politics: in plain words, archaeologists have tended to move to other regions either when Mesopotamia became inaccessible or difficult to access, or/and when individual countries offered particularly favourable conditions to expeditions. One example is the ephemeral flourishing of Iranian archaeology in the 1970s, prior to the Islamic revolution, another one is the emphasis, between the 1960s and the early 2000s, on "Upper Mesopotamia" as a consequence of the numerous projects of salvage archaeology connected with the constructions of dams on the main watercourses of the region. It is also worth observing how each of these "waves" of field activity created a generation of specialists (many archaeologists who were trained in the late 1970s and 1980s, for instance, are specialists of Upper Mesopotamia and Syria, while many of those belonging to the previous generation started as specialists of Iranian Archaeology), and how, in its turn, it produces new research questions.

Typically, intense field activities in new, or relatively unexplored regions provoke an interest in long-distance relations, "trade" and exchange of raw

[1] The following text is an only slightly revised version of the paper presented at the "Broadening Horizons 5" conference as a keynote lecture to the session: "Civilizations in contact: current research and new approaches in Mediterranean and Near Eastern archaeology". I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments and suggestions, which I tried to integrate into the text.

[2] "The International Congresses on the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East are organized every two years by the scientific community of scholars working on and in the Near East and studying therein material and environmental evidence from the most remote phases until the Islamic period within a multidisciplinary approach" (cit. from http://www.icaane.net/).

materials and artefacts, as opposed to the internal development dynamics of each individual area. Suffice it to mention, here, the wave of studies about lapis lazuli,[3] carneol and steatite/clorite,[4] which accompanied the above-mentioned excavations in Iran, or the debate about the "Uruk colonisation" originated by salvage archaeology in Northern Syria and South-Eastern Turkey.[5] Long-distance interactions and "trade" are of course old and recurring themes of research, but what I would like to draw attention on is how their popularity shows an "ebb and flow" trend, whose peaks coincide with, or immediately follow, periods when excavations proliferate in regions outside of the Mesopotamian core, and are interspersed by periods in which this field of research is less practiced.

Another consequence of the multiplication of archaeological excavations in the external sectors of the Near East has been a renewed interest, which still continues today, in relative chronologies and synchronisation of the regional periodisations, a pre-condition for any worthwhile analysis of interregional relations. Between the late 1980s and the early 2000s, this resulted in a number of dedicated congresses[6] and international projects, which completely superseded traditional syntheses on the topic.[7] Among the most successful international ventures, we can mention the Santa Fe workshop "Mesopotamia in the Era of State Formation" organised by M. Rothman in 1998,[8] which resulted in the new, now widely accepted periodisation of the Late Chalcolithic period for the fourth millennium, the international EFS supported ARCANE project (principal investigators M. Lebeau, Pierre de Miroschedji, 2006-2011) for the third millennium,[9] and the SCIEM 2000 project headed by Manfred Bietak (1999-2011) for the second millennium.[10]

Due to the dramatic crisis which, starting in the early 1990s with the First Gulf War and still continuing today in Syria and in parts of Iraq, made fieldwork virtually impossible over most of the Mesopotamian core area and to the worsening conditions for foreign expeditions in other countries of the Near East, we are now again in a phase in which new, or previously little explored regions have become the focus of intensive field research. One case at issue are the former republics (now independent states) of the Soviet Union, both in the Southern Caucasus (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) and in the area of Central Asia (Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan), many of which have recently opened to international collaborations in the field of archaeology; another one is the states of the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula, where archaeological activities have recently intensified.

The clearest evidence of the ongoing integration into Near Eastern Archaeology of these regions, located at the very limits of the Near, or Middle East, or even outside of its borders (in the case of Central Asia) from a purely geographical point of view, is the appearance of dedicated sessions and the increasing number of papers dealing with related subjects in the last editions of the ICAANE international congress. [11] In spite of all this, large areas of the "Ancient Near East" still remained, until very recently, only poorly investigated, and are on the whole rather neglected in international field literature as well.

Not only have the geographical boundaries of Near Eastern archaeology become wider and wider, and increasingly blurred and vague; when investigating regions far from the Mesopotamian core area, researchers are often confronted with cultures and societies, which escape the traditional objects

[3] Tosi 1974, 1980a, 1980b.

[4] Kohl 1974, 1975, 1978.

[5] Algaze 1993; Stein 1999; Rothman (ed.) 2001; Postgate (ed.) 2002.

[6] Examples are the above mentioned congress "Artefacts of Complexity" (Manchester 1998, Postgate (ed.) 2002), and the congress "Chronologie des Pays du Caucase et de l'Euphrate aux IVe-IIIe millénaires"(Istanbul 1998, Marro, Hauptmann (eds.) 2000).

[7] One such case was the long-expected new edition of Ehrich's Chronologies in Old World Archaeology (Ehrich (ed.) 1992), which became outdated very soon after it was first published.

[8] Rothman (ed.) 2001.

[9] The publication of the results of ARCANE project is still in progress. For a general presentation and the final periodisation, see the project's website (http://www.arcane.uni-tuebingen.de/) and the introduction to the first published volume, which is dedicated to the Syrian Jezirah (Lebeau 2011).

[10] For the wide literature produced by the SCIEM 2000 project, the reader is referred to the project's website (http://www.oeaw.ac.at/sciem2000/).

[11] http://www.icaane.net/.

of the discipline: urban and/or literate civilisations and lowland agricultural societies. Increasing attention is being focused, in particular, on the specific features of cultures which developed in so far neglected natural environments, with consequences which begin to call into question traditional assumptions and research parameters of the discipline. Although I will especially concentrate, for illustrating this point, on recent research concerning the highland societies of the northern sector of the Near East, these represent by no means the only case at issue, another one being represented, for instance, by recent developments in the archaeology of the Arabian Peninsula.[12]

3. Integrating "Highland societies" into Near Eastern Archaeology

If one looks at a physical map of the Middle East, it becomes obvious that most of its territory actually consists of mountains, highlands and plateaus. These regions rarely produced urban centres. Even when they did produce cities, these were generally of smaller dimensions than those of the Mesopotamian alluvium and showed a lower level of occupational continuity. Their economy relied less heavily, and frequently not at all, on irrigation agriculture. On the other hand, the role of activities such as pastoralism, mining, etc., in the economy of these highland cultures was much higher, as was the interaction of their "cities" with groups practicing a more mobile style of life. Central governments in these regions had to negotiate their authority with the leaders of tribal groups, a fact which generally resulted into unstable political entities, which often took the form of tribal confederations. Let's think, just to make the most obvious examples, to the Elamite kingdom,[13] or to the kingdom of Nairi/Urartu.[14]

In addition, the inhabitants of the Highlands generally left less evident traces of their presence on the landscape, than those archaeologists working in Greater Mesopotamia are used to, a circumstance which often creates the impression that one is dealing with vast "empty" spaces with little or no human occupation. While totally artificial, *tell*-like mounds are rare and mounded settlements tend to be founded on natural hills and do not show a considerable depth of anthropic layers, many other archaeological sites are representative of "lighter", rather unstable forms of occupation: small ephemeral villages built in perishable materials, seasonal campsites etc. All of them are not easily detectable not only by traditional survey, but also by modern remote sensing techniques, on the diverse topography which characterises these regions, which are often covered by vegetation for most of the year. On the other hand, other categories of sites which are frequently met on the Highlands (*e.g.* stone forts, military outposts and terracing systems, ancient mines, rock art sites, or monumental funerary barrows) are more easily visible on the surface, but consist of features which are quite difficult to date, as they typically yield little diagnostic finds and often show a high continuity of occupation.

In short, in order to be discovered and properly evaluated, Highland anthropised landscapes need special attention and appropriate methods, which archaeologists used to work in the "core areas" of the Near East are often not trained for, nor accustomed to. In particular, techniques developed in the last decades in the fields of European Pre- and Protohistory and Ancient Topography may be profitably applied to these regions. One especially successful example is the recent work on metal and salt mines between the Southern Caucasus and North-Western Iran, much of which was accomplished by scholars trained in European prehistory or mining archaeology (such as the specialists of the Deutsches Bergbau Museum in Bochum).[15]

More in general, the growing attention to the archaeological indicators of transhumant/mobile pastoralism[16] and the development of the debate

[12] This was the object of Session 6 ("Marine connections") of the Broadening Horizons conference, to whose proceedings I refer for further discussion.

[13] Potts 1999.

[14] Kroll et al. (eds.) 2012.

[15] Gambashidze, Stöllner (eds.) 2016 (gold mines in Georgia); Bobokhyan et al. 2017 (gold mines in Armenia); Marro et al. 2010 (salt mines in Azerbaijan).

[16] Although analysis of animal bones is increasingly integrated in excavation reports, specific studies focusing on their

about its role in Near Eastern societies[17] reflect the intensification of field research in countries (Anatolia, Iran, the Southern Caucasus, etc.) where these practices traditionally play an important economic role. However, non-urban societies were also living in close proximity to, and lively interacted with, the sedentary societies of the Mesopotamian alluvium, whose dynamics cannot be fully understood without taking them into consideration, as recent excavations in Iraqi Kurdistan have clearly shown.[18]

From a more theoretical point of view, research in the Highlands requires an attention to indicators of social complexity and cultural achievements which are different from those of lowland societies. In fact, highland societies are inevitably deemed to appear as "primitive" (thus following the stereotyped description which Mesopotamian textual sources conveyed of them) if we measure their social complexity by largest settlement size, presence of palatial and temple architecture and other indicators of a central power, and their intellectual performances by the presence of written texts, etc.

In fact, monuments whose construction involved a high degree of communal work are not missing in these areas, but take forms to which Near Eastern archaeologists are less accustomed, such as huge barrow graves (kurgans) and sanctuaries positioned in rather inaccessible locations. The presence of monumental burials and the accumulation in burial contexts of wealth in the form of mobile objects of precious and/or, exotic materials (metals, semi-precious stones, etc.) have long been recognised to represent appropriate indicators of social complexity for Highland societies.

More recently, scholars' attention was also focused on extra-urban sanctuaries. As clearly demonstrated by the case of the aceramic Neolithic complex of Göbekli Tepe[19], these are not necessarily a manifestation of state-like hierarchical societies, but can as well represent the expression of egalitarian societies. N. Laneri however recently argued that Highland ceremonial sites of later periods may represent a different type of social complexity, which may be conceptualised in terms of heterarchical systems where leadership is not centralised, but shared or dispersed among different agents.[20]

In order to evaluate the intellectual achievements of Highland populations, attention may be focused on their capacity to control the procurement and the exchange of rare raw materials, and their being the seat of specialised handicrafts, or the point of origin of technological innovations. In particular, it is evident that by their very location and geology highland territories played a crucial role in the procurement and circulation of metals, whose leading role in the economy of Near Eastern Bronze Age societies is evident even from textual sources, and had therefore long been recognised by scholars. Not by chance, therefore, the intensification of field activities in the Highland regions of Anatolia, North-Western Iran and the Caucasus was matched by a renewed wave of research about metals and metallurgy.[21]

4. New perspectives on long-distance interactions

I would now like, however, to elaborate on another theme, that is how intensive field research in previously scarcely explored areas located at the geographic periphery of the Near East has revealed (or confirmed) deep and in some cases unsuspected connections with areas which are traditionally the object of other archaeological disciplines, a fact which challenges our traditional view of the Near East as consisting of a "core" and of a periphery, whose main role was to provide the core with nat-

contextual analysis and on their role as indicators of different models of animal exploitation are still rare (see, *e.g.*, Piro 2009; Berthon 2013; Siracusano, Bartosiewicz 2012; Siracusano, Palumbi 2014), and the use of isotopic analysis of both bones and seeds for tracking population movements is still in its beginnings (Messager et Al. 2015).

17 Marro 2004; Palumbi 2010, 2012.

18 Kopanias, MacGinnis (eds.) 2016.

19 Schmidt 2006.

20 Laneri 2014.

21 Relevant literature is too wide to be analytically listed here, but Yener 2000; Courcier 2010; Gambashidze et Al. 2010; Hansen et Al. (eds.) 2010, Vatandoust et Al. (eds.) 2011 can provide a first overview of recent research in different regions. For earlier decades, Chernykh 1992 provides the most complete synthesis of Soviet research on the topic, focusing on the northern half of Eurasia, but including the Caucasian region as well.

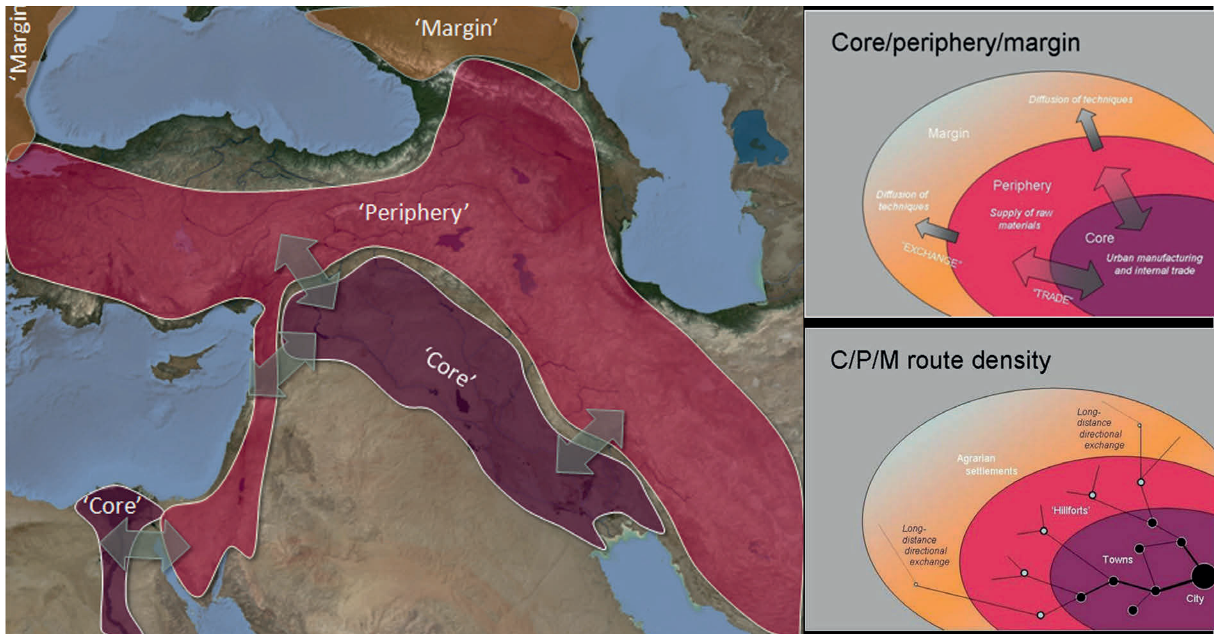

Figure 1
A traditional model of interregional relations in the ancient Near East (adapted from Wilkinson 2016; Sherrat 2004)

ural resources (again, as clearly demonstrated many years ago by M. Liverani, following the view provided by written Mesopotamian sources)[22] (fig. 1).

In fact, less monolithic models of interconnections within and outside of the ancient Near East had already emerged in the 1970s, following the important discoveries in Iran and Central Asia.

Fig. 2, for instance, shows a map, by the late Maurizio Tosi, of the Early Bronze Age civilisations of Middle Asia in the later third millennium BC, in which Mesopotamia occupies a relatively peripheral position. In a similar way, Mesopotamia plays a rather marginal role in the circuit of Late Bronze Age international trade as exemplified by the materials from the famous Uluburun shipwreck, excavated between 1984 and 1994, which rather focuses on the Eastern Mediterranean and the Levantine area (fig. 3).

These two examples highlight how regions (Iran and the Levant), which are usually considered to belong to the near eastern periphery, play a crucial role in connecting the Near East with the different cultural macro-areas (the Indus Valley and Central Asia and, respectively, Egypt and the Aegean) which surround it. These are traditionally the object of other archaeological disciplines; when seen in a wider perspective, however, they represent parts of a wider continuum of ancient civilisations and cultures, whose frontiers appear more and more blurred and permeable as research progresses.

The old core/periphery paradigm is thus becoming less and less satisfactory while, in its place, the model of a polycentric network is gaining momentum. This not only does not require drawing fixed boundaries between civilisations and cultures, but allows for different areas (or policies) to act as a centre for their immediately surrounding regions and to occupy, at the same time, a peripheral position with respect to other regions. More remarkably, it also allows to highlight the importance of some areas/policies – or human groups –, which at first sight play a minor role in this cultural continuum, in connecting with each other different foci of civil-

[22] See, most recently, Liverani 2017. On traditional models and techniques for visualising highland-lowland interdependence, see also Wilkinson 2016.

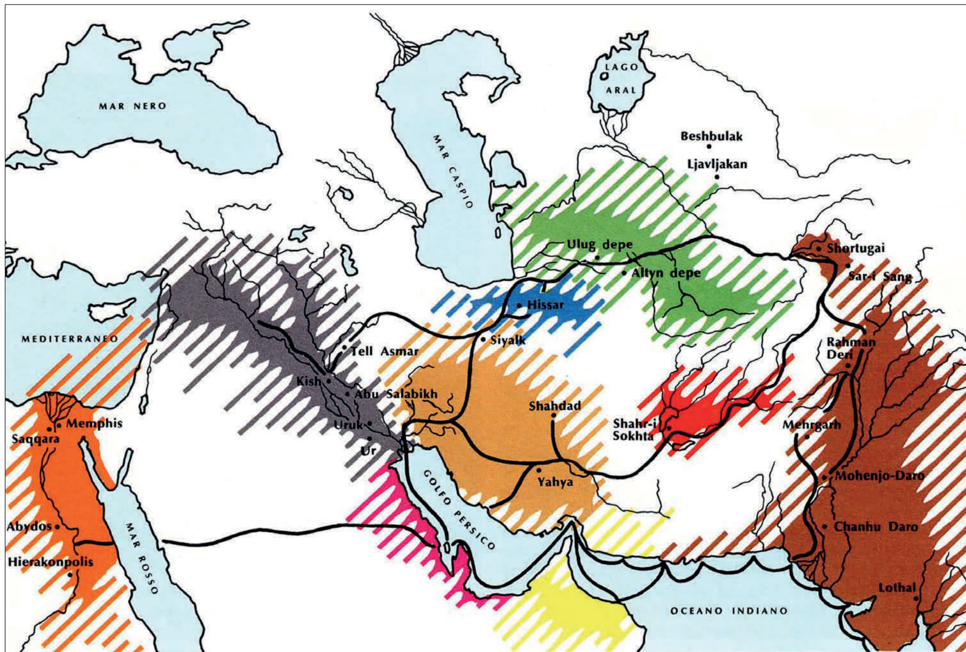

Figure 2
Cultural areas of Middle Asia in the 3rd millennium BC (after Tosi 1980b, p. 1796)

Figure 3
Possible route of the Uluburun ship (after Aruz et Al. (eds.) 2008, fig. 97)

isation. The recent popularity of network analysis in archaeology may provide a better fitting paradigm and a more appropriate terminology to this situation, by helping to define, *e.g.*, "nodes" and "links" within this huge interconnected area[23].

The intensification of field research in areas located at the very limits of the "Near East" also invites us to explore long-distance routes, or corridors, and networks of interconnections which are rather remote from the traditional Mesopotamian core and even, to a certain extent, independent from it. An approach to ancient trade which cross-cuts traditional borders between Near Eastern Archaeology and other disciplines is, for instance, evident in various contributions to the "ArchAtlas Project"[24] founded by the late Andrew Sherrat at the University of Sheffield, first of all in the attempts (2004) by Sherrat himself at modelling the long-term development of trade routes in Eurasia and beyond.[25] More recently, a similar approach characterises the volume T*ying the Threads of Eurasia* by Toby C. Wilkinson,[26] which explores the flows of different materials and objects (metals, stones, textiles etc.) between Anatolia, the Southern Caucasus and Western Central Asia by mobilising a wide array of data and methods, and other recent research by the same author[27].

5. Northern connections?

In the following, I will concentrate, as an example, on the perspectives opened by excavations in the Southern Caucasus. [28] If we consider the Greater Caucasus range as the northern geographical limit of the Near East, the countries of the Southern Caucasus are undoubtedly part of the latter, although with an apparently rather marginal role within it. In fact, direct connections between the Southern Caucasus region and the traditional Mesopotamian core are very few, though not totally nonexistent. On the other hand, however, connections with regions belonging to the northern portions of the Near East – Northern Iran and the Southern Caspian area, Anatolia, parts of Northern Mesopotamia – and, beyond these, with the Aegean to the west and with Central Asia to the east are becoming increasingly evident as field research progresses. Finally, the position of the region at the crossroads between the Near East and the huge world of the Eurasian steppes which extends beyond the Caucasus opens up the possibility of connections with areas (the Northern Black Sea, the Balkan peninsula) which are traditionally the object of European prehistory, and even, through the intermediary of the Northern Caucasus, with the steppes of Northern Central Asia.

In considering the origins and affiliation of cultural phenomena, Near Eastern archaeologists working in the Southern Caucasus are naturally inclined to look at the areas they know better, *i.e.* in southern direction. This is certainly appropriate in many cases: examples are, for the late fifth-earlier fourth millennium BC, the diffusion in the region of Chaff-faced wares with North Mesopotamian affinities[29] or, for the early second millennium Middle Bronze Age, the Trialeti culture, the connections of which with Anatolia and even with Southern Mesopotamia have long been recognised.[30]

However, a look toward the north may sometimes be equally illuminating: for instance, the profusion of gold in the graves of the Late Chalcolithic North Caucasian Maikop culture and, later on, in those of the South-Caucasian mid-third millennium Early Kurgan cultures, may be explained, and has actually been explained by some, through a distant familiarity with the early achievements of Balkan-Carpathian metallurgy. [31] To make another example, the diffusion, in the Late Bronze Age, of stone architecture and cyclopic fortresses in the Southern Caucasus after a long period of apparently non sedentary occupation is sometimes explained

[23] Knappet (ed.) 2013.

[24] http://www.archatlas.org/Home.php.

[25] Sherrat 2004.

[26] Wilkinson 2014.

[27] *E.g.*, Wilkinson 2016.

[28] The most recent and updated synthesis on the archaeology of the Caucasus is provided by Sagona 2018.

[29] Marro 2011.

[30] Rubinson 2003; Puturidze 2005.

[31] Kohl 2007; Hansen 2010, 2014a.

with the emergence in the area of complex policies under stimuli from – or as a reaction to – the northern expansion of the contemporary Near Eastern empires. Sabine Reinhold, however, notices that a similar spreading of stone architecture is attested, at the same time, in the Northern Caucasus, where she connects it with the emergence of settled pastoralism, a phenomenon that, starting with the early second millennium BC, covered an immense area in Western Eurasia to the north[32].

More in general, Near Eastern archaeologists working in the Southern Caucasus are confronted with new evidence pertaining to long-debated phenomena which have a much wider diffusion than the Near East and in connection to which the Near East plays a rather marginal role. This is the case, for instance, of the spreading of barrow graves (kurgans),[33] or of the diffusion of anthropomorphic stelae with warrior-like features. The latter appear, between the fourth and the third millennium BC, over an area spanning from the Caucasus as far as Portugal, and subsequently spread over the vast Central Asiatic steppes as well. Sven Hansen (2013) has recently connected their first appearance with the emergence in Eurasia of a new social type: a "heroic ruler", whose presence would be also signalled by the emphasis on metal weaponry (especially daggers and axes) in contemporary élite burials. As Hansen notes, it is probably no chance that this "northern" type of heroic ruler appears at approximately the same time as the Uruk "priest-king", another symbolic expression of emerging kingship, the iconography of which spreads, in the second half of the fourth millennium, from Southern Mesopotamia to Western Iran and the Upper Euphrates, and even reaches Egypt.[34]

Other cases of still to be explored possible long-distance connections are the appearance, again in the fourth millennium BC, of wheeled vehicles over an area spanning from Southern Mesopotamia, through the Northern Caucasus, to Northern Europe, [35] and the presence, in the mid-third millennium BC, of comparable élite "wagon graves" (a generally northern tradition) from the Southern Caucasus (Martqopi and Bedeni cultures) to Southern Mesopotamia and Elam (Ur, Susa).

I am not proposing here a simple revival of old diffusionist theories (*e.g.* Gimbutas' kurgan theory[36]), but I argue that the fact that these theories have been abused or misapplied in the past shouldn't restrain one from considering such widespread phenomena as a worthwhile object of study and that, in fact, data from recent excavations and new methods of analysis may contribute to shed new light on them. For instance, high-precision radiocarbon chronology may make a significant contribution, in the future, to old disputes about the priority of one or another region in the introduction of these innovations.[37]

The northern connections of the Southern Caucasus, which go back at least to the Late Chalcolithic period, thus urge us to reconsider the "urban revolution" and its pivotal role as the foundation of Near Eastern civilisations as a special manifestation of a "global revolution" which takes place, in the fourth millennium BC, over a much wider area comprising large portions of Asia and Europe. [38] Within this large interconnected area, which crosscuts our traditional disciplinary limits and which we can visualise as a network with many centres and peripheries, in which flows of raw materials, objects, people, but also of technologies, information and ideologies travelled along multiple and not mutually exclusive routes, each area and each human group developed its own combination, which we should certainly try to analyse in its peculiarities, but without forgetting the general framework.

This requires, in Near Eastern archaeologists who work in this area at least, an intensified dialogue with specialists of disciplines (European prehistory in this case), and an effort in familiarising with concepts, periodisation systems, [39] materials

[32] Reinhold 2017.

[33] Gimbutas 1997. For a recent overview of research on barrow graves, cf. Borgna, Müller Celka (eds.) 2012.

[34] Schmandt-Besserat 1993.

[35] Fansa, Burmeister (eds.) 2004; Petrequin et Al. (eds.) 2006; Burmeister 2011.

[36] Gimbutas 1997; more recently, see also Anthony 2007.

[37] For a synthesis of problems and perspectives of radiocarbon chronology in the Southern Caucasus, see, among others, Passerini et Al. 2018.

[38] Thus, the fourth millennium BC has recently been defined by S. Hansen (2014b) "a watershed in European prehistory".

[39] On the synchronisation of chronologies and periodisa-

etc. which may not be so familiar to them. On the other hand, this attention to the wider framework should be matched by a deepened analysis of each individual region and even of each category of artefacts,[40] in a continuous feedback between general and particular, which is the only way to avoid excessive generalisations and to guarantee a real progress of knowledge.

6. Anatolia and the Southern Caucasus as part of a Northern Near Eastern connection network

An example of such promising topics of research is the attempt at better defining the flows of materials, information etc. which connected, during the Bronze Age, Anatolia and the Southern Caucasus with the rest of the Near East, the Aegean and Central Asia.

It is evident that in most of the past models of trade routes and interconnections between the Near East and either Central Asia or the Aegean (see, for instance figs 2 and 3, above), the Southern Caucasus is either not considered, or given a totally marginal role. The same is true for large parts of Anatolia, as well. Thus, the main third-early second millennium BC land and sea routes (or, better said, corridors, or "highways")[41] crossing the Near East, as reconstructed from the distribution of materials like lapis lazuli, carneol or chlorite vessels, are those connecting Central Asia, the Indus Valley and Iran, through Mesopotamia and Syria, with the Levantine coast, and from there with Egypt. The resulting general model (fig. 4) is somehow similar to a version of the classical Medieval "Silk Road".[42] Although the importance of this main axis of communication should not be denied, it should be emphasised how it represents an over-simplification of a much more complex collection of interconnected local, regional and interregional communications networks. This is certainly a consequence of western field research of the second half of the twentieth century focusing on specific regions; however, it also reflects the special attention paid by scholars interested in long-distance connections to classes of artefacts recovered in earlier excavations in Mesopotamia and, ultimately, depends on the narrative transmitted to us by Mesopotamian textual sources as well.

Thus, the role of Anatolia in most general models of Near Eastern trade is limited to a few exceptional sites (e.g. Kültepe in Central Anatolia, or Troy on the Aegean coast) which yielded Mesopotamian-related finds. In the case of Kültepe, in particular, the discovery of the archives of the Assyrian merchants contributed to direct scholars' attention on the site's connections with Syro-Mesopotamia, whereas possible northern connections were rather disregarded. Fig. 5 shows two reconstructions of Kültepe's connection network (around 1800[43] and, respectively, in the mid-third millennium BC[44]); it is interesting to observe how on both maps Northern, and especially North-Eastern Anatolia, represents a sort of "empty space".

Recent research has however begun, through a multiplicity of different approaches, to unravel the complexity of exchange networks within ancient Anatolia. Michele Massa and Alessio Palmisano[45], for instance, have better characterised the importance of Central-Western Anatolia within different exchange networks, and the role played by Northern Mesopotamia and the Northern Levant in connecting this area with the Mesopotamian alluvium. As their analysis focuses on exchanges between Anatolia and Mesopotamia, however, North-Eastern Anatolia remains an empty space on their maps, too.

On the other hand, other contributions[46] tried to reconstruct the network of interactions in Bronze Age Anatolia by comparing it with net-

tion systems between Caucasia and the Near East, see Rova in press.

40 *E.g.* Helwing 2012, 2017 argues for different, overlapping networks of ceramic versus metal manufacture traditions and artefacts circulation and exchange in the Late Chalcolithic period.

41 Wilkinson 2014.

42 As recently formulated by T. Wilkinson (2014), it may be defined as "one of many possible 'Silk routes'".

43 Kulakoğlu, Kangal (eds.) 2010.

44 Tonussi 2007.

45 Massa, Palmisano 2018.

46 Wilkinson 2014; Massa 2010.

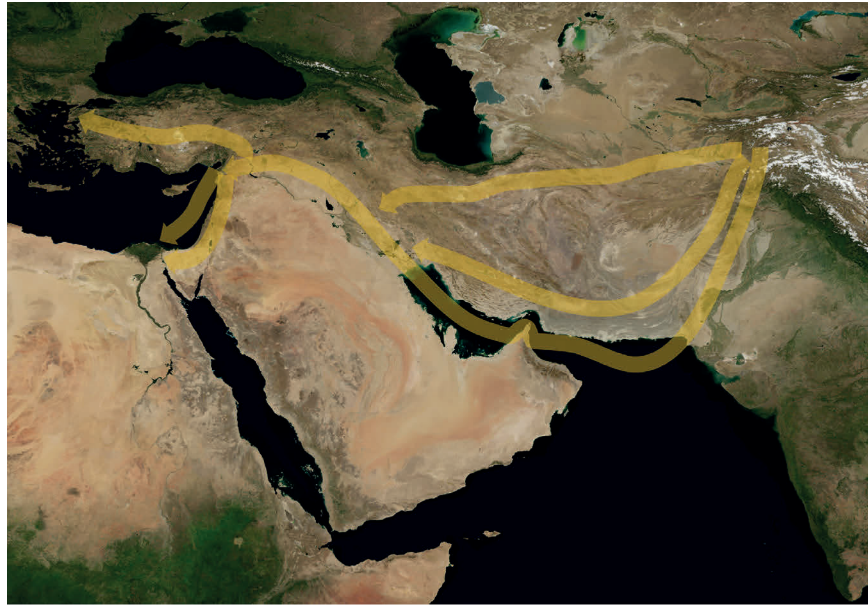

Figure 4
Satellite map of the Near East with indication of the main axe of Bronze Age interregional communications passing through Syro-Mesopotamia (based on NASA, Visible Earth, Bluemarble images)

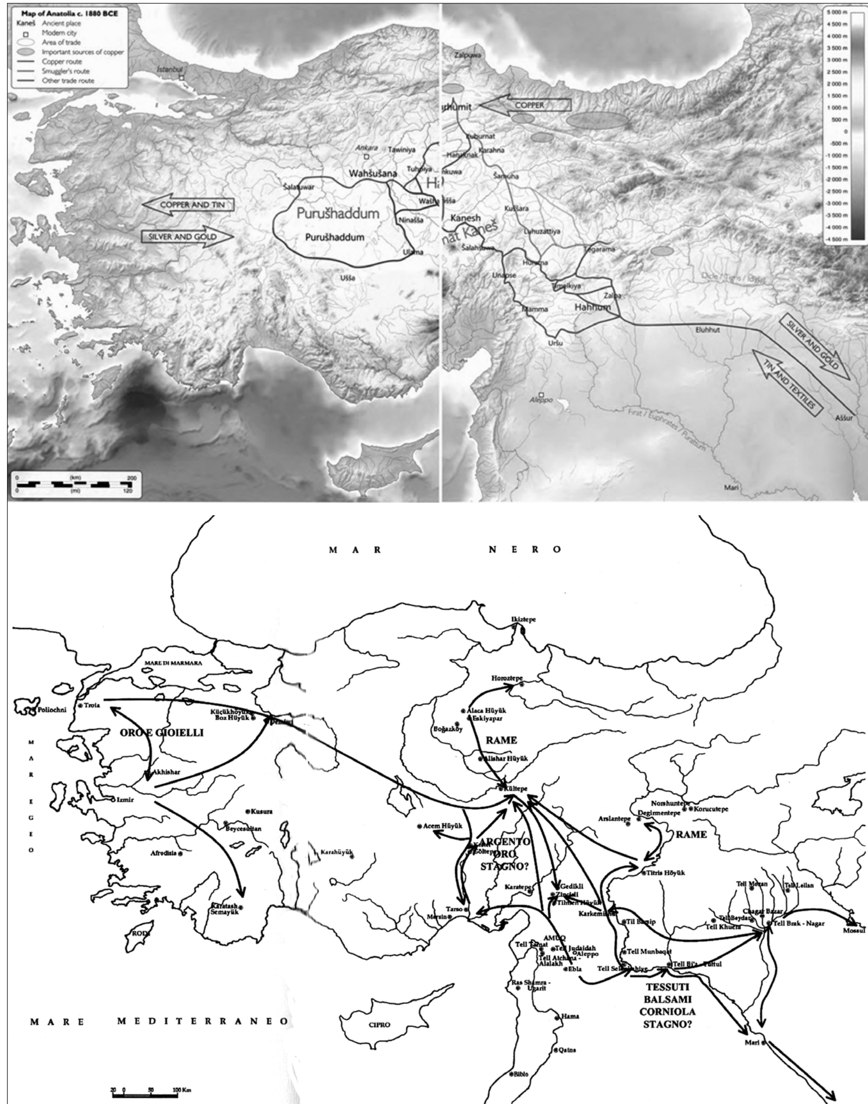

Figure 5
Maps showing the network of interconnections of the Kültepe site around 1800 (above) and in the mid-3rd millennium BC (below) (after Kulakoğlu, Kangal (eds.) 2010, map on pp. 170-171; Tonussi 2007, map 22)

works of routes and roads from different historical periods, like, for instance, Roman roads or pilgrimage routes. Toby Wilkinson in particular, following a line of research inaugurated by Catherine Marro[47] some years before, drew special attention to the importance, in this connection, of less formal routes ("pathways" as he calls them) like for instance those of seasonal migration by nomadic and transhumant groups (fig. 6). It is interesting to observe that the "empty space" represented by Northern and North-Eastern Anatolia, the regions which presumably had the strongest connections with the Southern Caucasus in the interregional communication network, is slowly starting to get filled in the maps attached to these contributions.

Another, more traditional but complementary way to tackle the same question is to look at the distribution of sites and archaeological materials. Earlier research, mainly by archaeologists working in Western Turkey and by specialists in Aegean prehistory, had already made clear how Central Anatolia was part of a network of communications involving the Aegean and South-Eastern Europe, which concerned different artefacts, and was partially independent from, though interconnected with, the "mainstream" route heading to the Mediterranean coast through Syro-Mesopotamia. A good example is represented by the distribution, in the mid-third millennium BC, of *depas* and tankard cups,[48] which barely touches North-Western Syria and the Middle-Upper Euphrates, but does not extend beyond these limits. North-Eastern Turkey, on the other hand, probably lies outside the dissemination area of such ceramic types, and therefore appears as an "empty space" on these distribution maps as well.

Only in the course of the last decade, intensification of research both in Northern Turkey and in the Southern Caucasus has resulted in the expansion in north-eastern direction, in scholars' perception, of the Early Bronze Age Anatolian connection network. Gaps in our knowledge are being progressively filled through the infusion of data from new excavations, the publication of artefacts from old museum collections, renewed attention to specific categories of materials (metals in particular) and through comparative study of the evidence from the two regions.

Discoveries at third millennium sites in the northern part of central Turkey (especially graves or hoards with rich collections of metal burial goods, like *e.g.* Resuloğlu e Kalınkaya-Toptaştepe, Bekaroğlu Köyü, but also settlements, such as Ikiztepe) have allowed Th. Zimmermann[49] and others to re-evaluate well-known finds like those from Alaca Höyük and Horoztepe in the context of a mainly east-west oriented Early Bronze Age network of interconnections. This northern corridor can be assumed to continue not only in western direction towards the Aegean, the Black Sea and South-Eastern Europe, but also, in eastern direction, toward the Southern Caucasus[50] and even beyond this, to the South-Caspian region[51] and Northern Iran and, through the latter, until Central Asia[52]. Finally, it also provided access, through the coastal plains and the few passes which cross the Greater Caucasus barrier, to the Northern Black Sea and the steppes of the Northern Caucasus (fig. 7).

That this northern network of connections – or at least some portions of it – were already existing in the fourth millennium BC is proved, among others, by the presence of lapis lazuli in the kurgans of the Maikop and Novosvobodnaya cultures in the Northern Caucasus[53] and in the roughly contemporary Late Chalcolithic kurgans of Soyuk Bulak in Azerbaijan. [54] While lapis lazuli is known, at ca the same time, in different areas of the Near East (*e.g.* at Tepe Gawra in Northern Mesopotamia) and even in Egypt, and may therefore have travelled, like in

[47] Marro 2004.

[48] For a recent visualisation of the distribution of *depas* and tankards, see Massa 2010; see also Tonussi 2007, pp. 261-272 *et passim*.

[49] Among the numerous contributions by this author, see especially Zimmermann 2007, 2009, 2011.

[50] On the Caucasian connections of the Alaca Höyük graves, see already Mansfeld 2001.

[51] For some preliminary considerations about this still poorly explored region, see Piller 2012.

[52] On third millennium connections with Central Asia, see especially Wilkinson 2014.

[53] Ivanova 2012.

[54] Lyonnet et Al. 2008.

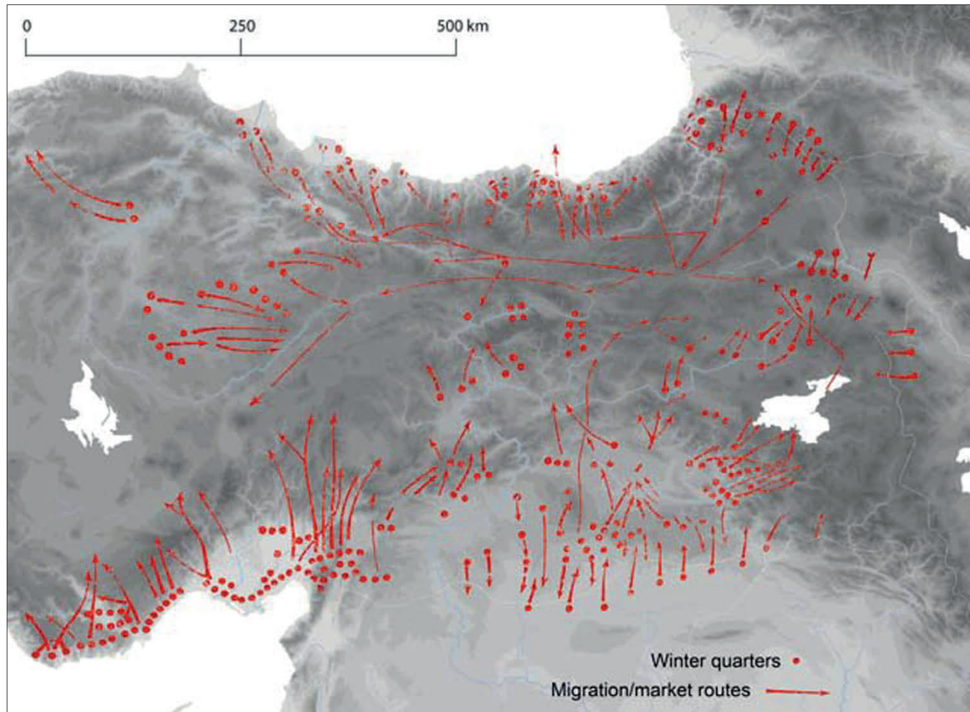

Figure 6
Traditional routes of seasonal migration in Anatolia (after Wilkinson 2014, fig. 2.9)

Figure 7
Satellite map of the Near East with indication of the supposed "northern corridor" and of its connections with other main axes of interregional communications (based on NASA, Visible Earth, Bluemarble images)

later times, along multiple, different routes,[55] other finds from the Soyuk Bulak kurgans support these "northern connections". This is the case, for instance, of the animal-headed sceptre, which has a precise parallel at Sé Girdan in North-Western Iran, and is also vaguely reminiscent of sceptres from the northern pontic steppes, but especially of the metal finds, which include a "copper" dagger and a number of golden beads.

Connections of the Maikop culture of the Northern Caucasus with Northern Iran and Central Asia have been repeatedly pointed out by Maria Ivanova in the course of the last few years.[56] In a recently published contribution she focuses in particular on the distribution of a series of metal artefacts of Central Asian and South Caucasian origin (shaft-hole axes and grip-tongued daggers) which, in her opinion, were introduced in the fourth millennium BC to the Northern Caucasus and from there spread, in the early third millennium, to Eastern Europe as well as to Anatolia and the Aegean.[57] The origin of fourth millennium shaft-hole axes is controversial, as some authors regard them as a belated transfer of the East-European tradition of heavy copper axes;[58] be that as it may, it is clear that they mainly circulate along routes, and in ideological circuits, which are different, though to a certain extent in communication with, those of the contemporary emerging Syro-Mesopotamian urban centres.

The same is true for the earliest swords: these are first attested at approximately the same time (the late fourth millennium BC) both in the Turkish Upper Euphrates (at Arslantepe) and in the Northern Caucasus (in kurgan no. 31 at Klady) and even in the third millennium BC they are not attested south of the Anatolian region (Alaca Höyük).[59]

The mere number of metal objects which are distributed throughout this northern network of interconnections is a clear hint to the fact that the latter is associated with the circulation of metals and metallurgical expertise. It becomes equally evident, just by comparing a map of the archaeological finds in the involved regions with a map of the location of the main metal sources, that it is also connected with the search, control and trade of metal ores. Hence, future advances in research concerning mining activities and metallurgical technology, along the different lines of enquiry that have been mentioned above,[60] are also likely to produce relevant results on the specific topic of "northern interconnections" in the next future.

On the other hand, the emphasis placed, since the very beginning, on metal weapons within this circuit of exchanges brings us back to another issue which was briefly commented upon in a previous section of this paper, namely that of a specifically northern type of heroic or warlike rulership, which possibly travelled along the same routes.[61]

This early tradition of "northern connections", which can be traced back at least to the fourth millennium BC, represents a possible background against which specific transfers of objects, rituals and ideologies between the Near East and the Aegean area during the third and second millennia might be, in the future, evaluated independently from, and as an alternative to, the traditional route following the "Syro-Levantine Corridor". One among many cases at issue is the distribution, in the second millennium, of long swords (so-called "rapiers"),[62] which stretches from the Southern Caucasus to the Aegean islands and Inland Greece, thereby completely skipping Syro-Mesopotamia.

7. Some final remarks

To conclude, recent excavations in less known, geographically marginal areas of the Near East have opened up the view of a precociously interconnected, global ancient world which widely exceeds the traditional limits of Near Eastern archaeology as an institutional discipline (fig. 8). Research in these areas is beginning to provide the hitherto missing

[55] Cf. Wilkinson 2014, 123-133, fig. 4.3 for a map.

[56] Ivanova 2012, 2013.

[57] Ivanova 2016.

[58] For a recent discussion, see Helwing 2017.

[59] Piller 2015; see also Dall'Armellina 2017.

[60] See *supra*, § 3.

[61] See *supra*, § 5.

[62] Abramishvili 2001; most recently, also Dall'Armellina 2017; Dall'Armellina, this volume.

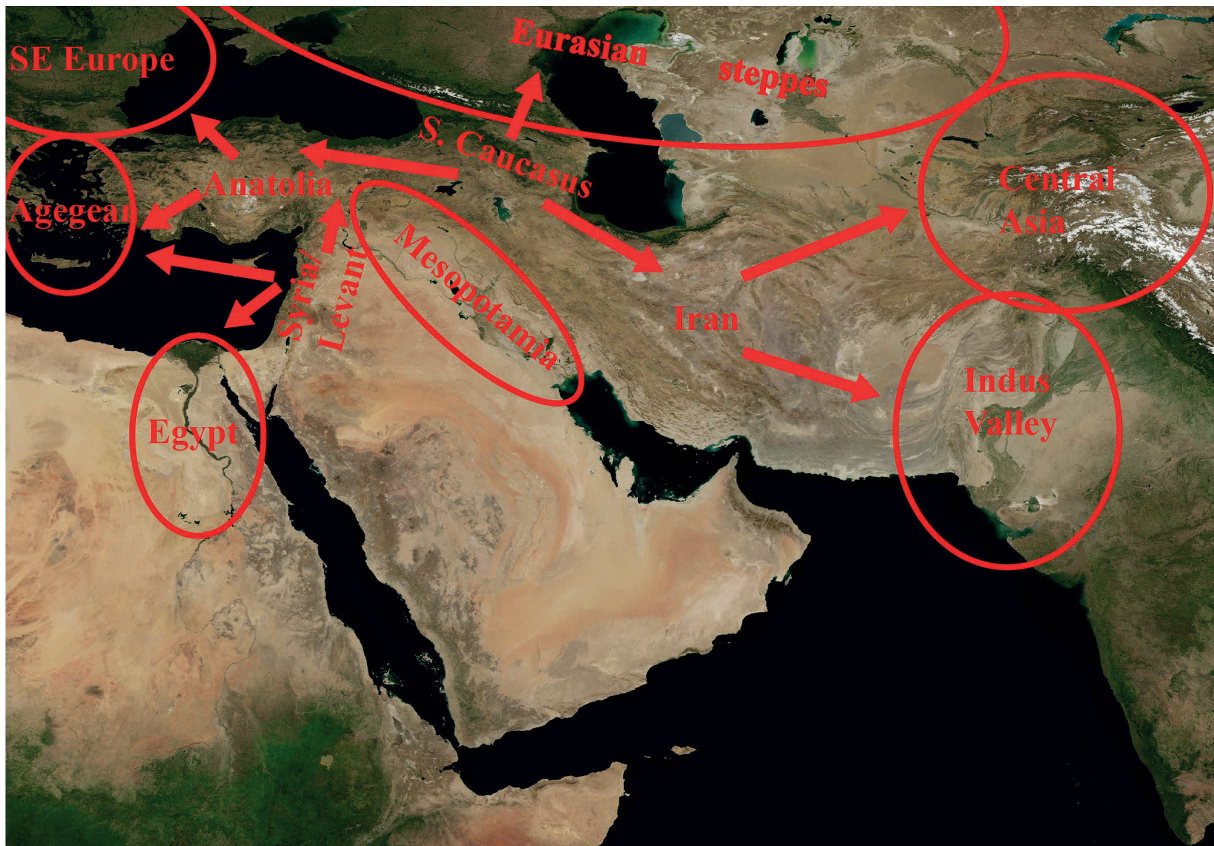

FIGURE 8
Satellite map of the Near East with indication of the interrelations of the different peri-Mesopotamian regions with each other and with the other contemporary cultural macro-areas (based on NASA, Visible Earth, Bluemarble images)

links between the Near Eastern civilisations and their contemporary neighbours, and will allow a fresh look at old-debated questions concerning long distance circulation of raw materials, objects, technologies, and ideas. If on the one side this may lead to somehow relativise some achievements of the traditional Mesopotamian core area, on the other one it can definitely contribute to better contextualise them in the framework of a multicentric network of exchanges which connects the Near East with other cultural macro-areas: Central Asia, the Indus Valley, the Eurasian steppes, South-Eastern Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Egypt.

In order to fully exploit the new wealth of data which field research is continuing to offer us, it is necessary for us to swing between two opposite, but not mutually exclusive approaches. On the one hand, in order to analyse the single threads of this interconnected network and their evolution in the course of time, we have to focus our research more narrowly, and less episodically, on each individual area, as well as on each period, material, technology, category of objects, etc. For this, we have to broaden our set of methodological instruments to all nowadays available techniques of analysis. At the same time, however, it is necessary for us to "broaden our horizons" to the other civilisations of the ancient world, either by gaining ourselves new competencies in disciplines which may not be part of, or may not be central in, the university training of Near Eastern archaeologists, or at least by promoting a continuous scholarly dialogue crosscutting traditional disciplinary borders.

Definitely, the developments described in this paper are not totally devoid of risks. It might be

feared, for instance, that the same identity of "Near Eastern archaeology" as a separate discipline may be threatened by the constant expansion of its geographical field of activities and by the overlap, in scope as well as in required competencies, with different archaeological disciplines. This could be considered as a special case of a very general trend, whereby traditional university curricula and academic disciplinary borders are confronted with increasingly interdisciplinary research practices.

In fact, the challenge for Near Eastern archaeology in the next future may well be to maintain its traditional focus on the civilisations of the Near East as a specific cultural macroarea, as vague as its borders may become. This undoubtedly requires that future generations of Near Eastern archaeologists, besides focusing their research on a specific region within the Near East and considering it in its overall network of connections – including those with other cultural macro-areas –, continue to possess a general knowledge about the history of the Near East, its natural environment and its and past and present social dynamics, which is not requested to the specialists of other archaeological disciplines, and thus represents an essential part of their scientific identity.

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