

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

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This special issue of *Studia Orientalia Electronica* collects papers from the international conference “The Strange and the Familiar: Identity and Empire in the Ancient Near East,” held at the University of Helsinki on August 23 and 24, 2019. The conference, as its title suggests, examined issues found at the intersection of identity and empire in the ancient Near East during the second and first millennia BCE. To this end, the papers in this volume ask questions concerning how empires construct their own internal and external identities; how imperial borders may exist as multivalent entities; and how foreign groups maintain—or, alternatively, lose—their own identity when existing in imperial spaces. The conference was generously supported by funding from the Center of Excellence in Changes in Sacred Texts and Traditions (CSTT), the Center of Excellence in Ancient Near Eastern Empires (ANEE), and the Finnish Institute in the Middle East (FIME).

The papers in this volume fall into three major groups, categories that were first established in the original conference: center and periphery in the Late Bronze Age, Assyria and Babylonia, and later empires and biblical contexts. This structure facilitates closer connections between the papers and allows for the major themes of identity and empire to thread through the volume as a whole.

The first three papers consider expressions of empire in the second millennium, focusing on the cultures of Anatolia and the Levant. In her paper, “Ways of Being Hittite: Empire and Borderlands in Late Bronze Age Anatolia and Northern Syria,” Müge Durusu-Tanrıöver presents cases where the borderlands, as opposed to defining the “other,” were used to generate identities for the Hittite empire. The following two papers move south, first to Alalakh to discuss the intersection of identities present in the Idrimi inscription, with Jacob Lauinger’s paper, “Imperial and Local: Audience and Identity in the Idrimi Inscriptions,” and then to Ugarit and its rich evidence for a vivid intermingling of peoples, cultures, and traditions, as discussed by František Válek in “Foreigners and Religion at Ugarit.”

The next papers jump through time and space to consider identity as described by the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires of first-millennium Mesopotamia. The papers by Ben Dewar (“The Burning of Captives in the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions, and Early Neo-Assyrian Conceptions of the Other”) and Eva Miller (“Drawing Distinctions: Assyrians and Others in the Art of the Neo-Assyrian Empire”) both consider the treatment of the foreign or the “Other” by the Neo-Assyrian empire and its kings, but approach this topic via different bodies of evidence. Dewar examines how and why the relatively unusual punishment of burning is used in the Assyrian royal inscriptions, while Miller discusses the representations of captive or otherwise submissive

foreigners on the Assyrian palace reliefs, with reference to how such depictions may be, in some regard, deficient or incorrect.

We travel from the Assyrian north to the Babylonian south with the papers by Jon P. Nielsen (“Kings of Chaldea and Sons of Nobodies: Assyrian Engagement with Chaldea and the Emergence of Chaldean Power in Babylonia”) and Michael Kozuh (“The Roving Other: Shepherds, Temples, and Empires in First-Millennium Mesopotamia”). The former examines the interaction between Assyria and its rulers and the Chaldeans as kings of Babylonia, and how Chaldean identity developed under the Assyrian Empire. In his paper, Kozuh tackles the question of otherness and empire from within, rather than without, discussing the role of shepherds in the Eanna archive of Uruk.

Finally, the papers in the volume move beyond Mesopotamia to examine the construction of empire and identity in primarily Achaemenid contexts. Silvia Balatti considers the edges of empire in her paper, “Yaṣnā and Sakā: Identity Constructions at the Margins of the Achaemenid Empire,” while Jennifer Finn’s “Persian Collections: Center and Periphery at Achaemenid Imperial Capitals” considers how those margins may be brought into the center, examining collecting as a display of imperial power. Finally, Ehud Ben Zvi presents the act of social identity construction by the Yehudite in his article, “The Art of Bracketing Empire Out and Creating Parallel Worlds: The Case of Late Persian Yehud.” Taken individually and as a whole, the papers in this volume present a range of diverse approaches to the complicated tangle of issues surrounding the construction of identity in—and by—empire in the ancient Near East.