

Elisabeth WAGNER-DURAND – Julia LINKE (Hgg.), Tales of Royalty. Notions of Kingship in Visual and Textual Narration in the Ancient Near East. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2020, 325 S., 31 s/w-Abb., 19 farb. Abb., EUR 99,95. ISBN: 978-1-5015-1555-2

The book collects essays that were presented in a workshop organized within the 61st Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, held in Bern and Geneva in 2015: the volume has been moreover enriched with three additional papers (by Herbert Niehr, Natalie N. May, and Seth Richardson). I well remember the quality of the presentations and discussions at that time, having being invited to chair one of the sessions and, since then, I have been really looking forward to reading the publication.

The book touches upon textual and visual materials mainly from the Mesopotamian context from the 3rd to the 1st millennium BC (the only exception is the contribution of Niehr on the Aramaean kings in ancient Syria): the focus on Mesopotamia is an added value and a limit at the same time. It is a value because one can follow and identify connections, differences, and similarities across space and time; it is a limit because the topic of narrative, both royal and non-royal, can be of course further investigated in other regions and areas of the ancient Near East, trying to recognize either similar patterns or discontinuities and local specificities (indeed, the contribution of Niehr partially suggests the fruitful possibility of this vein of research).

Anyway, the volume is really well structured and any contribution enriches and enlarges the field of research and investigation not only on the quantity but also on the quality of narratives, both written and visual, in ancient Mesopotamia: my review does not tackle each contribution singularly (I think the presentation made by the editors perfectly fulfils this duty), but I prefer to concentrate on themes and suggestions (even provocation following the intuition of Richardson's paper) that can be traced and collected in the reading of the entire volume.

Indeed, one can chose to read papers one by one without necessarily studying the entire book, depending on personal interest, field of research, and curiosity: however, in writing a review, it is necessary to get and consider the entire content of the book and thus all papers must be read. This obligation finally led me to think that the originality of the book does not only concern the content of the collected articles, but indeed the possibility to start reading the book from the end. If I may, I would in fact suggest the reader to start from the contribution by E. Wagner-Durand in part VI: the author in fact perfectly and

clearly defines the question of narrative in general, presenting an accurate and, for this reason, very useful analysis of terminology, concepts, and applicability of the current narratological studies (encompassing semiotics), lingering on the effects and results of narratives in both the promoter and the receiver of a story; the perfect completion is this sound consideration which can be found in the conclusion by E. Wagner-Durand and J. Linke who, in choosing to deal with potentials and limitations of studying narration in the field of ancient Near Eastern (actually Mesopotamian) studies, perfectly set the questions of methods and the theoretical background of all papers that one can then study in reverse.

Being in the section dedicated to categories and concepts, I would then suggest that the reader go through the brilliant and, to a certain extent provocative, intuition and solution of S. Richardson who in fact proposes the use of the term 'validity' instead of 'legitimacy' in referring to the analysis of kingship and the function and activities of the kings. The difference might be very thin (one can in fact even ask whether the two terms cannot be synonyms), but Richardson's reasoning is well founded upon a critical analysis of written sources: if the content of royal narratives does not aim to legitimize the kings, can they be terms for the validity of sovereigns? I wonder whether in fact legitimacy might be taken for granted and, in a certain way, already acknowledged at the time when the gods identify and chose the perfect ruler: are royal narratives, in the end, not just the expression of terms of validity for the kings to prove that the initial set of legitimacy and therefore the divine selection were obviously right? Interestingly enough, royal failures can in fact be detected in non-royal accounts (see the contribution by C. Ambos). As a matter of fact, Irene J. Winter (2007), in her analysis of the topos of the Mesopotamian king as builder, demonstrated that kings can be represented as such precisely because they already fulfilled the duty of building the temple for the gods: the image does not legitimate the king, but it is in fact a validation of an action that already occurred (it is not promise that can then be disregarded – or indeed it can as Ambos explains and therefore one should revise the validity of the image of the building kings. Strangely enough, J. Linke does not refer to Winter's studies in her paper while I think it would have added significant information on the narrative value of those images in an invoked and evoked narration of an already done action in the past, the image is the exact consequence and result of that action). Therefore, I agree with the comment of the anonymous reader of Richardson's paper (as he himself declares in the afterword) that "a full discussion of these issues [namely the implication of the using validity instead of legitimacy] ought to have addressed visual as well as textual media". In fact, how can a royal portrait be judged? Legitimate or valid? The image of the king follows precise styles and canons because it needs to

legitimate the fact that he was chosen by the gods or does it validate that divine choice and therefore his role (one can even say his *physique du role*)? Dealing with royal portraits, I wish to add some references to the final list made by Richardson: surely Winter 2009, but also non-English written essays that are no less important and influential in the art historical discourse in the field of ancient Near Eastern studies (Bonatz 2017, Matthiae 1994; 2021) and beyond (Belting 2013).

The concluding remark by Richardson points out the importance of analysing different aspects of a known culture and civilisation, and this seems particularly true for Mesopotamia where the media are strictly bounded and we can thus recognise not only direct reference and relationships (for example ekphrasis of visual work, such as the Stele of Dadusha) but also space and time cross quotation (intertextuality and intericonicity, see Nadali and Portuese 2020). Not casually, the questions of media and transmediality are touched on in the conclusion of the volume by Wagner-Durand and Linke.

This again supports, although it might sound strange, my suggestion in studying the content of this dense book from the end: I am convinced that the single arguments of the papers will be much more appreciated. It is of course more difficult, but I think this exercise is worthwhile: after having read the paper by Richardson, I came back to the contribution by Niehr who explicitly refers to the strategies of legitimation. Would his argument and conclusion be the same or different if one investigates the strategies of validation? I wonder whether legitimation can be a process needed to justify a change, while validity is the obvious consequence of a regular path.

Does the book cover all aspects of textual and visual narratives? Of course not but this was not the aim of the workshop nor consequently of the publication. The volume edited by Wagner-Durand and Linke surely has the great merit of setting the question of terminology, methodology, and theoretical framework that opens further possible investigations of narratives in the field of Mesopotamian studies and beyond: it would be extremely interesting to investigate the birth of narrative images in pre-literate Mesopotamian contexts and in areas where written sources are not available. This would be both an exercise of reflection and a challenge that could in the end help in understanding and explaining Mesopotamian specificities that we consider easy and familiar because of the rich and varied corpora of data and documents.

A final consideration that stems from this suggestion: concentrating on areas and periods that do not have written sources, would it be possible to repeat

the assertion by M. Heinz that while texts are narrative by themselves, pictorial representations never narrate? It seems to me that we are taken back to Lessing's distinction of spatial art (sculpture and painting) and temporal art (poetry): do we really need to debate again the question *ut pictura poesis*? It seems to me a useless matter if we now refer to recent studies on narratology and the function of stories in our daily life. Is it so important to distinguish between properly narrative images and images that evoke a narration and a story, denying in the end that both types do not express a story at all? Jonathan Gottshall (2012) made clear that the *Homo Sapiens* is literally immersed in stories, when both awake and sleeping, in books, television, political and religious discourses, sport performances, music, dreams, and memories. The distinction does not make sense and I do not share the conclusion that pictorial representations are not narrative, either directly or indirectly: I firmly believe that making images and making stories are not separate aspects, but they are just two sides of the same coin. The contribution by J. Linke, B. Couturaud and N. N. May is fundamental to explain not so much the diversity but rather the complementarity between media and, more specifically, between texts and images (the Tales of Royalty workshop was held in the Rencontre of Bern and Geneva whose main topic was Text and Image). Narrative skills are not only related to making images (sometimes it is erroneously said that images translate words into pictures, while I prefer to say that they transform words into pictures, based on independent laws and choices of communication); they are also related to the production of tools and objects and, as recently stated, to the development of language (Malafouris 2008).

In the end, this book probably raises new questions more than giving answers: someone might consider this as a defect. On the contrary, I think this is merit and for this reason we have to deeply thank the organizers and editors of the workshop and book and the scholars who accepted the challenge of dealing with such an apparently simple topic. We learn from stories, stories help us in living and interacting with people and things, and this book is another story we will surely refer to when we continue to speak and debate stories.

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Davide Nadali

Associate professor of Near Eastern Archaeology

Sapienza Università di Roma – Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità

Ex Vetriere Sciarra

Studio 121

Via dei Volsci, 122

00185 Roma (Italia)

E-Mail: davide.nadali@uniroma1.it