

# WHAT MAKES CIVILIZATION?

THE ANCIENT NEAR  
EAST AND THE FUTURE  
OF THE WEST

DAVID WENGROW

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

## CONCLUSION: WHAT MAKES CIVILIZATION?

Our conventional image of the ancient Near East as the ‘cradle of Western civilization’ can no longer be taken for granted. Why, some scholars are asking, should the early achievements of Mesopotamia and Egypt be viewed as a mere prelude to ‘the rise of the West’, when there are other stories to be told, and other links between past and present to be explored? Yet in a different—and contradictory—vein, historians of the classical world have recently been chastised for failing to adequately acknowledge the cultural debt owed by Greece to the ancient Near East.

Behind these scholarly debates lie hard political and economic realities. For many modern states in the Middle East, the pre-Islamic past represents a gateway for Western tourism; for secular forms of knowledge and identity; and for the world market. The ownership, protection, and representation of pre-Islamic cultures is now an intense focus of ideological struggle, affecting the everyday lives of communities throughout the region.

#### CONCLUSION: WHAT MAKES CIVILIZATION?

As the remains of the past are drawn with increasing ferocity into the conflicts of the present, it is worth reflecting on the lessons we stand to learn from the ancient Near East. What conclusions can we draw from the myriad collections of artefacts and site reports accumulated over a century of research?

If the parallel development of Mesopotamia and Egypt demonstrates anything, it is surely the deep attachment of human societies to the concepts they live by, and the inequalities they are prepared to endure in order to preserve those guiding principles. Certain basic notions of how the world should be made and ordered—by keeping the house beautiful or the body pure—remained constant (and constantly distinct) in these two regions for thousands of years, despite the interactions between them, and despite changes in almost every other field of life. The desire to realize this sense of order, and the sacrifices demanded in the process, produced astonishing flows of materials, transforming societies and reshaping environments from Afghanistan to Turkey, and from the forests of Lebanon to the deserts of Arabia.

But the gods were never satisfied. Their work was never done. In contemplating yet another remaking of our own world order, there is surely something here for us to learn. Civilizations, from the perspective of history, are shown to be the outcome of mixtures and borrowings, often of quite arbitrary things, but always on a prodigious scale. Their study draws us into a grand narrative of the past, a story built from the ground up by routine human activities, surpassing the limited purview

#### CONCLUSION: WHAT MAKES CIVILIZATION?

of any one society, and of such a magnitude as to worry the gods. Yet by elevating civilizations to the pinnacle of human achievement, or seeking to orientate our future around an idealized image of what they might become, are we not simply raising up new gods where old ones have fallen? The problem, it seems, is both as old as time and as fresh as our tomorrows.