

The World in 1279 BC

In the year 1279 BC, Ramesses II, the eponymous ruler of this book, ascended the throne of Egypt. His name is remarkably famous today, but when he came to power the larger part of the inhabited world was unaware of his existence, or even of the existence of Egypt, the country he ruled. Conversely, he and his fellow Egyptians were familiar with a small part only of the outside world, although this knowledge was greater than that of their ancestors, who had lived only a few hundred years before. Many members of Ramesses' court were conscious of the people I will investigate in this book. Some of them had met visitors from an area stretching from the south of Egypt, that is, ancient Nubia, to the Black Sea in the north of Anatolia, and from the Greek mainland to western Iran, or they had gone there themselves. They knew little about the regions beyond these limits, however. They may have seen some objects from sub-Saharan Africa, from Central Asia, or Atlantic Europe, but they would not have known the people who created them.

Also to modern historians the world of 1279 BC is almost entirely unknown and unknowable. It is unknowable because the inhabitants of most of the globe left very few remains for us to study. Countless people did not know agriculture or a settled way of life at that time. Of those who did, only some lived in an urban culture, and even fewer used writing. The remains of their existence are scanty and hard to interpret. Prehistoric archaeologists have reconstructed with varying degrees of success and detail the conditions of the lives of some of the people of the thirteenth century BC, but we mostly do not know the names they used to identify themselves or the languages they spoke. At best our knowledge of these people is limited to the bare outlines of their material existence. Oftentimes, even material remains cannot

be studied, as people constantly moved around, leaving no traces in the archaeological record. The greater the complexity of a society and the more advanced it was on a scale of material and technological development, the more likely we are today to be able to see some remains of it.

In the latter half of the second millennium BC, globally only three regions had advanced and complex societies, characterized by urbanism, elaborate social hierarchies, and material remains that show that their economies had developed well beyond a subsistence level. These three were broadly separated in space, and their cultures had almost certainly developed on their own. Our grasp of these cultures varies enormously.

In Central America the Olmec culture was in its initial stages of growth, reaching its zenith only after 1200 BC, thus after the period of interest in this study. These people living on the south coast of the Gulf of Mexico practiced agriculture and lived in cities, but they did not write. They started to construct monumental buildings by around 1250 BC, and these later on developed into major cult centers. The Olmec people created these cultural elements independently, as, whatever some modern scholars have suggested, they had no contacts with the world east of the Atlantic Ocean or west of the Pacific.

The other two advanced cultures of the thirteenth century BC were located on opposite ends of Asia, at the outer edges of the band that stretches south of the deserts and steppes of Central Asia, and north of the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Peninsula. These cultures occupied small dots on the immense Eurasian landmass, separated and surrounded by vast regions with populations that were nomadic or living in villages. While contacts between these two advanced cultures may have occurred, they were certainly indirect, and most likely the inhabitants of neither region knew that the others existed. To the historian today the two are very differently accessible. In the east of Asia, the people of Shang China in the middle Yellow River Valley started to use writing only around 1200 BC. The only written evidence we have is on oracle bones and on bronze vessels, and the inscriptions provide few details, mostly royal names and isolated events. The archaeological remains of Shang China and contemporary cultures in the area are very impressive, however: numerous walled villages and towns, rich tombs, and large buildings. Yet, the region's history is written primarily on the basis of later Chinese accounts of the distant past. The writing preserved from the late second millennium BC merely confirms the existence of kings mentioned in later historiography.

In the west of Asia, the situation was radically different. Here, straddled along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, several cultures coexisted, each with an abundance of textual, archaeological, and visual sources

that permit the historian to study them in great detail. This was the world Ramesses II and his courtiers knew. It included a number of states that were equal in status to his and are well known to us as well: Hatti, the land of the Hittites in Anatolia and northern Syria, Babylonia in southern Iraq, and Assyria in northern Iraq and eastern Syria. Beyond those lay the Aegean islands and Greece sharing a culture we now call Mycenaean, and the Elamite state of southwestern Iran. Other smaller states existed on the west coast of Anatolia, in the Syro-Palestinian region, and on Cyprus, and earlier northern Syria had been united under a kingdom called Mittanni. The inhabitants of these regions, often living in cities with monumental buildings and with great economic and other activities, left a lot of evidence of their actions and thoughts in writing and in material form. We know many of their names, what languages they spoke, what they did for a living, which gods they honored, and numerous other details. The situation is truly unique for its time. If we think of the globe as a dark sphere unless illuminated by the historical record, the only place that we can really see at this time is the Eastern Mediterranean world. Indeed, teleological world histories based on empiricist observation do only talk about this region, calling it “the cradle of civilization.”

The Eastern Mediterranean world will be the subject of this book. It is important to realize how unique it was for its time, how it was surrounded by a vast world that we barely know. That outer world was not detached from it, however, and what happened there had an effect on the world we do know. The evidence for this outer world is almost entirely indirect, based on later historical parallels and on the brief glimpses we obtain when their inhabitants entered into the small, illuminated zone of the Mediterranean or sent trade goods to it. When immersed in the study of what we can observe, we easily forget that there is so much we cannot see. We may think we talk about the world, but in fact we only look at a small speck in a vast area of the unknown.

A History Without Events

We can study the cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean world in many different ways, as the large number of books and articles that scholars have already devoted to them demonstrates. The available sources permit the writing of political, social, economic, diplomatic, cultural, and religious histories for each of the Eastern Mediterranean cultures individually, or for several of them at the same time, focusing then on interactions. One of the characteristics of the region in this period is its “internationalism”: the

various states – nation is an anachronistic term not to be used for these entities – were well aware of each other's existence and had numerous contacts of diplomatic and commercial nature. Many saw themselves as part of a system whose other participants they knew and ranked in a hierarchy. The extent to which they interacted with one another, or at least to which it is clear to us today, is unparalleled for the ancient world, and consequently scholars have devoted much attention to it. Still, the focus of these historical researches has been political. For example, much has been written about Egypt's relations with the Syro-Palestinian states under its influence, and how these were affected by political events within Egypt. Or, the contacts between Babylonia and Assyria and their struggle with each other for hegemony has been analyzed in detail, with a focus on the actions of individual kings. Such studies are crucial, and their conclusions will be visible throughout this book, informing its contents at every stage. But my focus here will be different: kings and queens, merchants and soldiers, farmers and weavers, will be seen as participants in a system that surpassed their actions to an extent unknown to them. The natural environments, economies, and social structures of each of these states individually and of all of them jointly determined the system. At a certain level the individual situations of the states were mere variations of a common condition, where each part contributed to the survival of the entire system.

History must work at various levels of abstraction. Here I will abstain from focusing upon the individual characteristics, but hope to explore the elements shared among these cultures, which made this period such an unusual time in ancient history. The events of history – individual battles, treaties and so on – will thus be less important as none of them, singly, altered the system in a fundamental way. Every individual event is indicative of how the system functioned, and how it could adapt itself to pressures from the inside and the outside. Hence individual events will not be the focus of my attention, but I will use them as signposts leading to an understanding of what lay behind them. The type of history I will write here belongs to what the French historian Fernand Braudel called social history. My aims are inspired by his masterpiece on Mediterranean history in the age of Philip II of Spain, whose title I have unabashedly imitated as the designation of my own work.

Structuralism and Orientalism Revived?

Is the aim to uncover a system behind the histories of many people and cultures in a wide geographical area acceptable today in our postmodern

world? Is it a revival of a type of scholarship that has been criticized, for two decades at least, as forcing similarities and structures onto divergent groups and individuals, ignoring their particular circumstances? Moreover, by imitating the title of a study of the sixteenth century AD, am I suggesting that historical time in the Eastern Mediterranean stood still? Am I repeating the Orientalist stereotype of the changeless Middle East? These are some of the pitfalls confronting a work like this.

There is a wide range of levels on which one can approach the history of a region, every one of them with their own values and interests. How historians rate the particular against the common depends on what they can and want to achieve. Microhistories can be of immense interest. But how often does the historian of the pre-modern period have access to sufficient information to reconstruct aspects of the life and thoughts of an individual? Is the survival of the ideas of a sixteenth-century AD miller from Friuli not due to the fact that they were so unusual as to draw the attention of an Inquisition that was obsessed with record keeping? In the case of ancient history the focus on the individual will often lead to the writing of a king's history. The life and times of Ramesses II have been the subject of several monographs, and other rulers of his days – although not that many – have or could be subjected to similar treatments because the information on them is rich in detail. But where does that leave the other people of these ancient societies? Archaeologists tell us, justifiably, that much can be learned about them from their material remains, and in certain places we have access to writings that reveal details about their lives and activities. Egyptian tombs from the New Kingdom provide a mine of information in this area, and their owners range on the social scale from members of the royal family to what seems to be the middle class. Archives of individuals that have been uncovered in several cities throughout the Eastern Mediterranean tell us a lot about their business interests. By all means these individuals' lives should be explored and analyzed. Yet, all in all, very few possibilities to work on this level of historical detail exist for the ancient world. Too often we only have shreds of evidence, textual or archaeological, that are meaningless when looked at in isolation.

We are most often forced to take a distance from individual people and to draw together the cultures of this era by looking at the larger picture. Hence the predominance of what I might anachronistically call "national" histories: Egypt in the New Kingdom, the Hittite Empire, Kassite Babylonia, etc. These studies bring together information on individual kings and commoners to paint the picture of a period in the histories of those states. Again this is perfectly justified and important, and very often we can only work at this level of generality.

The historian can also take one step farther back, ignoring states' boundaries. The level of abstraction becomes even greater and the specificity of events is ignored. True, one can say that the injustice to the individual's circumstances becomes greater. But so does the level of understanding, as it is impossible to interpret the singular without using a broader framework. Can one really grasp the history of a state like New Kingdom Egypt without employing a set of general ideas regarding ancient states? How do we explain to ourselves and to our audiences what we observe without immediately placing it within a set of references culled from broad preconceptions? Such a structure often is too reliant on what previous scholars have assumed, and too rooted in racist, sexist, and culturalist stereotypes. Therefore, it needs constantly to be re-examined and redrawn. Working on this level does indeed do violence to the multitude of peculiarities that constitute life. But the idea that one can reach an understanding of an individual event or person in history without reference to a broader framework is a fallacy.

What about the stereotype of the unchanging Middle East? By referring to Braudel's study of the Mediterranean in the sixteenth century AD, I hope to indicate similarities in methodology and focus, not in the historical conditions of the Eastern Mediterranean. Yet, certain elements are more lasting than others in the history of a region. Braudel saw different time-frames in the study of history, including one that is of a geological rather than human scale. People's interactions with the natural environment, the basis of their survival, remained very similar throughout the pre-industrial age. Even if we have to allow for climate change over time, patterns of agriculture, seafaring, and the like subsisted for millennia. Sometimes the patterns Braudel revealed for the sixteenth century AD were already present in the thirteenth century BC. But, on the level of the individual in history much had changed: The political situation of the Eastern Mediterranean in the time of Ramesses II was completely different from that in the days of Philip II. Most aspects of culture, religion, and the economy were different as well. I do not see a fundamental similarity between the two periods, but rather I believe that the two periods can be studied through similar approaches.

Setting Limits

Where do we draw the borders, where do we begin and end, what regions do we include or ignore? Historians are at the mercy of their sources, which are very unevenly distributed in space and in time. We can say from the

outset, however, that the Eastern Mediterranean was a world that was dominated by literate cultures, whose textual remains signal the fact that they were part of the system. The mere presence of texts indicates that the people writing them participated in the international structure that is the subject of this study. In this context, the presence of writing demonstrates that the societies had a hierarchical structure, a complex economy, and a level of socio-political development that favored record keeping and enabled some to communicate through the written word. Every society discussed here went through phases with little or no writing at all, all of them included within their boundaries large majorities to whom reading and writing were alien skills, and all interacted with societies outside their boundaries that did not use writing at all. But the presence of writing is a prime characteristic of all societies included in this study. The written word will thus set our limits, even though non-written evidence forms an important historical source as well.

Boundaries based on the presence of one attribute are porous and vague; the find of a single cache of documents could upset the picture by forcing us to include another century or region. In the type of history envisioned here such vagaries are not as problematic as with a political history since we will be looking at long-term trends that did not start or end suddenly. I will discuss the second half of the second millennium BC, with the temporal limits on both ends adjustable to local circumstances. The beginning date of the period is especially vague. At different moments in the sixteenth through fourteenth centuries, societies of the Eastern Mediterranean entered the historical record. In Babylonia, for example, fourteenth-century rulers started to commission building inscriptions that allow us to ascertain the existence of these kings, otherwise only known from later lists. The stability that the dynasty there provided led to economic expansion, which in turn required a bureaucracy, so we start to find more evidence on the economy in the mid-fourteenth century. In Egypt writing never disappeared in the so-called second intermediate period (ca. 1640–1539), but its use was restricted to short inscriptions and what we find then was extremely limited in comparison to material from the fifteenth through thirteenth centuries. In mainland Greece, on the other hand, records become available only late in our period, and they remain very restricted in use and nature. Here we rely on archaeological work that allows us to say that the culture we study started around 1600.

The end date of the period is often thought to be associated with events around the year 1200 when many of the societies in the Aegean and the Levant experienced a major cataclysm, whose roots are still a matter of great debate. Greece, Crete, Anatolia, and coastal Syria-Palestine saw a

destruction of palaces and cities which was immediate and terminated much of what existed before. But not all the inhabitants of the Eastern Mediterranean suffered the same fate. The states of Mesopotamia and Egypt went into decline, yet there was no abrupt termination of what existed before. The dynasties in power survived for another century or so. Writers of political histories of these states never set a strict boundary at 1200, but we can say that the signs of decline were already clear then and that what followed were the dying days of an era. Also within the Syro-Palestinian area the states that survived the cataclysm of 1200 did not continue to flourish, but gradually declined to make way for something else. By 1100 virtually the entire Eastern Mediterranean world, except for Egypt, had abandoned writing, or if people did continue to write, the traces of it are unknown to us.

To define our area in space it may be best to start from the center and to work our way to the margins. Again the existence of writing acts as a guide. The core area is the crescent-shaped region stretching from Southern Babylonia to Southern Egypt. It incorporates Babylonia, Assyria, Northern Syria, Central Anatolia, the Syro-Palestinian coast, and the Nile Valley from the Delta to Upper Nubia. In all those regions writing was widespread. Adjoining were the lands of western Iran to the east and the Aegean world to the west, where writing was present but restricted in its uses. The inhabitants of all the regions included in the Eastern Mediterranean world had contacts beyond these borders, however. The Babylonians were in touch with areas in the Persian Gulf to the south, Assyrians with eastern Anatolia and northwest Iran, Hittites with areas in the north and west, Mycenaeans with Italy and Western Mediterranean islands, Egyptians with Libya and areas south and east of its Nubian territories. How far these contacts reached is impossible to say. Some scholars have suggested that there was a "world system" at this time that connected cultures covering the entirety of Eurasia with a core in the Eastern Mediterranean, but that seems to be an exaggerated view. Direct contacts with regions beyond natural boundaries such as the Alps, the Caucasus and Hindu Kush mountains, and the Sahara and Arabian deserts, must at best have been rare.

I do not want to give the impression that within the core areas all people were literate and sedentary. In every state lived many who were outside or at the margins of history. We know these people only through the written records from their literate neighbors and from their own limited archaeological remains. Their silence is partly due to the fact that they had fewer material means than the urban residents whose texts we read, but also because modern archaeologists have paid less attention to them. The illiterate and non-sedentary groups were very important actors during the entire

period, however, and perhaps played a decisive role in the end of the world described here. We will thus need to look at them closely, eliciting from the scarce and biased data some idea about their existence.

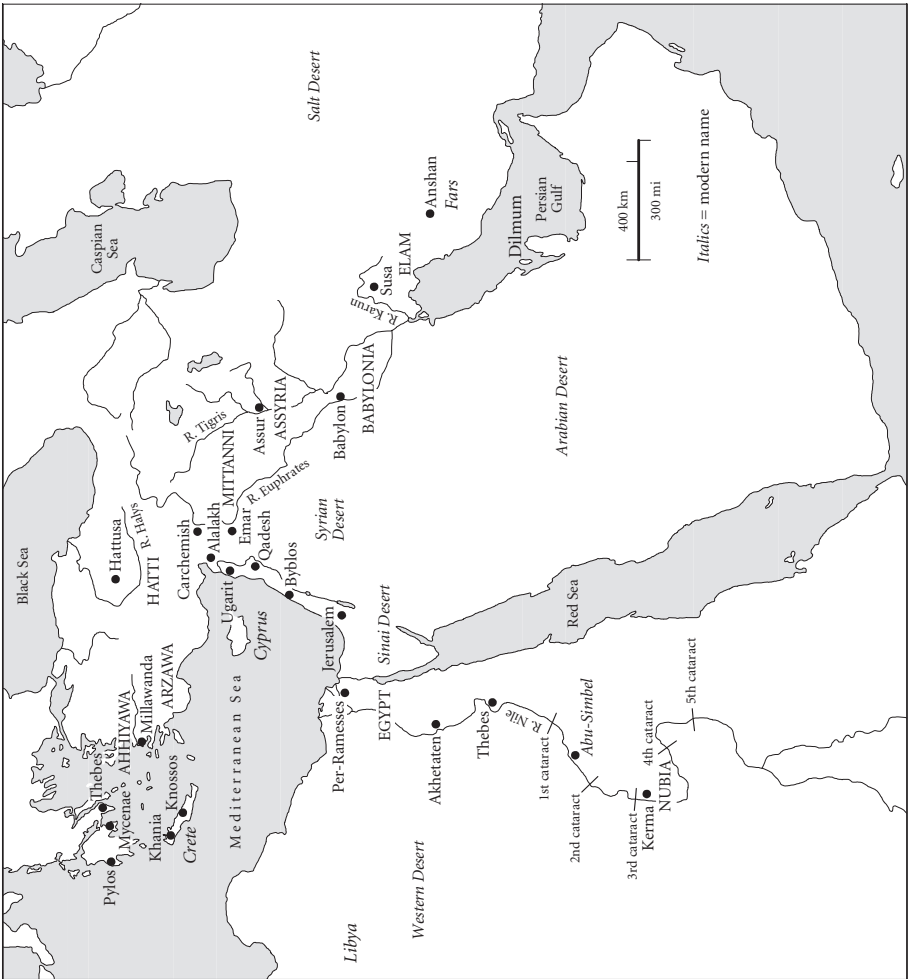
Writing as a Parameter

I use the presence of written material as a major criterion in deciding what periods and places to include in this study. Am I justified in doing so? After all, writing was a very restricted skill in antiquity and it is certain that most of what was written in the second millennium BC has been destroyed over time or has not yet been found. In any case, writing is just one aspect of culture. Perhaps the level of urbanization or the like, something that can be determined archaeologically and is less dependent on the accident of recovery, should be used to delimit the period and region investigated here. I think, however, that we are justified in placing emphasis on written material for two reasons.

First, this is historical research, and history relies primarily on the written word for its information. Archaeological and geographical data are very important and relevant, but the written sources of the societies we study provide the basic *historical* context.

Second, while writing was known in various parts of the Eastern Mediterranean world from the late fourth–early third millennium on, the extent of its use was not constant over time. In the most literate and best-known regions of the area, Mesopotamia and Egypt, the knowledge of how to write was never lost after its initial invention; otherwise we could not understand the clear continuity in the scripts and writing techniques used. But the prevalence of writing allows us to distinguish periods in these histories. The extent of the written record stands in direct relation to the political histories of these states. When states were strong and politically centralized their use of writing increased. Royal inscriptions became more numerous and more elaborate in contents. Since the state bureaucracies were more extensive and powerful in a centralized political context, their production of administrative records was greater. Also the private economy was more active in these periods, which led to more record keeping by individuals. This might be a truism for the entirety of pre-modern history: it is not accidental that periods in between those of political centralization are often called “Dark Ages.” The metaphor of the historian’s work being illuminated by the written word is well established.

Especially in the ancient cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean the extent of centralized political power determined the fluctuations in the amount



Map 1.1 The Eastern Mediterranean in the age of Ramesses II

of written material. The fact that writing was so broadly used in the Eastern Mediterranean world in the fourteenth through the twelfth centuries by itself shows that this was a period with strong states and extensive economic development. Hence the presence of writing can be used as a means to delineate the period and to include regions into the core area under study.

Bibliographic essay

Braudel's renowned study of the Mediterranean is Braudel 1972. A recent ambitious study of Mediterranean history looking at structural patterns is Horden and Purcell 2000. The microhistory of a miller's life in Friuli (northeast Italy) is Ginzburg 1980, while for the idea of a late second millennium BC Eurasian world system, see Frank 1993.