Middle East a few remarks on geography, history and art

Abstract

This article results basically from personal impressions gathered during my visits to the Middle East in 1994, 1998, 2002, 2011 and 2017, as well as from some suggested readings. Special emphasis is laid on geographical factors, as well as on historical circumstances connected with architecture and sculpture in the ancient Middle East. Important to stress is that the tale of the Mesopotamian hero Gilgamesh is much more than the first epic ever written in the world; Gilgamesh's wish for immortality is the drama of every single man, no matter if he lived in ancient Mesopotamia during the 3rd millennium BC, or if he lives in the 21st century's Manhattan.

Keywords: old empires, culture, greek miracle, mesopotamia, egypt

Introduction

Surrounded by seas and deserts, larger than the Holy Roman Empire at its height but smaller than China, the Middle East is neither a continent nor a country. As a geographical entity, it is the region where the three continents that formed the so-called Old World meet. Such a characterisation is still too vague. Apart from the countries located in the intersection between Europe, Asia and Africa—that is to say, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Egypt—, the Middle East also comprises Iraq, Iran and all the countries of the Arabian Peninsula. Arguably, Ethiopia, Libya, Sudan, South Sudan and Afghanistan could also be included, given their cultural affinities (Figure 1).

Cradle of civilization

Middle East is the cradle of the civilization. Between the fifth and the fourth millennia BC, high advanced cultures started to develop and to thrive in Mesopotamia and Egypt. The presence of big and generous rivers in terms or fertilization of the soil—namely the Tigris, the Euphrates and the Nile respectively—in this crescent-shaped region (hence “Fertile Crescent”) propitiated the invention of agriculture and irrigation. The Middle East is the birthplace of written language. Through millennia, great cultures and empires (Sumer, Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, Hittite, Persia, Seleucia…) flourished and perished within its limits. The Persian Empire represents the first attempt of cultural unification for the Middle East. Its borders practically coincided with those of the Empire of Alexander the Great, conqueror of the Persians—and whose death, in 323 BC, marked the beginning of the Hellenistic Age, which would last until 31 BC, when Caesar Augustus’ authority as Emperor was established. From Iberia until the banks of the Euphrates River, Rome (daughter of the Hellenism Alexander had founded) reigned supreme. Far from being an obstacle—as the Atlantic Ocean had been until 1492, the year Columbus discovered America—, the Mediterranean Sea promoted the contact between the peoples who lived around it, due to the relative proximity between its edges. Both geographically and culturally, the peninsula of Anatolia acted as something like a bridge between Asia and Europe; no wonder that Turkey has more ancient cities in its territory than any other place in the world. Travelling westwards, scientific ideas came from Mesopotamia, crossed Anatolia, reached Ionia and the Greek Balkans—a phenomenon that is linked to the cultural rise of Greece in the second half of the 1st millennium BC, and that we usually call the Greek miracle.1 Travelling eastwards, Alexander and his armies of soldiers, scientists, philosophers and artists crossed Anatolia, swept down through Mesopotamia and continued until the Indus valley, sowing Greek culture wherever they passed: “In 334 BC Alexander crossed the Hellespont from Europe to Asia, and the world was never the same again. (...) It was incredible, breath-taking.

Figure 1 Restored walls of Babylon (Southern Mesopotamia).

At one point he and his army covered four hundred miles in ten days.”2 When Herodotus, repeating his predecessor Hecataeus,
defined Egypt as a gift of the Nile,7 he provided more than the best
definition ever provided of the land of the Pharaohs. In doing so,
he gave us an example of how deeply the physical geographic of a
country can influence the possibilities of human life within it. The dry
climate, with an extreme shortage of rains, contributed to emphasise
the role of the Nile River, with its regular floods, as the responsible
for the very existence itself. In the words of William Stevenson Smith,
“The regular rise of the Nile every year provided the striking example
of a renewal of life with each annual flood and gave the Egyptian a
cheerful assurance of the permanence of established things, suggesting
the acceptance that life would somehow continue after death in the
same way”.4 For Mesopotamia, the “land between rivers”, as the
Greek denominated it (cf. mésos=middle and potamos=river), a
paraphrase of Herodotus’ sentence is 100% valid: Mesopotamia is a
gift of the Euphrates and the Tigris. From a very remote past, those
twin rivers have left a deposit of sedimentary rocks, linking this way
the Arabian plateau to the Zagros Mountains. Regarding the happy
combination between extension and fertility, we do not find anything
comparable along the 3,700 kilometres of almost completely arid
lands that separate the Nile and the Indus. In climatic terms, we can
say that the Middle East is squeezed between the hottest areas of the
world: the Sahara and Northwest India.8

What would be the destiny of humanity if Cleopatra’s nose were
shorter? This is just one of the many unanswerable historical questions
that we inherited from the Old World. Indeed, “The historian-
philosopher will never stop meditating about the nose of Cleopatra.
If this nose had seduced the gods as it did seduce Cesar and Anthony,
an Alexandrian Gnosticism diffused could have been imposed in
the place of the Christian doctrine dictated by the two Romes: the
ancient, the one of the Tiber, and the new, that of the Bosphorus.
(…) Let us recognise the facts”.9 The very concepts of History and
Geography comes from there–more specifically from the works of
Hecataeus of Miletus and Herodotus of Halicarnassus, both authors
being born in Asia Minor (Miletus and Halicarnassus, formerly Greek
cities, respectively). A meaningful fact is that, with the exception of
the statue of the god Zeus, sculpted by Fidias in European Greece, all
the Seven Wonders of the World are concentrated in the Middle East.
Unfortunately, nothing but ruins remains of the Hanging Gardens
of Babylon and most of those seven colossal works of architecture
and sculpture. Only the Pyramid of Cheops—the oldest of them—was
well succeeded in coping with the misfortunes brought by Nature and
culture. In Babylon and Assyria, clay prevailed as raw material for
building; in Egypt, stone has always been abundant. This contingency
helps to explain the destruction of the majority of the old monuments
of Mesopotamia, as well as the survival of so many of their Egyptian
counterparts. In Egypt, the practice of cutting stones into big blocks was
rapidly established. Both the architect and the sculptor were supplied
with an enormous amount of regularly geometric blocks, hence the
Egyptian tendency towards pyramidal, cubical and prismatic forms
in architecture and sculpture, as well as the prominence of works of
large scale in those arts. In contrast with this favourable situation,
the ancient Mesopotamians had to import stone. Their land supplied
them only with small and round stones–no wonder the rounded forms
and the substantial fragility of Sumerian sculptures; differing from
their neighbours in Egypt, ancient Mesopotamian sculptors had a
predisposition towards spherical and conical shapes. The same can be
said of architecture: Egypt is the land of the pyramids; Mesopotamia
is the land of the ziggurats.

Conclusion

There is ample evidence to indicate that the rise of civilization in
the ancient Middle East would be inconceivable without the favourable
conditions offered by the Tigris, the Euphrates and the Nile. Mutatis
mutandis, the same relation is valid for India and the Indus River,
China and the Yangtze River, the Inca Empire and the Titicaca Lake.
Here we find an important point to be considered: on the one hand,
water supplied by rivers and lakes are a geographical condition for the
advent of a civilized society; on the other hand, such a condition is not
enough. When in excess, water can be an obstacle for civilized life.
With 6,992 km length, the Amazon River is the longest in the world,
and the Amazonia basin has been inhabited since several millennia.
Nonetheless, most of the Amazonian native peoples had not surpassed
a Neolithic standard of living until the arrival of the Europeans, in
the 16th century; even nowadays many of them live as though they
were still in prehistoric times. Sufficient evidence exists to suggest
that the humid Amazon rain forest, with its typical impenetrability,
is a discouragement for large scale agriculture, architecture,
engineering, high population density, centralized political structures,
intense social stratification, large scale trading and all other elements
that characterize a civilized society. What is clear is that modern
technology and patterns of life in general tend to become more and
more planetary—a matter that ignites debates that are beyond the
boundaries of this article. Not to be forgotten is that the tale of the
Mesopotamian hero Gilgamesh is much more than the first epic ever
written in the world; Gilgamesh’s wish for immortality is the drama of
every single man, no matter if he lived in ancient Mesopotamia during
the 3rd millennium BC, or if he lives in the 21st century’s Manhattan.
In closing, I echo the words of a French geographer whose work was
kindly offered to me during my stay in Ethiopia, in January 2011:
“Geography was invented because the curious-minded man wanted to
understand how things were arranged on the Earth’s surface. (…) His
thirst for knowledge was stronger than his fear of knowing nothing.
Piercing through the darkness they acted as geographers”.

7See Edward Lanning. Peru before the Incas, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-
Hall, 1967, p. 3; Victor von Hagen. Der Ruf der Neuen Welt. Deutsche bauen
Amerika, Ilm, Knauer, 1974, p. 113 et passim; and Hannah Flint. “Who are the
Amazon’s uncontacted tribes?”, in The Telegraph, 31 Jul 2014.
8See Sylvain Tesson. Petit traité sur l’immensité du monde, Paris, Éd. Équéateurs,
2005, p. 77; see also Kay Anderson et al. Handbook of Cultural Geography
org. Kay Anderson et al, Londres/Thousand Oaks/Nova Dél, SAGE, 2003,
pp. XVIII-XIX.

Citation: Oliveira JVG. Middle East a few remarks on geography, history and art. Open Access J Sci. 2018;2(3):216–218. DOI: 10.15406/oajs.2018.02.00075
Acknowledgements
None.

Conflict of interest
The author declares there is no conflict of interest.