

On the Formal Study of Near Eastern Languages in America, 1770–1930

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"The very peculiarity of our national destiny, in a moral point of view, calls upon us not only not to be behind, but to be even foremost, in intimate acquaintance with oriental languages and institutions. The countries of the West, including our own, have been largely indebted to the East for their various culture; the time has come when this debt should be repaid."

—Edward Salisbury, 1848

Yale, Semitic Studies, and a Yale Expedition to the Near East

As early as 1884, the American Oriental Society had called for an American archaeological expedition to the Near East, to take its place alongside the British and French national missions that were filling the British Museum and Louvre with spectacular treasures. John P. Peters (1852–1921), who had studied philology with William Dwight Whitney at Yale and had become an Episcopal minister in New York, joined the group, which set about to raise funds for such a purpose. There was no question of U.S. government support, and no university or scholarly organization had the resources to undertake such an enterprise. The answer was private philanthropy, and a wealthy New York woman, Catherine Lorillard Wolfe (1828–87), offered \$5,000 for the funding of a Mesopotamian expedition. In 1884–85, William Hayes Ward (1835–1916), an orientalist, clergyman, and newspaper writer, led a survey in Mesopotamia to choose a promising site.⁶² Peters was able to find support among a group of distinguished Philadelphians for a Mesopotamian expedition. In 1893 this expedition traveled to the ancient Sumerian city of Nippur, in southern Iraq, under the auspices of the University of Pennsylvania and its newly founded University Museum.⁶³

In Peters's own words, the significance of the American and other projects of the time was that they "opened new vistas of ancient history. They have shown us that men in a high state of civilization, building cities, organizing states, conducting distant expeditions for conquest, ruling wide-extended countries, trafficking with remote lands, existed in Babylonia 2,000 years before the period assigned by Archbishop Ussher's chronology for the creation of the world. Our work at Nippur has carried our knowledge of civilized man 2,000 years farther backward, an enormous stride to make at one time."⁶⁴

The student of "orientalism" will note that there is no implication here of dominance or appropriation of the region or its past, both unthinkable to an American of the time, nor any reference to a Christian or biblical agenda, be-

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yond suggesting that a well-known seventeenth-century chronology of ancient history based on Bible study alone was incorrect.⁶⁵ America had neither the ideology nor the military strength to consider colonizing the Near East. Americans were convinced of the superiority of their culture, morality, and way of life over all others, including those of Europe and the Near East, but this attitude had little impact on contemporaneous oriental philology, which tended, on the German model, to be universalist and secular in character. Language study was not a political act but an expression of personal interest and tended to ignore native tradition.⁶⁶

Although it generated a spate of grammars and dictionaries of modern Near Eastern languages and made the printing of them much easier, the American missionary movement had surprisingly little direct effect on American philological education in the nineteenth century. The missionaries, many of whom knew Near Eastern languages well, remained all their lives in the field. Their educational enterprises in Beirut, Istanbul, Teheran, and elsewhere served eventually to create a new local scholarly and political elite who would in some cases enrich American higher education with their combination of native competence and American academic training, but this lay far in the future. The missionaries' emphasis on education also created a large group of younger Americans who were born or had significant living experience in the Near East, some of whom, such as the Yale explorer, geologist, and climatologist Ellsworth Huntington (1876-1947), were to reinvest their knowledge in American higher education, but this too lay in the future.

Exploration of Mesopotamia, Egypt, or the Levant was, therefore, even to a devout clergyman like Peters, a voyage of exciting discovery of unknown human history, pure and simple. Human history belonged to everyone. As Americans saw it, the modern peoples of Mesopotamia or Egypt had no more historical connection with the ancient civilizations there than the Spanish with Aztec culture or Americans of English descent with the builders of the Indian mounds of Ohio. Like the English, French, Dutch, and Spanish in the New World, the Arabs and Turks were in Iraq or Egypt by right of conquest and had no more claim on the more ancient cultures of the region than Americans did, beyond the chance that they lived there, a fact which Americans accepted as naturally as they did their own residence in the New World. The money of Catherine Lorillard Wolfe or the Philadelphians was put up with no conditions attached beyond the hope of finding new information about the human past. The would-be American archaeologists, like their colleagues in Europe, were impatient with what they saw as the idleness, greed, perfidy, and obstructionism of the local authorities, but they hoped that a cadre of people in the Ottoman Empire sharing their enthusiasm for exploration might someday be created and even discussed plans for how this might be done.⁶⁷

The career of Charles C. Torrey, who replaced Harper at Yale in 1900, exemplified the transformation of the old New England tradition of biblical scholarship (such as the work of Stuart, Gibbs, and Robinson) by the newer German university philology.⁶⁸ Torrey, whose grandfather had been the first president of the University of Vermont and whose father was a Congregational clergyman, graduated from Bowdoin College and Andover Seminary, where he had intended to remain on the faculty. The Seminary sent him for further training to Germany, where he studied Arabic with Theodor Noldeke, the greatest Semitist of his time (and perhaps of any time), Assyriology with Peter Jensen, and Epigraphy with Julius Euting. He went on to write a doctoral dissertation on commercial terminology in the Qur'an and returned to America as the most capable and best-trained Semitist his country had yet produced.

Torrey took his first year as Yale professor (1900) in Constantinople and Palestine with a view to establishing an American School for Oriental Research in Jerusalem. He negotiated for the necessary permissions from the Ottoman government, found temporary quarters for the School, and undertook an archaeological excavation near Sidon, the results of which formed the subject of one of the School's first publications.⁶⁹ He then returned to Yale to begin a distinguished career as a Semitist, biblical scholar, and Arabist. Among his many noteworthy publications was the first scientific edition of a classical Arabic text published in the United States, a historical work dealing with the Arab conquest of Egypt.⁷⁰ Salisbury, eighty-seven and blind, had lived long enough to see professional Arabic studies reestablished at Yale by an American-born scholar. The next step should be a Yale expedition to the Near East.

The aftermath of the Nippur Expedition was one of bitter controversy and recrimination that dragged on for more than a decade and resulted in the discrediting of America's leading Assyriologist, Herman Hilprecht. The successes and failures of this first American expedition in Mesopotamia impressed themselves deeply on the community of American Semitists. The idea of opening another project, preferably in Mesopotamia or the Holy Land, held strong appeal. In 1913, at the initiative of George Barton, then at Bryn Mawr College, the Archaeological Institute of America created a "Mesopotamia Committee" to investigate ways and means for opening a second American school and research center in Baghdad. Besides Barton, this committee included Clay, James B. Nies (1856-1922), a clergyman of independent means with a strong personal interest in Assyriology; Morris Jastrow, Assyriologist at the University of Pennsylvania; and later William Hayes Ward.

Clay brought his remarkable energy, vision, and fund-raising skills to this enterprise, the first step of which was the decision by Ward to will his valuable library to such a school if it could be created within a decade of his death, which took place in 1916. Even at the height of the First World War, there

was much talk of an expedition as soon as hostilities ended. The Assyriologist Stephan Langdon (1876-1937), an American by birth who held a professorship at Oxford and a post at the University Museum as well, was eager to lead the University Museum back to Mesopotamia, taking advantage of British control there. Clay, Barton, and James Montgomery (1866-1949), a professor in Old Testament and Semitics at the University of Pennsylvania, were eager to launch one under their own leadership, preferably under the auspices of the Mesopotamia Committee. Only the United States would have the resources and energy for such undertakings on a large scale in a world exhausted and made bankrupt by war. American orientalists were also eager to throw off their intellectual subservience to Germany and go their own ways.⁷¹ There was a strong sense of competition among American universities as to which would be first in the field and how.⁷²

In the early spring of 1920, Clay set out for Baghdad on behalf of the Mesopotamia Committee and was pleased to receive the support of Arnold Wilson, acting civil commissioner in Iraq, and through him the British authorities in the region. On the basis of books from John P. Peters and Morris Jastrow, Clay had the nucleus of a fine research library to bring to Baghdad, which survives today in the Iraq Museum. Prospects seemed favorable enough that when the American School in Jerusalem was incorporated in 1921, its corporate name was changed to the "American Schools for Oriental Research," in anticipation of the creation of the Baghdad school. A large bequest from James Nies provided in 1922 the necessary funding for an American School building in Jerusalem. Under Torrey's auspices the School had bought a choice tract of land before the First World War, but had no funds available for building. Everything had therefore fallen into place for a new project that would be dominated by Clay and his associates. No permanent housing was available for the proposed Baghdad school; a proposal that the British government confiscate the house of the German archaeologist Koldewey for such a purpose was not implemented.

Clay's next project was to wrest control of the Archaeological Institute of America from the classicists who had dominated it since its foundation. Most of the Institute's annual budget, about \$10,000, went to publish a stodgy journal, whereas the group around Clay felt that some money should be made available for actual archaeology. Clay ran unsuccessfully for president of the Institute in 1921 and was particularly annoyed at the Institute's policy of not publishing papers on "oriental" topics. When it became clear that the classicists would continue as they had been, Clay and his group initiated incorporation and formal separation of the American School from the Archaeological Institute, which had served as its umbrella organization since its foundation. This was accomplished in 1921 after much legal chaffering. Plans for a new

journal and annual bibliography of Near Eastern archaeology, put forward by Clay, did not materialize.

Finally, it was of utmost importance to the Yale group to see that a sympathetic person was appointed to the professorship of Assyriology at the University of Pennsylvania left vacant at the death of Morris Jastrow in 1921. Their happiness was complete when the choice fell upon their ally, George Barton, so Yale and the University of Pennsylvania could at last make common cause (1922). The group was, however, much disappointed when they found that the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, backed by Rockefeller millions, would not join them but intended to operate independently and create its own expedition. This meant that the American School and any Yale excavations had to find their own funding.

Clay served as annual professor in Jerusalem in 1920, revitalizing the American School and founding the Palestine Oriental Society (1920), modeled on the American Oriental Society. He hoped that this organization would transcend the national and religious rivalries in the region to bring together all who had a scholarly interest in the history of Palestine. His sheer enthusiasm and force of personality led to some successful meetings with a substantial and varied attendance. This organization was later to become the Israel Academy of Sciences, a transformation Clay did not live to witness.

The strongly anti-Zionist position of the Yale faculty involved made fundraising for excavations in Palestine a tricky matter. Clay published a strongly worded attack on "Political Zionism" in the February 1921 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*. The riposte on Clay's paper was not slow in coming: he was denounced as "devious" and "anti-Semitic," neither of which was true, and the *Jewish Daily News* opined that "Prof Clays may shout and scream, success will ultimately crown the ages old effort to make Palestine once more the Jewish Homeland."⁷³ Nothing daunted, Clay continued to write against extensive Jewish immigration to Palestine, though he did advocate limited revival of Jewish culture there, and he was intrigued by his old friend Jastrow's proposal that a Jewish university be created in Palestine.⁷⁴ Other trustees of the American School felt that Clay was endangering their efforts with his outspoken views, even though many of them agreed privately with him. Not only would Jewish money be cut off from the School, the School might be drawn into the local political turmoil in Palestine. In any event, Clay began to lose interest in Palestine in favor of greater opportunities elsewhere, and W. F. Albright, as director of the School, proved more adept at avoiding political controversy.

Enhancement of university and museum collections, begun late in the preceding century, was a strong factor in ongoing planning. Clay was tireless in his efforts to create an archaeological museum at Yale. A public display of Mesopotamian antiquities and casts of famous objects in the British Museum

and the Louvre had been opened on the Yale campus by 1912. Clay also secured a superb collection of Judaica, formed by the Kohut family of New York, for the Yale library. Torrey had been instrumental in building a large collection of Arabic, Turkish, and Persian manuscripts, as well as a fine numismatic collection. The Peabody Museum, which concentrated on natural history and anthropology, received objects from ancient Egypt in acknowledgment of its participation in the Egypt Exploration Fund, based in London, and individual collections, such as Greek vases and Palestinian pottery, were also given to Yale by benefactors.

Political and social conditions in Iraq were much better than they had been in the days of the Nippur expedition. The problem was that one could no longer simply raise money, seek a permit from the Ottoman government, and send anyone to the field who wished to go. There were definite standards to be met, and the redoubtable Gertrude Bell, honorary inspector of antiquities, sought to keep a constructive balance between scientific excavation and her hope that the new Iraq would conserve and understand the relics that lay in her soil.

Clay set out for Iraq again in 1923, with the benefit of a private Pullman car provided by the British authorities, visiting Byblos, Kadesh, and Carchemish. He was initially interested in the possibilities of Qatna, a large untouched mound in northern Syria, but he pushed on to Mesopotamia. Under his auspices, the American School in Baghdad was at last opened at the British Officers' Club that fall. The plan for it was to offer living quarters, a library, and training in archaeological techniques, Mesopotamian languages, and epigraphy, at least until such time as Baghdad University could create a viable Semitics department. Clay was dazzled by the prospects of the hundreds of mounds he saw around him; his initial hope was to find the site of ancient Mari, which he thought would reveal a whole new chapter in the early history of the Semites.⁷⁵

By 1925 there were at least nine major expeditions at work in the Near East: the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania were working at Ur (the University of Pennsylvania was also digging in Egypt and at Beishan in Palestine), Oxford and the Field Museum of Chicago were digging at Kish in Mesopotamia, Harvard was working in both Egypt and Nubia, the University of Chicago was working on a large scale at Megiddo in Palestine (not to mention maintaining long-term projects at Karnak and Luxor), Princeton was planning to return to Sardis, the French were digging at Byblos in Lebanon, the University of Michigan had dug at Antioch and was now at Carthage, the Metropolitan and Harvard-Boston Museums were working in Egypt, the British School of Archaeology was at Ophel, and so forth, but Yale was not yet in the field!

Clay decided to trump them all by opening two sites at once: either Uruk or Larsa in Mesopotamia, and Harran near the Turkish-Syrian frontier, both under the direction of the only available American with significant Near Eastern archaeological field experience, Clarence Fisher (1876-1941). Fisher drew up a budget, about \$30,000, and a list of equipment needed for a Yale project; all that was needed were funds and a site.

Clay wavered between Larsa and Uruk: there were thousands of tablets from Larsa already at Yale, so there was the hope of finding more, but Uruk was a much larger and more complex site. Gertrude Bell promised him either one, in principle, if he would undertake to mount a five-year project to high professional standards. As these plans were in ferment, Clay suddenly died in August 1925.

When the Yale faculty concerned regrouped themselves after this catastrophe, an expedition committee was formed under Charles C. Torrey, which drew up a list of distinguished potential patrons. Although Rockefeller was already supporting a joint Penn-British Museum expedition to Nippur, the Yale Committee felt encouraged to approach him for long-term support. A new Assyriologist, Raymond Dougherty (1877-1933), was eventually appointed to replace Clay, with the understanding that Yale would send an expedition to Mesopotamia under his aegis. Dougherty had been a student of Clay's and had served at the Baghdad School. He knew and respected Bell and was keenly interested in Uruk, the source for thousands of Babylonian letters, administrative documents, and literary texts, many of them at Yale. The Yale budget for a project was reduced to \$25,000 a year. If Rockefeller would put up the first three years, Yale could easily find the balance through her patrons. But in the meantime Clarence Fisher had been hired by the Oriental Institute to work at Megiddo, so he was no longer available, and the Yale project lacked a field director. At this point, Rockefeller's agent announced that Rockefeller was doing enough by spending \$15,000 a year at Ur, so Yale would receive nothing from him.

Dougherty, undiscouraged, proposed an even grander scheme than Clay's: there would be a southern Mesopotamian site, either Larsa or Uruk (projected budget for five years, \$125,000), a "Middle Mesopotamian" site at Dura Europos (projected budget for five years, \$125,000), work in Transjordan at Gerasa (budgeted for ten years at \$10,000 a year), plus two lesser projects at Arles and Tarragona in Europe, for a grand total of \$367,500—an impressive sum for a group that had no resources at all, not to mention no field experience. Since no qualified director was yet available, Dougherty wrote to a British architect, A. Stuart Whitburn, who had spent a season with Sir Leonard Woolley at Ur. Woolley was flabbergasted:

"Mr. Whitburn showed me last season your letter outlining the programme

of a Yale expedition at Dura & Warka & offering him the direction of this twofold work. Frankly I was shocked, & in two ways. First, no archaeologist however experienced could possibly do justice to those two important sites at once: either of them is a full-time job. At Ur, with a good staff to help, I am getting right behindhand & shall soon have to stop fieldwork in order to publish results: I could not dream of undertaking a second site—indeed have definitely refused to do so when it was suggested, because I knew that the work would be badly done. I do most earnestly hope that any work undertaken out there may be undertaken in a way which will make good work possible. Secondly, while I quite agree that on certain sites the direction of an expedition might well be confided to an architect, provided that he has with him a thoroughly trained archaeologist field-worker (& Dura is perhaps such a site: Warka is emphatically not), yet the offer of such a direction to Mr. Whitburn was not in any way justified. In this I am not saying anything against Mr. Whitburn: he is a good architect & an admirable assistant to me, but he has none of the qualifications for directing an archaeological excavation, & he was the first to recognise this, I am thankful to say, & so to refuse the offer made to him. Actually had he accepted the post the expedition would, I think I can safely say, not have taken the field, because before a permit is issued the name & qualifications of the director have to be submitted for approval to the archaeological committee of the British Academy, & I am sure that they would not have accepted him. You see, it would have been impossible to provide Mr. Whitburn with a properly trained archaeological assistant simply because none such was available! That is the main difficulty at present, & I am myself doing my best to train men for responsible jobs, but it takes time—after all, I'm still only a learner myself after 20 years in the field.

I sincerely hope that Yale may send an expedition to Mesopotamia—the more work done the better—but equally I hope that it may be entrusted to someone properly experienced. And really, a season under me (if I may refer to your letter) does not qualify a man! I've had some pretty useless people before now whom I should be sorry to see even as assistants! My own experience in the country is that there must be on the staff 3 specialists, an archaeologist (i.e., a field worker), an architect, & an assyriologist: failing any one of these proper results cannot be obtained. . . .

I was not the only person to be shocked by the scheme outlined in your letter to Whitburn: other people in Iraq whom he consulted, though perhaps they knew the work only from the outside, realised that the scheme would never work unless the responsibilities were regarded more seriously.⁷⁶

Dougherty wrote back, explaining that each expedition would be more or less independent of each other, even if there was the same field director. Capable assistants would take care of the actual field work. Woolley no doubt

reacted to this by writing off Dougherty as hopeless and surely communicated his views to the British authorities. The grand old days of amateur exploration and adventure in Iraq were over. In due course the Germans reasserted their claims, and a German team returned to Uruk in 1928, so all hope of a Yale project there had to be abandoned.

Dougherty turned his interests to a project in Arabia, consulting Philby and Musil about desert routes. Dougherty's mental collapse and his death by suicide in 1933 brought the project to an end. Under the influence of Michael Rostovtzeff, professor of classics, Yale next concentrated her energies on Dura Europos and Gerasa—but those are other stories that cannot be told here.

Conclusion

My narrative has two main morals. First, Americans were primarily motivated by a desire to explore and discover and were willing to spend a lot of energy and money in the process. Their interest in the ancient Near East had nothing to do with colonial or imperialist aspirations. If anything, Americans were frustrated by the new higher standards of European colonial administration of antiquities in the mandated Near East after the First World War. Few Americans saw a necessity that the civilizations of Mesopotamia be explored as culturally relevant to their own, even if Mesopotamian cities were mentioned in the Bible or classical histories. Indeed, in the competition for expedition support at Yale between geographers and ethnographers, on the one hand, and orientalists, on the other, the geographers and ethnographers tended to prevail, though they were exploring strange lands and peoples that could in no way be considered related to American culture or the Bible. Second, there is surprisingly little influence of what is known as "biblical archaeology" in this quest. Biblical archaeology is now out of fashion in the social sciences and even suspect as pseudo-scientific.⁷⁷ Clay, Peters, Dougherty, and many of the other American actors in this tale were ordained Protestant ministers but were interested in Larsa and Dura Europos, scarcely what anyone would call biblical sites. Whereas, among orientalists, American biblical scholars enthusiastically appropriated for their own disciplines discoveries in the ancient Near East and considered the whole of western Asia the "biblical world," this had surprisingly little effect within American oriental and ancient Near Eastern studies. American Egyptology, furthermore, which had a much narrower base in universities than Semitics, had even less involvement with biblical studies.⁷⁸

