

## Afterlives of Ancient Rock-cut Monuments in the Near East

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# Afterlives of Ancient Rock-cut Monuments in the Near East

*Carvings in and out of Time*

*Edited by*

Jonathan Ben-Dov  
Felipe Rojas



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## Preface

This volume is a contribution to the long-term history of ancient rock-cut monuments in the Near East. It is focused not on the origins and significance of rock-cut reliefs and inscriptions among the people who carved them, but rather on the meanings those monuments acquired after their carving. Its contents intersect directly with scholarship on the re-use and re-interpretation of ancient material remains in the Near East, and, more generally, with the work of various specialists probing the archaeology and anthropology of social memory and the history of archaeology and antiquarianism before the modern period.

Most of the chapters gathered here were presented at a conference entitled “Carvings in and out of Time: Afterlives of Rock-cut Monuments in the Ancient Near East,” which was held at the Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology and the Ancient World at Brown University on February 15 and February 16, 2017. On that occasion, the editors invited diverse specialists including archaeologists, philologists, and art historians to tackle the following questions: Who in the pre-modern world was interested in ancient rock-cut reliefs and inscriptions? How did interpreters make sense of the images and texts on those monuments? Why did they care to do so?

Two scholars who were part of the original conference are not included here: Beate Pongraz-Leisten’s keynote speech, which was a wide-ranging survey and analysis of rock-cut reliefs and their cultural significance during the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and Pavol Hnila’s exploration of the uses and re-uses of *vishaps*, menhir-like prehistoric monuments found in the highlands of modern Armenia. We are indebted to both Pongraz-Leisten and Hnila for their stimulating papers at Brown, as well as to Valeria Sergueenkova who presented a joint paper with Felipe Rojas, for their participation. Conversely, the chapters by William Adler, John Steele, and Moya Carey and Lindsay Allen were not presented at the conference, but are now part of this volume.

Chapters 2 through 8 deal with the interpretation and manipulation of reliefs and inscriptions, many of which are extant today. They have been arranged in a sequence that is roughly geographic, ranging through Mesopotamia, Egypt, Anatolia, and Iran. The last three chapters, by contrast, deal with a set of monuments mentioned in various literary traditions from the Hellenistic through the early modern periods. According to those traditions, expert knowledge was allegedly inscribed in ante-diluvian times on stone and brick stelae. The stelae in question probably never existed except as described in texts; and yet, as

Ben-Dov in particular shows, actual rock-cut reliefs and inscriptions informed the mythology and folklore related to the purported ante-diluvian stelae.

*Chapter 1* discusses why the afterlives of rock-cut monuments have mattered and continue to do so, and situates the volume in current scholarship.

In *Chapter 2*, Karen Sonik and David Kertai examine the practice, common among ancient Mesopotamian rulers, of carving reliefs and inscriptions alongside those commissioned by their predecessors. The authors establish a theoretical basis for the study of identity and personhood and their specific manifestations in ancient Mesopotamia, and then turn to places where Shalmaneser III (r. 859–824 BCE) “produced his presence” next to that of earlier kings. By setting up carved monuments by those of his predecessors—they argue—Shalmaneser was visually and physically interconnecting past and present kings as well as distributing his personhood throughout his kingdom and beyond his lifetime. This chapter deals with such concepts as the body of the king and his material representation, and the relationship of each of them to temporality.

Time and matter are central also in *Chapter 3*, Jennifer Thum and Anne-Claire Salmas’ discussion of interactions with ancient rock-cut monuments in Egypt. Placing emphasis on ancient Egyptian conceptions of temporality, their paper spans millennia and considers interactions not only from the Pharaonic past, but also from both earlier and much later times. Thum and Salmas treat the archaeological sites that are their focus as dynamic cultural spaces that are transformed both by the physical layering of carvings, and by the sheer accumulation of ancient and modern (re-)interpretations of those layered carvings.

In *Chapter 4*, Lorenzo D’Alfonso and Matteo Pedrinazzi analyze the cultural relevance of a Hittite monument after the demise of the Hittite Empire. They study two intimately related, but temporally—and arguably culturally—distinct rock-cut interventions at the spectacular site of Kızıldağ in central Turkey: a Bronze-Age inscription in Anatolian hieroglyphs honoring a certain “Great King Hartapus” and, immediately next to it, an Iron-Age figurative relief of a seated ruler on a throne. By reflecting in detail about what afforded the monuments on Kızıldağ lasting significance (even as most other rock-cut inscriptions seem to have been largely neglected), this chapter is a contribution to the political and cultural history of Anatolia between the Bronze and Iron Ages.

Felipe Rojas in *Chapter 5* studies a rock-cut carving overlooking the city of Antioch that is known among classicists as the “Charonion.” By deploying texts written between the sixth and the twenty-first centuries CE, he analyzes how that carving has been variously implicated in the production of knowledge about the past in Antioch (and beyond). Rather than marking a stark divide



between legitimate modern sources and their illegitimate pre-modern predecessors, he argues that all the various interpreters who have written about the carving have used the monument to make history, even if they have used very different intellectual, and seemingly incommensurable frameworks to do so.

Robert Rollinger's contribution in *Chapter 6* deals with Herodotus' thoughts on anthropogenic monuments found in the territories ancient Greek historians called "Asia." Rollinger surveys all "Asianic" monuments mentioned by Herodotus and argues that the Greek historian uses those monuments, including reliefs and inscriptions in the Levant and Anatolia, primarily as a way to critique the overambitious claims of the great political super-power of his time, Persia. He shows how Herodotus contrasts Persian monuments with the widespread traces of the semi-mythical Egyptian pharaoh known to the Greeks as Sesostris.

The next two chapters concern ancient rock-cut monuments in Iran:

Matthew P. Canepa offers in *Chapter 7* a wide-ranging analytical survey of the diachronic dialogue in which the rulers of ancient Iran engaged on cliff-faces throughout their empire and beyond. Canepa is especially interested in the interconnections between matter, on the one hand, and cultural memory on the other. He demonstrates that Iranian reliefs and inscriptions are a window into the historical consciousness of successive Iranian rulers. The complex layering of Iranian rock-cut monuments attests to those rulers' deliberate efforts to take a stand vis-à-vis the physical legacy of their predecessors.

In *Chapter 8*, Lindsay Allen and Moya Carey consider the afterlives of ancient Iranian material culture in the Safavid period (1501–1722 CE). Much of the evidence they analyze is drawn from the visual arts, primarily from Persian miniature paintings. In their visually rich survey of Iranian engagements with ancient reliefs and stone-carvings, the authors show that the seventeenth century CE was a crucial moment in the reframing and re-interpretation of pre-Islamic monuments in Iran, and that Iran was an active participant in transcontinental discussions about antiquity and its traces. This chapter underscores the fact that the practice of visually documenting carved antiquities was not solely a European phenomenon. It is also an important reminder that the history of antiquarianism in the early modern Near East follows different trajectories than those followed in Europe, even if those trajectories are entangled.

The three final chapters revolve around a cultural motif of remarkable tenacity in diverse cultures from antiquity to the early modern period. The motif involves ante-diluvian stelae and inscriptions containing fundamental human knowledge (specifically, astronomical and astrological learning). Various narratives invoke those primordial stelae to reflect on such matters as the

transmission of celestial knowledge, human and divine learning, and more generally, the origins of civilization.

In *Chapter 9*, Jonathan Ben-Dov traces the early attestations of the stelae motif to the first millennium BCE, and elucidates their connection to narratives involving the so-called Watchers, rebellious angels who had fallen from Heaven in order to intermingle with humans in defiance of god's decree. The mythology of the Watchers is first attested in treatises concerning the primordial Enoch, great-grandfather of Noah, evidencing a unique Levantine-Mesopotamian cultural hybrid in the early Hellenistic age. Ben-Dov traces the grounding of that tradition in *realia*, showing how the carved monuments of the Neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II, in what is now the Republic of Lebanon, were interpreted in Levantine cultural memory, and more specifically, in Jewish apocalyptic literature.

In *Chapter 10*, William Adler takes as his point of departure two Jewish sources recounting the motif of the primordial stelae: Flavius Josephus' *Antiquities* and the *Book of Jubilees*. He goes on to trace the intricate path of the motif of the stelae in the writings of various Byzantine chronographers. Mirroring an original ambivalence in the Jewish traditions, the chronographers vacillate between attributing positive or negative value to the supposedly angelic knowledge carved on the stelae. Curiously, the authors of these chronicles lived in Anatolia, which raises an intriguing question: did the chronographers reflect upon the extant Anatolian rock-cut reliefs and inscriptions around them when recounting the traditions of the primordial stelae?

Finally, in *Chapter 11* John Steele examines how that very same tradition developed among European historians of science between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries CE. Josephus' enigmatic statement about humankind's discovery of ancient wisdom engraved on pillars troubled and fascinated early modern historians. Whether they commented on the stelae motif, critiqued it, or outright shunned it, historians of astronomy up to the eighteenth century were compelled to engage with the tradition of the engraved pillars or stelae when thinking about the origins of their discipline. This article, more than any other in the volume, shows that rock-cut reliefs and inscriptions are mirrors, as it were, of the prejudices, fears, and hopes of their successive interpreters.

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## Notes on Contributors

### *Jonathan Ben-Dov*

(Ph.D. 2005) is associate professor at the Department of Biblical Studies, Tel-Aviv University. He is the author and editor of several books on the Dead Sea Scrolls and about time reckoning and astronomy in Antiquity. He has published widely on Jewish apocalyptic literature in its Ancient Near Eastern setting.

### *Felipe Rojas*

is an associate professor of archaeology in the Joukowsky Institute for Archaeology and the Ancient World at Brown University. His book *The Pasts of Roman Anatolia* (Cambridge University Press, 2019) examines Roman-period interest and manipulation of pre-classical material remains in Anatolia and beyond. Among his other publications are the volumes *Antiquarianisms: Contact, Conflict, Comparison* (Joukowsky Institute Publications, 2017) and *Otros pasados: Ontologías alternativas en el estudio de lo que ha sido* (forthcoming), both co-edited with Benjamin Anderson.

### *David Kertai*

is curator of the ancient Near East collections at the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden. He earned his Ph.D. in Near Eastern Archaeology at Heidelberg University. He is the author of *The Architecture of Late Assyrian Royal Palaces* (Oxford University Press, 2015) and numerous articles on Assyrian archaeology, art and architecture, and history. He has taught and conducted research at institutions including the University College London, the Freie Universität Berlin and the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University. Since 2005, he has participated in archaeological projects in Syria, Turkey, and Iraq.

### *Karen Sonik*

is Associate Professor of Art History at Auburn University. She earned her Ph.D. in the Art & Archaeology of the Mediterranean World at the University of Pennsylvania and specializes in the visual arts, literature, and cultural history of Mesopotamia. She has authored numerous studies examining issues of identity, agency, and materiality in Mesopotamia and is editor of *The Materiality of Divine Agency* (with B. Pongratz-Leisten; De Gruyter, 2015); *Journey to the City: A Companion to the Middle East Galleries at the Penn Museum* (with S. Tinney;

Penn Museum, 2019); and *Art/ifacts and ArtWorks in the Ancient World* (Penn Museum, 2021). Her research has been supported by the American Philosophical Society, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Louis J. Kolb Foundation.

*Jen Thum*

is Assistant Director of Academic Engagement and Assistant Research Curator at the Harvard Art Museums, where she teaches with works of art from across the collections. Her Ph.D. dissertation (Brown University, 2019) is a study of ancient Egyptian royal living-rock stelae, the research for which was supported in part by a CAORC Mellon Mediterranean Regional Research Fellowship and an ECA Fellowship from the American Research Center in Egypt. Jen is dedicated to public engagement in her work as both an Egyptologist and a museum professional.

*Anne-Claire Salmas*

received her Ph.D. from the Sorbonne University and worked in several international institutions (École du Louvre; Brown University; the Griffith Institute, University of Oxford) before being appointed Assistant Professor of Egyptology at the American University in Cairo. Her doctoral dissertation was devoted to understanding temporal rhythms and daily life experiences associated with temporal phenomena in ancient Egypt. Since time and space naturally frame everyday life, this initial research has led her to investigate spatial practices, by exploring how space was perceived, experienced and (re-)constructed on a daily basis by individuals and communities in ancient Egypt.

*Lorenzo d'Alfonso*

is Professor of Ancient Western Asian Archaeology and History at the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University, and Associate professor of Ancient Western Asian Archaeology at Pavia University. He is interested in the processes of social and political transition characterizing the second and first millennium BCE in Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia. Since 2010 he has been the director of the Niğde Kınık Höyük archaeological project.

*Matteo Pedrinazzi*

completed his M.A. in Classical and Oriental Antiquities at Pavia University in 2013, discussing a thesis on the rock relief of Kızıldağ in Anatolia. He has excavated at different sites in Syria and Turkey and has been the director of Operation B at the site of Niğde-Kınık Höyük during the campaign 2012. After

the degree, he has worked as Curatorial Assistant and Social Media Manager at the G. Ferré Foundation, and today he teaches History, Geography and Italian Literature at Quintino di Vona Middle School, Milan.

*Robert Rollinger*

is Professor of Ancient History and Ancient Near Eastern Studies at the Leopold-Franzens University of Innsbruck. His main research areas are the history of the Ancient Near East and the Achaemenid Empire, contacts between the Aegean World and the Ancient Near East, ancient historiography, and the comparative history of empires. Recent publications include: *Imperien in der Weltgeschichte. Epochenübergreifende und globalhistorische Vergleiche* (co-edited; 2014); *Mesopotamia in the Ancient World. Impact, Continuities, Parallels* (co-edited; 2015); *Alexander und die großen Ströme. Die Flussüberquerungen im Lichte altorientalischer Pioniertechniken* (2013); *Blackwell Companion to the Achaemenid Persian Empire* (co-edited; 2020).

*Matthew P. Canepa*

is Professor and Elahé Omidyar Mir-Djalali Presidential Chair in Art History and Archaeology of Ancient Iran at University of California, Irvine. He is the author of numerous publications including the award-winning books, *The Iranian Expanse: Transforming Royal Identity through Architecture, Landscape, and the Built Environment, 550 BCE–642* and *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual of Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran*, both published by University of California Press. He is currently a member of the scientific committee and contributor for the J. Paul Getty Museum's exhibition and catalogue, *Persia: Iran and the Classical World* (2022).

*Moya Carey*

is Curator of Islamic Collections at the Chester Beatty in Dublin (2018–date), and previously held the post of Iran Heritage Foundation Curator for the Iranian Collections at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (2009–18). Her research addresses the history of visual culture in Iran, particularly carpets, metalwork, and the arts of the book. She also researches nineteenth and early twentieth-century histories of collecting Middle Eastern material culture, and is currently working on architectural salvage in Khedival Cairo. In 2017, she published *Persian Art. Collecting the Arts of Iran for the V&A* (London: V&A).

*Lindsay Allen*

has been Lecturer in Ancient Greek and Near Eastern history at King's College London since 2005. She focuses on the history of Achaemenid Iran, with a particular focus on the historiography of kingship, working particularly on the

interface between texts and materiality. She also works on the history of collecting of Iranian objects, and is currently completing a long-term project on the modern dissemination of stone fragments from Persepolis (Takht-e Jamshid).

*William Adler*

is Distinguished University Professor of Religious Studies in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at North Carolina State University. The author or co-author of seven books, he specializes in the study of early Jewish and Christian literature, with a particular interest in Jewish and Christian historiography. He has served as a visiting Professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and as a visiting research scholar at the University of Adelaide, the Friedrich Schiller University Jena, the University of Basel, and the Freie Universität Berlin.

*John Steele*

is Professor of the History of the Exact Sciences in Antiquity in the Department of Egyptology and Assyriology at Brown University. His research focuses on the development of astronomy and astrology in Babylonia, the circulation of ancient knowledge, and the reception and use of ancient astronomy in the early modern and modern periods. His recent publications include *The Babylonian Astronomical Compendium* (2019; co-authored with Hermann Hunger), *Keeping Watch in Babylon: The Astronomical Diaries in Context* (2019, co-edited with Johannes Haubold and Kathryn Stevens), *Scholars and Scholarship in Late Babylonian Uruk* (2019, co-edited with Christine Proust).