Ethnic Reconstruction and Onomastic Evidence

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THIS ARTICLE DEALS WITH THE PROBLEM of ethnic reconstruction as based mainly or exclusively on onomastic evidence, such as personal and geographical names. Two ancient Near Eastern areas are covered in this article, namely Mesopotamia and Syria. It is hoped that methodological observations made in this article will be found useful to scholars working on similar problems in other fields.

For the reader not acquainted with the ancient Oriental historical frame the following information may be helpful: From about 3000 B.C. on we find the ancient Sumerian civilization, with its thousands of cuneiform texts written in Sumerian, a language of unknown relationship, flourishing in southern Mesopotamia. In the middle of the third millennium B.C. the Semitic Akkadians came to the fore politically under their great conqueror, King Sargon of Akkad, and gradually supplanted the Sumerians as the leading power of Mesopotamia. After about 2000 B.C. the Akkadians broke up into two political entities: the Babylonians centered around the city of Babylon in southern Mesopotamia and the Assyrians centered around the cities of Assur and Nineveh in northern Mesopotamia. In the Old Babylonian period, about 2000–1600 B.C., Semitic nomads and semi-nomads emanating from the arid regions of Arabia south of the Euphrates exerted strong political pressure. These were the Amorites who succeeded in this period in imposing their political, but not cultural, control over Mesopotamia and Syria. Toward the end of the Old Babylonian and the beginning of the Middle Babylonian periods, around 1500 B.C., the Hurrians, whose linguistic relationship is unknown, expanding from the area of Lake Urmia (north of Mesopotamia) became the dominant political power in Mesopotamia and Syria. Finally, in the middle of the second millennium B.C., the Semitic Arameans succeeded in imposing their language, but not political control, over the whole Fertile Crescent, and their language remained dominant in that area until it was re-

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placed by Arabic as a consequence of the conquests by the Arabs after the rise of Islam in the seventh century A.D.

In reconstructing ancient ethnic groups which we call peoples, we base our conclusions mainly on the primary language or mother tongue which we find used by these groups in their written tradition. This practice is followed for two reasons: first, because of the strong probability that language represents the main trait characterizing a people; and, second, because our available sources are much more plentiful in respect to the language than they are to other traits of a people such as customs, religion, tradition, mode of life, etc. We find that these other characteristics are too numerous and too complex to serve as a reliable basis for ethnic reconstructions in the ancient Near East. Furthermore, the old adage *lingua fecit gentem* can be supported by the observation that a people dies when its language dies. Note, for instance, that the Sumerians lost their ethnic identity and disappeared from the scene as a people when they gave up their language in favor of Babylonian, and that, in later times, Babylonians and Assyrians lost their ethnic identity when they accepted the Aramaic language. For these reasons, when speaking of the people called Sumerians we mean simply the people using the Sumerian language as their mother tongue, and when speaking of the Akkadians we mean the people using Akkadian as their mother tongue.[1]

While our knowledge of the Sumerians, Akkadians, Hittites, Hebrews, or Egyptians is quite good, there are great limitations in our knowledge for the early periods about these peoples with a strong written tradition, and also at all times about the peripheral peoples whose written tradition was weak or completely absent. Among the problems with which we are faced in our ethnic reconstructions are: What was the role of the Akkadians in the proto-historical period of Mesopotamia at the time when written tradition was limited to Sumerian? Can we project our limited knowledge of the proto-historical period into the near past and try to reconstruct the ethnic situation in Mesopotamia in the pre-historical period, from which no written sources are extant? How can we enlarge our knowledge about the Hurrians, whose written tradition

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[1] These questions were discussed by the writer in several places: *Hurrians and Subarians* (Chicago, 1944), pp. v—vi; *City Invincible*, ed. by C. H. Kraeling and R. M. Adams (Chicago, 1960), pp. 74—78; *Genava*, n. s., VIII (1960), pp. 259—261.

was relatively weak? What can we say about the Amorites, the Beduins of ancient times, who never learned to express their own language in a written form?

In all the cases in which the primary linguistic sources are either absent or are weakly represented, we must rely on secondary sources to help us in our ethnic reconstructions. Among these secondary sources are proper names, mainly personal and geographical, which we find mentioned in the primary sources. The best known example of a Near Eastern language partially reconstructed on the basis of proper names alone is Amorite, the language of the nomadic and semi-nomadic populations of Syria and Mesopotamia in the Old Babylonian period.

The first observation that can be made about ancient Near Eastern personal names is that they are generally easy to understand. The reason for this comprehensibility is that they were usually couched in the language of the person or persons giving the name. The reason for their being couched in the current language of the name-givers was that the latter customarily formed names for their children in order to express a sentiment, a wish, or gratitude, revolving around their progeny or themselves. In Sumerian, for instance, the names were commonly formed in sentences of the type "May-(god)-Enlil-give-(long)-life" or "(God)-Enlil-has-given-(long)-life." More rarely, descriptive nouns or phrases were used, such as "Mouse" or "Our-Crown." Some divergent trends in naming children are exemplified in the following: Papponymy, that is, naming children after grandparents, frequently followed in royal names; prestige names, as illustrated by the custom of the Nuzi scribes to bear old, prestige-laden Sumerian names at a time in the Middle Babylonian period when the Sumerian language was long dead; and vogue names (= German "Lallwörter") of the type *Nana*, *Lulu*. Since names based on these trends were relatively rare, the conclusion that the ancient Near Eastern names reproduced the current language of the name-givers and were consequently easily understood holds true. By contrast, we may note in our modern world such first names as John, Henry, George, Mary, Helene, Frances, or, to a lesser degree, such family names as Walker, Webster, Kennedy, Breasted, which are not couched in the current language of the name-givers and therefore are generally not understood by the public.

The second observation that can be made about the ancient Oriental personal names, and which results from the first observation, is that these names must have changed in line with the linguistic and ethnic changes. Onomastic changes due to dialectal changes are of no interest to us here. What is important is the consideration of changes in names due to ethno-linguistic changes. The specific questions before us are: Are the historically attested ethnic changes reflected in the language of the personal names and, vice versa, do the linguistic changes attested in personal names necessitate the assumption of changes in the ethnic situation? The answers to both questions are affirmative. Disregarding the inconclusive intermediate periods, we find the following changing situation in the area of Mesopotamia. The Sumerian personal names stopped being used in the Old Babylonian period when the Babylonian language, and, with it, the Babylonian ethnos, became dominant; the Babylonian and Assyrian names disappeared gradually by the middle of the first millennium B.C. when the Arameans took over; and the Aramean names were replaced by Arabic names when the Arabic language became dominant in that area. Thus the evidence based on personal names can generally be utilized only for ethnic reconstructions pertaining to periods contemporary with the written evidence, but it is of little value for the periods preceding the ethnic change.

The immediate observation that can be made about the ancient Near Eastern geographical names is that they are generally impossible or difficult to understand. This observation applies especially to names pertaining to natural features, such as rivers and mountains, and to a lesser degree to names of man-made features, such as cities (and other kinds of settlements) and countries. The reason that geographical names are impossible or difficult to understand is that they were phrased in a language which is often incomprehensible to us; and the reason for this incomprehensibility lies in the fact that the geographical names were not formed anew every time an ethnic change had taken place, but were inherited from the preceding periods, even from the distant ages when some unknown or little-known languages were spoken. In spite of the difficulties connected with the interpretation of geographical names, by observing the formations of the names and the recurring stems and suffixes, certain valuable conclusions can be drawn about the

underlying language of these names. Thus, in contrast to the in-
formation culled from the study of personal names, the information
based on the study of geographical names is of primary importance
in our reconstructions of the ethnic situation in the pre-historical
and proto-historical periods.

After these general remarks we may now consider the specific
cases of utilization of proper names for ethnic reconstructions in
two areas of the ancient Near East, namely, Mesopotamia[2] and
Syria.[3]

In the earliest Mesopotamian sources written by the Sumerians
in the Sumerian language we find mention of hundreds of personal
names. While no Akkadian names are attested in these sources,
certain names of the types *Dada* or *Lulu* and *Ilala* or *Kukuga* may
reflect the remnants of the proto-population of Mesopotamia before
the Sumerian immigration; but the great majority of the personal
names are Sumerian. In the ensuing Pre-Sargonic and Sargonic
periods we note a lessening proportion of the Sumerian names,
paralleled by a growing proportion of Akkadian names, indicating
the growth of the Akkadian ethnic elements at the expense of the
Sumerians. Thus, the personal names give us a very weak documen-
tation for the proto-population of Mesopotamia, but a full and
correct picture of the ethno-linguistic situation and changes in the
early historical periods.

The conclusions which can be deduced on the basis of a study
of the Mesopotamian geographical names are at variance with those
which can be drawn from personal names. Almost all the Mesopo-
tamian geographical names found in the earliest Sumerian sources
are non-Sumerian and non-Akkadian and must be assigned to the
proto-population of Mesopotamia. This conclusion is true of the
names of rivers and mountains, as well as of cities and countries.
Only in the Pre-Sargonic period do we find the first attestation of
Sumerian geographical names; and the Akkadian city-building
activity apparently did not take place until the Sargonic period.
Thus, the geographical names give us valuable information for the
proto-population of Mesopotamia in the pre-historical periods, but
reflect very badly the subsequent ethno-linguistic changes which
took place in the proto-historical periods.

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[2] Discussed in *Genava*, n. s., VIII (1960), 263 ff.

[3] Discussed in *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* XV (1961), 39 ff.

It would be as wrong for us to draw the conclusion on the basis of personal names that the population of Mesopotamia in pre-historical times was Sumerian, as it would be to conclude on the basis of geographical names that the Mesopotamian population in proto-historical times was non-Sumerian. Since personal names, being innovating, give us the correct picture of the ethno-linguistic situation in Mesopotamia in the historical periods, while the geographical names, being conservative, reflect the earlier, pre-historical situation, the conclusion which should be drawn on the basis of both personal and geographical names is that the earliest provable population of Mesopotamia was non-Sumerian (of unknown linguistic affiliation) and that it was supplanted by the Sumerians in historical times.

Similar conclusions to those deduced for ancient Mesopotamia can be drawn for ancient Syria on the basis of proper names found in the cuneiform texts from Alalakh and Ugarit. The language of these texts is Akkadian, borrowed from Mesopotamia, and represents the second cultural language of the area. The great majority of the personal names in these texts are Semitic (Amorite, etc.), followed by Hurrian and a small number of names of unknown linguistic affiliation. In contrast, the great majority of early Syrian geographical names are of unknown linguistic affiliation, with Semitic and Hurrian names forming a definite minority. The conclusion which imposes itself here is that the earliest population of Syria was of unknown linguistic affiliation and that it was followed in historical times by the Semites and (then) by the Hurrians. The sequence Semites-Hurrians is based on arguments which are of no interest to us here. Again we can observe the innovating character of personal names and the conservative character of the geographical names.

The utilization of proper names in ethnic reconstructions and the degree of their relevance has been illustrated above by specific examples taken from ancient Near Eastern history. The questions to consider now are: How valid generally are the conclusions reached above in respect to the ancient Near East, and can they be applied equally well to other areas and periods, such as the classical world or even modern times? I shall leave out the discussion of the classical world and limit myself to stating that I have found nothing in the history of the Greeks and Romans, especially in their older

historical periods, which might be considered discordant with the conclusions reached for the Near East. What I should like to consider in support of my conclusions is a hypothetical case which might possibly take place thousands of years from now.

Let us visualize a situation in which our civilization and all human life on our planet called Earth has disappeared completely as a result of some catastrophe, and thousands of years from now an archeological expedition, coming, let us say, from Mars, arrives at the shores of Lake Michigan to excavate the area of what was once the glorious city of Chicago. In excavating the ruins the archeologists are lucky to come upon some very valuable documents containing the census of the city and its suburbs taken around 1960. The documents are full of personal and geographical names. What likely conclusions could be drawn by the would-be Martian philologists from a study of these names ?

The personal names would represent a linguistic jumble (English, German, Polish, etc.), but it would be relatively easy to reach the conclusion that these Chicago names resemble similar names found in the excavations of different European sites. Since the European names antedate by centuries those found in and around Chicago, the concomitant conclusion would be that the Chicago names were borne by settlers coming from Europe. The names would also show that small proportions of settlers came originally from Asia and Africa. But the information gathered from personal names would yield nothing about the older population of the Chicago area and the wrong conclusion might be drawn that the new populations were settled in an area formerly devoid of any human beings.

Let us now consider the conclusions which might be based on a study of geographical names. These too would represent a jumble resembling geographical names found mainly in Europe. The clear majority of the names would be English (Evanston, Elmhurst, Hyde Park, Woodlawn, Kenwood, etc.), with very small proportions of French (Joliet, Des Plaines, etc.) and German (Munster, Schaumburg, etc.) names. In addition to these, a rather substantial number of names — second only to those of English origin — including Chicago, Illinois, Michigan, Calumet, Milwaukee, Waukegan, Kankakee, etc., would be considered unique and without parallels outside of our area. These strange-sounding names would obviously be taken as representing the native population of the area. But it would be

wrong to draw the conclusion on the basis of the geographical names and their proportions that by far the most common population of the Chicago area in the year 1960 was represented by peoples of English origin, that the next most common population consisted of American Indians, that the people of French and German origins followed suit proportionately, and that the Slavonic peoples were hardly represented.

Only by a joint utilization of the evidence based both on personal and geographic names could the right conclusions be reached: That the personal names, being innovating, reflect rather adequately the ethnic background of the population of the Chicago area in 1960, composed as it was mainly of peoples of English, German, Polish, etc., origin in that order; and that the geographical names, being conservative, yield incorrect ethnic information about the Chicago area in 1960, but allow a historical reconstruction of the population of the area as being composed first of native (namely, American Indian) peoples, who were later superseded as a result of a very strong settlement activity of English (or British) people and a much weaker one on the part of the peoples of French and German origins.

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