

The Limits of Credulity (Presidential Address)

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However, skepticism on principle is neither a more estimable nor a more productive intellectual attitude than the credulity with which it is frequently blended in the simpler minds.

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For Bill Hallo

Historiography has often been the subject of the after-dinner talk delivered by the scholar whom you have honored with your presidency. For instance, in 1952 Egyptologist John A. Wilson discussed "Oriental History" of early and modern times;² in 1992 Jack Lassner spoke of the difficulties facing the historian of early Islam;³ in 1993 Thorkild Jacobsen addressed us on the use of Sumerian religious texts as historical sources;⁴ in 1997 Jack Sasson set out the problems attendant upon reconstructing the events of the reign of King Zimri-Lim of Mari;⁵ and in 1989 my teacher Bill Hallo considered "The Limits of Skepticism."⁶ Bill argued forcefully that the historian of the early Near East should accord greater trust to the ancient narrative sources than has been customary in the wake of the "linguistic turn"⁷ and stressed that above all "we should not expect to know more than the ancient sources *knew*, but we can hope to know more than they chose to *tell*."⁸ I am in agreement with Bill that the scholar must not dismiss any relevant textual evidence out of hand, but as a confirmed skeptic, I will offer here some observations in support of adopting a rigorous and hypercritical approach to the sources.

Any consideration of historiography must open with the question: what is history?⁹ To begin with, we must distinguish between history and the past, that is, the humans who lived before us and their institutions and activities. The past in all of its manifold aspects is gone forever and cannot be retrieved.¹⁰ History is a reconstruction of elements of the past in the

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1. *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 79–80.
2. John A. Wilson, "Oriental History: Past and Present," *JAOS* 72 (1952): 49–55.
3. Jacob Lassner, "'Doing' Early Islamic History: Brooklyn Baseball, Arabic Historiography, and Historical Memory," *JAOS* 114 (1994): 1–10.
4. Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Historian and the Sumerian Gods," *JAOS* 114 (1994): 145–53.
5. Jack M. Sasson, "The King and I: A Mari King in Changing Perceptions," *JAOS* 118 (1998): 453–70.
6. W. W. Hallo, "The Limits of Skepticism," *JAOS* 110 (1990): 187–99.
7. For an introduction to this radical approach to history in general, see A. Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1997). Although by no means a thoroughgoing postmodernist, Mario Liverani has been the most prominent critic within ancient Near Eastern studies of the acceptance of the narratives of ancient documents as straightforward reflections of historical events; see his programmatic essay "Memorandum on the Approach to Historiographic Texts," *Or NS* 42 (1973): 178–94.
8. *JAOS* 110 (1990): 189; italics in original.
9. See the classic by E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961).
10. K. Jenkins aptly describes the past as "an absent object of inquiry"; see *On "What is History?"* (London: Routledge, 1995), 17.

mind of a human being of a later generation. It should be stressed that in principle there will exist multiple histories of any given period, each congruent to the mental world, social purposes, and sources available to the person who creates it. Thus the history of the Sargonic kings of the twenty-fourth and twenty-third pre-Christian centuries written in Babylonia during the second millennium B.C.E. differs from a history of the same dynasty produced in Italy or the United States in the twentieth century C.E.¹¹

Bill is fond of quoting¹² Johan Huizinga to the effect that “[h]istory is the intellectual form in which a society renders account to itself of its past.”¹³ This is true, as far as it goes, but why do societies even perceive a need to render such account? Historian of England J. H. Plumb remarks that “[history] is always a created ideology with a purpose, designed to control individuals, or motivate societies, or inspire classes.”¹⁴ Furthermore, it “was needed to strengthen the purpose of those who possessed power and, equally important, to reconcile those who lacked it.”¹⁵ In practice, the sanctioned history of a social group conveys the message that the current organization and power distribution of that society is the inevitable result of the progress of events, a function exemplified by the current vulgar belief that the triumph of capitalism and liberal democracy in Eurasia after 1989 has brought human political development to its end.¹⁶ Alternatively, some idealized future or past state of affairs may be held up as a goal to be achieved, as in Christian eschatology or Stalinist visions of a communist utopia under construction on the one hand,¹⁷ or as in German National Socialist nostalgia for a premodern society purportedly free of internal conflict on the other.¹⁸

Furthermore, each individual member of society fashions his or her own history as part of the construction of identity.¹⁹ This idiosyncratic history will be an amalgam of elements drawn from personal experience and components of one of the available histories of the encompassing society, suitably adapted to the situation of that individual. For example, people of modest means from my parents’ generation in America often recall the Great Depression as a time when they struggled against personal hardship while President Franklin Delano Roosevelt waged a larger battle on their behalf to repair the national economy. In contrast, some of our conservative and/or very wealthy fellow citizens may consider the 1930s as a

11. M. Liverani, “Model and Actualization: The Kings of Akkad in the Historical Tradition,” in *Akkad: The First World Empire*, ed. M. Liverani (Padua; Sargon, 1993), 41–67.

12. See, for example, “New Directions in Historiography (Mesopotamia and Israel),” in *dubsar anta-men: Studien zur Altorientalistik. Festschrift für Willem H. Ph. Römer*, ed. M. Dietrich and O. Loretz (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1998), 110.

13. J. Huizinga, “A Definition of the Concept of History,” in *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, ed. R. Klibansky and H. J. Paton (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936), 36–44.

14. J. H. Plumb, *The Death of the Past* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 17 [originally published 1969]. The actual quotation begins: “The past . . .” but by this Plumb means what I am calling the “sanctioned history” of a social group.

15. *The Death of the Past*, 45.

16. See F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, HarperCollins Perennial, 2002) [originally published 1992]. See the critique by B. Cumings, “Time of Illusions: Post-Cold War Visions of the World,” in *Cold War Triumphalism: The Misuse of History after the Fall of Communism*, ed. E. Schrecker (New York: The New Press, 2004), 77–89.

17. See S. Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999).

18. See J. Hermand, *Old Dreams of a New Reich*, tr. P. Levesque and S. Soldovieri (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1992).

19. See N. Morley, *Writing Ancient History* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1999), 154.

period in which their values and interests were endangered by the legislative and administrative programs of that same F.D.R.

As an historian, I am not in a position to declare which of these views is “true”; I may only decide which—if either—better fits the history of the United States I generate for myself. But what I wish to illustrate here with this pairing is that each of these plausible histories of the 1930s inserts personal memories into a societal frame, in this case the common school-book attribution to American presidents of the capacity to determine the destiny of their times (as in “the Roosevelt era”²⁰). This emphasis on the “great man,” in preference to social or economic factors, as the shaping force of history is part of a widely accepted American ideology.

Thus it is imperative—and indeed inevitable—that a society and each individual member thereof develop histories of that societal group. But why do we feel called to construct histories of other cultures, particularly of those long dead? It is a commonplace that the past experience of even a foreign culture might offer paradigms for our own individual or group conduct, that we may draw “lessons from history.” This is certainly the justification often given during the Graeco-Roman period for the contemplation of the past.²¹ I may, however, be permitted to doubt the practical value of reasoned historical considerations for the determination of the conduct of nations. More often than not, it seems to me, national leaders and their advocates simply mine the past for precedents to justify their own policy predictions. For example, with little or no appreciation of divergent context, the dreadful consequences of the Munich agreement of 1938 have been adduced repeatedly in political debate as justification for an uncompromising stance in international disputes.²²

I probably should not cast too much aspersion on the notion of history as teacher, however, for its widespread popularity is undoubtedly a factor in securing continued societal support for the study and teaching of history in a time of straitened economic circumstances and reduced educational budgets. But I must confess my own rather different motivation for pursuing history: simple curiosity about other times and places. I know that this impetus moves many of my colleagues as well. In addition, it affects countless members of the general public, to judge from the strong presence of popular historical productions on cable television and the nonfiction bestseller lists. There has even been a recent Turkish film featuring re-enactments of the most famous events in Hittite history, interspersed with talking heads, including those of several members of this Society.²³ It seems that inquisitiveness about even the exotic past is a widespread phenomenon.

I would furthermore endorse the opinion of historian of Germany Richard Evans that “historical writing can enhance our appreciation of the human condition by bringing to life and explaining beliefs and cultures that are very different from our own, and so perhaps adding to the richness of human experience and understanding, and fostering tolerance of different cultures and belief systems in our own time.”²⁴ So, history is good to think.

20. This is well exemplified in fiction by P. Roth, *The Plot against America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004).

21. See A. Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1990), 18.

22. See M. Small, “Some Lessons of Munich,” in *Appeasing Fascism: Articles from the Wayne State University Conference on Munich after Fifty Years*, ed. M. Small and O. Feinstein (Lanham: Univ. Press of America, 1991), 89–98.

23. *The Hittites*, directed by Tolga Ornek (Istanbul: Ekip Films, 2003).

24. R. J. Evans, “What is History?—Now,” in *What is History Now?*, ed. D. Cannadine (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 9.

But how *do* those of us who create accounts of the past for the consumption of others, that is, professional historians, do so responsibly?²⁵ Here I will sketch my personal approach to the theory of historical inquiry. While I am hardly a postmodernist, I feel that a perusal of the writings of recent theorists of historical practice is very instructive for historians of the early Near East, if only for making us aware of the often unconscious presuppositions with which we undertake our work.²⁶

Given that it is impossible to falsify an historical proposition through experiment, we must recognize that the natural sciences do not provide a viable model for historical research.²⁷ In my view, the historian's task is to recreate a simulacrum of the past through empathy (*Verstehen*), rather than to explain it (*Erklären*).²⁸ That is, he or she may conclude, after due consideration, that a particular sequence of past human events "makes sense," but not that it was inevitable. We cannot establish laws for history.²⁹

Since the re-creation of the past takes place in the mind of the individual historian, which has been shaped by his or her personal experience and world view, the unbiased historian is an unattainable ideal.³⁰ However, each historian must always be aware of his or her own political and moral principles and how they impact on the evaluation of the data brought to bear on a particular problem. In some instances it might be appropriate to make these principles known to readers or listeners. (Full disclosure: I consider myself a democratic socialist, a pacifist, and a practical atheist.)

We historians will inevitably make moral judgments,³¹ but we must guard against applying unreasonable and anachronistic standards in evaluating the personalities and activities of the past. We may justly condemn the Athenian massacre of the male population of Melos,³² but censuring the Romans for holding slaves or Chaucer for exhibiting benighted attitudes about women would render us ridiculous.

Second, I concur with the view that historical facts are created, not found.³³ That is, a datum only acquires a meaningful existence when placed within a system of relationships to other data. And it is in connection with the creation and evaluation of such a system that historical disputes arise. Given adequate sources, technical matters, such as the establish-

25. In recent years few historians of the ancient Near East have delivered themselves of self-conscious considerations of their methodology. Among the most interesting exceptions are M. Van De Mieroop, "Why Did They Write on Clay," *Klio* 79 (1997): 7–18; "On Writing a History of the Ancient Near East," *BiOr* 54 (1997): 285–305; *Cuneiform Texts and the Writing of History* (London: Routledge, 1999); E. von Dassow, "On Writing the History of Southern Mesopotamia," *ZA* 90 (2000): 227–46; and D. C. Snell, "The Historian's Task," in *A Companion to the Ancient Near East*, ed. D. C. Snell (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 95–106.

26. See E. A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004), 20–23.

27. See J. Appleby, L. Hunt, and M. Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 259.

28. See G. G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*, rev. ed. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1988), 133–44, on Wilhelm Dilthey.

29. For an attempt to identify more modest "paronymic" similarities among historical events, see B. M. Roehner and T. Syme, *Pattern and Repertoire in History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2002).

30. On the elusiveness of the objectivity long held up as an ideal in American historiography, see P. Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988).

31. See J. L. Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 123.

32. Thucydides 5.84–116.

33. See the instructive discussion of this question by R. J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 65–87.

ment of a chronology,³⁴ are in principle subject to resolution, and everyone can affirm that a certain institution existed or that some battle occurred at a particular time and place. The real historiographic quarrels begin with interpretation, with the creation of a context in which events assume a meaning.³⁵ No one will disagree with the statement that the First World War began on August 5, 1914, but debate still rages over the assignment of responsibility for the outbreak of the conflict.³⁶ In practice, the arbiter among competing historical interpretations is the general opinion of the community of scholars.³⁷ This consensus is, of course, subject to change in response to the adducing of fresh evidence or the persuasive formulation of a new argument. By the very nature of the historical discourse there can be no final truth.

Third, the historian must ask him- or herself the right questions. Contrary to the dictum of Leopold von Ranke, the sources cannot speak for themselves, but only yield (often partial) answers to appropriate queries.

With what evidence does the historian, particularly the ancient historian, work? Although as I insisted earlier, the past has vanished forever, it has left behind traces that we can interpret today and in the future. Architecture, pottery, and other mute material remains are important in the writing of history, of course, but for most of us currently active in the American Oriental Society, the most usual recourse is to the textual vestiges of bygone civilizations. Ancient Sumer, Babylonia, and Assyria have unintentionally bequeathed to us many types of documents. Most useful to the Assyriologist as historian are administrative and business records, king lists, compilations of year names, and narrative historiography, which may be subdivided into inscriptions written on behalf of kings during their reigns and literary/historical compositions.³⁸ These genres of text call for varying interpretive strategies, but all must be approached with a critical eye.

In the quotation from Bill Hallo with which I began, he urges us to adopt an attitude of humility before an ancient source. This is fair enough, but the possible implication that today's researcher cannot learn things about a bygone society of which the author of a contemporary text was ignorant must be qualified. For one thing, we are often aware of how the story turns out. The modern Classicist, for example, is privy to something about the Roman Republic that was hidden from Cicero's slave-girl: he or she knows that the particular social formation in which the slave lived was rapidly approaching its end and can examine events and the writings of her master in light of that knowledge. That is, our vantage point in time usually affords us a long-term perspective on developments, and we often have more information about contemporary events taking place in locales distant from one another than did the ancient writer. In some respects we can construct a fuller historical context than the contemporary could have done.

34. Work continues on the construction of the absolute chronology of the Ancient Near East. See most recently H. Hunger and R. Pruzsinszky, eds., *Mesopotamian Dark Age Revisited* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2004).

35. See A. Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, 7. Note also the condemnation by the traditionalist G. R. Elton of "confusion between the event and the meaning it acquires in the reconstruction attempted by the historian," *The Practice of History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 52.

36. Historians from the most prominent parties to the war have tended to minimize the responsibility of their own nations, but German historian F. Fisher caused a controversy when he suggested in 1961 that the expansionist nature of the late *Wilhelmine Reich* was a major factor in the coming of war; see G. G. Iggers, *New Directions in European Historiography* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1984), 90–92.

37. Cf. J. Appleby et al., *Telling the Truth about History*, 261–62.

38. See H. G. Güterbock's classic study, "Die historische Tradition und ihre literarische Gestaltung bei Babyloniern und Hethitern bis 1200," *ZA* 42 (1934): 1–91; 44 (1938): 45–149.

Furthermore, we do not share the particular biases held by those who generated our sources, and this may allow us to spot misstatements and distortions. The Egyptologist has no emotional stake in the outcome of the Battle of Qadesh between Ramses II of Egypt and Muwatalli II of Hatti, and may therefore easily recognize that the pharaoh's claims to have achieved a great victory are fraudulent.³⁹ In some cases, of course, the interpretation of the evidence does have consequences for the *Weltanschauung* of today's scholar. Perhaps the understanding of a biblical passage brings with it significant theological implications for a believer, or the choice of a model of the ancient economy must be in harmony with a writer's desire to support a certain contemporary social or economic policy.⁴⁰ The consumer of a history produced by another person should always be cognizant of such possible sources of bias.⁴¹

Returning now to the ancient sources, I must emphasize a reason for skepticism that is seldom mentioned: in a world of severely restricted literacy,⁴² the great majority of texts from the cuneiform civilizations were generated within the palace or temple bureaucracy.⁴³ Even if the scribal schools in some periods and places may have been in some sense "private,"⁴⁴ their proprietors nonetheless might be associated with the temple staff.⁴⁵ More importantly still, no one outside of these Great Organizations ever composed narrative history. No literary public existed in ancient Mesopotamia. We have practically no witnesses to the ideas and beliefs of the common people of the ancient Near East, and consequently we shall remain forever ignorant of any possible oppositional conceptions of history held by the lower orders of society.⁴⁶

In dealing with these official texts we come up against a significant inherent difficulty: telling the truth is not a value much honored by governments, but is at best secondary to the pursuit of their policy goals, and above all, to assuring their survival.⁴⁷ As illustration here

39. See H. Klengel, *Hattuschili und Ramses: Hethiter und Ägypter—ihr langer Weg zum Frieden* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2002), 55–70.

40. As in the debate between "formalists" and "substantivists" on the character of the ancient economy; see N. Morley, *Theories, Models, and Concepts in Ancient History* (London: Routledge, 2004), 33–50. On the extension of this question to the economies of the ancient Near East, see J. Renger, "Probleme und Perspektiven einer Wirtschaftsgeschichte Mesopotamiens," *Saeculum* 40 (1989): 166–78.

41. For instance, very different histories of Israel/Palestine have been written by the Presbyterian J. Bright (*A History of Israel* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959]) and the Quaker K. W. Whitelam (*The Invention of Israel: The Silencing of Palestinian History* [London: Routledge, 1996]).

42. On the earliest writing systems and their limited use within ancient populations, see J. Baines, "Literacy and Ancient Egyptian Society," *Man* 18 (1983): 572–99; and P. Michalowski, "Writing and Literacy in Early States: A Mesopotamian Perspective," in *Literacy: Interdisciplinary Conversations*, ed. D. Keller-Cohen (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 1994), 49–70.

43. For the cuneiform world, only the Old Assyrian and Old Babylonian periods have left us significant numbers of texts written by or for private families or individuals.

44. The archaeological contexts from which school texts have been recovered include private houses as well as temples and palaces; see Å. W. Sjöberg, "The Old Babylonian Eduba," in *Sumerological Studies in Honor of Thorkild Jacobsen*, ed. S. J. Lieberman (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975), 176–78.

45. For the Neo-Assyrian period, collections of "canonical" texts have been found in private houses belonging to priests at both Assur (Kišir-Aššur, *āšipu*-priest) and Sultantepe/Huzirina (Qurdi-Nergal, *šangû*-priest); see O. Pedersén, *Archives and Libraries in the Ancient Near East 1500–300 B.C.* (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 1998), 135–36, 178–79.

46. That is, we shall never be able to produce a work of "history from below," such as E. P. Thompson's magnificent *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).

47. Eugene Vidal, father of writer Gore Vidal and early federal aviation administrator, expressed his disdain for politicians: "They tell lies even when they don't have to"; G. Vidal, "On Flying," in *United States: Essays 1952–1992* (New York: Random House, 1993), 1072.

I may simply adduce from our own recent experience the Iran-Contra mess⁴⁸ or *l'affaire Lewinsky*,⁴⁹ both of which eventuated in findings or admissions of mendacity in high places. Has human nature changed, or should we expect that ancient rulers and their minions had a greater regard for veracity than our contemporaries? I suggest that in dealing with a cuneiform narrative of purported historical content we ask first of all, Why should this or that statement or implication be true? rather than Why might it be false?⁵⁰

To answer such questions we consider why a particular text might have been written⁵¹ and then attempt to reconstruct the conditions under which it was created, that is, its context. This process entails developing an understanding of the dominant ideology of the culture, a task that we can accomplish by immersing ourselves in the totality of the documentary record, collating explicit statements of ideals and examining documents written in extreme circumstances, under which the usual ideological filters may have been displaced temporarily.⁵²

In a nutshell, the dominant ideologies of the various states of the ancient Near East shared the view that the gods owned and controlled the world, and that human beings were merely their servants.⁵³ The person of the king constituted the node at which the two spheres of beings intersected.⁵⁴ The monarch not only represented the people before the deities, conveying their needs and wishes, but he also oversaw the proper performance of the duties that humans owed to their divine masters. If the king was exercising his rule in a just manner, everything else in the cosmos would function well. Therefore all inscriptions produced under royal aegis focus on the ruler and his virtues, to the neglect of all other individuals—generals, priests, etc. And inevitably the sources depict the king as enjoying success in all endeavors.⁵⁵ It was as if wishing would make it so.

I will now illustrate some of my points by examining three well-known historical compositions from Hatti. I would have liked to begin with administrative documents, for such prosaic records constitute the genre of text most likely to reflect accurately “wie es eigentlich gewesen.” For an administrative system would break down if the data with which its bureaucrats operated diverged too greatly from actual receipts and disbursements, for example. Assyriologists have recovered precious nuggets of useful historical information from laconic notes on the purpose of expenditures occasionally provided in Ur III or Old Babylonian records.⁵⁶ Unfortunately, rather few such practical documents have been recovered from the

48. L. E. Walsh, *Firewall: The Iran-Contra Conspiracy and Cover-up* (New York: Norton, 1997).

49. W. J. Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Vintage, 2005), chapter 48.

50. As a young student at Yale University I was very impressed by a lecture delivered by Oscar White Muscarella in which he insisted that the first question to ask of an artifact without secure provenience is “Why should it be real?” See now his extensive collection of questionable material, *The Lie Became Great: The Forgery of Ancient Near Eastern Cultures* (Groningen: Styx, 2000).

51. See M. I. Finley, *Ancient History: Evidence and Models* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1986), 105.

52. As for instance, in the First Plague Prayer of Hittite king Mušili II in which he admits the complicity of his father Šuppiluliuma I in the assassination of the latter's brother; see my translation of this prayer in *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 1, ed. W. W. Hallo and K. L. Younger (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 156–57 (A obv. 16ff.).

53. See my “The Religion of the Hittites,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 52 (1989): 98–108.

54. See my “Royal Ideology and State Administration in Hittite Anatolia,” in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. Sasson (New York: Scribners, 1995), 529–43.

55. See H. G. Güterbock, “Hittite Historiography,” in *History, Historiography and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literatures*, ed. H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1983), 34.

56. An example chosen at random: *BIN* 9, 438 records gifts disbursed by a workshop at the court of king Išbi-Erra of Old Babylonian Isin: “presents for Libūr-nīrum, the daughter of the king, the day she was married by Išdum-kīn, the son of Ḫuba-simti, the *sukkal*”; translation by M. Van De Mieroop, *Crafts in the Early Isin Period* (Louvain: Departement Orientalistiek, 1987), 109.

Hittite archives,⁵⁷ since in Ḫatti economic data was apparently usually written on wooden tablets,⁵⁸ all trace of which—save for the clay bullae that were once attached to them⁵⁹—have perished.

A curious genre of early Hittite historiography centers on the humiliation of the king's closest associates. A good example of this class of text is provided by an excerpt from the composition known to Hittitologists as “The Siege of Uršu.”⁶⁰ While the Hittite armies were unsuccessfully investing an important town in northern Syria, after several reverses

(the officer) Šanda brought a (negative) report. Thus said the king: “Why have you not given battle? Do you stand [as] on chariots of water, or have you perhaps (yourself) turned to water? Have you taken revenge? If you had fallen on your knees before him (the enemy), you would certainly have killed him, or at least have frightened him! (But) now you have engaged only in hesitation!” and so on.⁶¹

Is it credible that the Hittite monarch was surrounded by nincompoops truly deserving of such aspersions? I believe that we might better view this document through the lens of Hittite royal ideology. Many texts exalt the king through the cataloguing of his achievements and the description of the flourishing of Ḫatti under his scepter. “The Siege of Uršu” achieves this same glorification through negative means—by demonstrating the gross inferiority of even the members of the nobility in comparison to the king.

Perhaps the most important text for the historian of the Hittite Old Kingdom is the so-called “Proclamation of King Telipinu.”⁶² The monarch opens this composition with an exposition of the course of Hittite history up until his own day. Of the first ruler mentioned⁶³ he relates:

[For]merly Labarna was Great King and his [son]s, [brother]s, as well as his in-laws, his (further) family members, and his troops were united. The land was small, but wherever he went on campaign, he held the enemy country subdued by (his) might. He destroyed the (foreign) lands, one after another, stripped(?) the lands of their power and made them the borders of the sea. When he came back from campaign, however, each (of) his sons went to (govern) some country.⁶⁴

Telipinu continues by describing the reigns of the following kings Ḫattušili I and Muršili I in much the same language. Then, he informs us, misfortune befell Ḫatti as several rulers replaced one another in the course of bloody coups. For example, after the murder of his father,

Ammuna became king. The gods sought (revenge for) the blood of his father Zidanta, and they did not allow grain, wine, oxen, or sheep to prosper under his care . . . But wherever (his) troops went on campaign, they did not come back successfully.⁶⁵

57. See J. Siegelová, *Hethitische Verwaltungspraxis im Lichte der Wirtschafts- und Inventardokumente* (Prague: Národní Muzeum, 1986).

58. See M. Marazzi, “Ma gli Hittiti scrivevano veramente su ‘legno,’” in *Miscellanea di studi linguistici in onore di Walter Belardi*, ed. P. Cipriano, P. Di Giovine, and M. Mancini (Rome: Il Calamo, 1994), vol. 1, 131–60.

59. See P. Neve, *Ḫattuša: Stadt der Götter und Tempel* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1992), 53–61.

60. G. Beckman, “The Siege of Uršu Text (CTH 7) and Old Hittite Historiography,” *JCS* 47 (1995): 23–34.

61. Op. cit., 26, rev.¹ 10–13.

62. From the very beginning of Hittite studies this composition has provided the basic framework around which the history of this period has been reconstructed; see H. A. Hoffner, “Histories and Historians of the Ancient Near East: The Hittites,” *Or NS* 49 (1980): 306–8.

63. Labarna I was not in fact the first king of the Hittites. That honor goes to the poorly documented Ḫuzziya (0); see my “Hittite Chronology,” *Akkadica* 119–20 (2000): 27.

64. Translation by Th. P. J. van den Hout, in Hallo and Younger, eds., *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 1, 194 (§§1–3), with modifications.

65. Translation by Th. P. J. van den Hout, *ibid.*, 194–95 (§§20–21), with modifications.

But now that he has ascended the throne as the consequence of yet another coup, Telipinu proposes to eliminate strife and reunite the Hittite ruling class through the enforcement of a strict rule of succession:

Let only a prince of the first rank, a son, become king! If there is no first-rank prince, then whoever is a son of the second rank—let this one become king! If there is no prince, no (male) heir, then whoever is a first-rank daughter—let them take a husband for her, and let him become king!

Whoever should in the future become king after me, let his brothers, his sons, his in-laws, his (further) family members, and his troops be united! You will come (and) hold the country subdued with (your) might.⁶⁶

Thanks to information drawn from other documents, today we may recognize the tententious character of the “Proclamation.”⁶⁷ The kings to whom Telipinu attributes idyllic reigns in fact faced significant challenges,⁶⁸ and not all of those rulers whom he condemns were utter failures.⁶⁹ Above all, it is surely significant that Telipinu was himself the son-in-law of his penultimate predecessor, Ammuna, and brother-in-law of the ruler whom he deposed, Ḫuzziya I.

That is, the law of succession promulgated by Telipinu, which in fact represents but a slight modification to customary practice and was abrogated immediately after his death,⁷⁰ was tailored specifically to justify his own seizure of power. Furthermore, in his narrative the king has exaggerated the contrast among the fortunes of his predecessors in order to encourage the Hittite nobility to unite behind his leadership for the common good.

The final text I will consider is the “Apology of Ḫattušili III.” This thirteenth-century monarch relates that some years previously,

[when] my [bro]ther became a [go]ld (i.e., died)—because I governed (the capital city) [Ḫatt]uša and because he had [installed] me in a position of authority—I di[d] not [do] anything (evil) out of regard for the love of [m]y br[other. T]herefore, sin[ce] my brother did not have a [l]egitimate son, I took up Urḫi-Teššup, son of a concubine. [I installed] him in rule over [Ḫa]tti and placed all of [Ḫattuša] in his hand, so that he was Great King over the lands of Ḫatti.⁷¹

According to Ḫattušili’s account, his ungrateful nephew proceeded gradually to strip him of all of his offices and dignities until he was left with but a single town to govern. After “seven years” of this shabby treatment, Ḫattušili was finally driven to revolt. His uprising being supported not only by much of the aristocracy, but also by his patron goddess, he easily succeeded in seating himself upon the throne of Ḫatti in place of Urḫi-Teššup.

Although scholars had long doubted the veracity of this account,⁷² we now have definite proof that Ḫattušili indeed misrepresented the facts of his relationship to his nephew. In the

66. Translation by Th. P. J. van den Hout, *ibid.*, 196–97 (§§28–29), with modifications drawn from my translation in “Inheritance and Royal Succession among the Hittites,” in *Kaniššuwār: A Tribute to Hans G. Güterbock on His Seventy-Fifth Birthday, May 27, 1983*, ed. H. A. Hoffner and G. Beckman (Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1986), 13.

67. See M. Liverani, “Telipinu, or: On Solidarity,” in *Myth and Politics in Ancient Near Eastern Historiography* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2004), 27–52.

68. For revolts against the rule of Ḫattušili I, some led by members of his own family, see T. Bryce, *The Kingdom of the Hittites* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 79–82 and 89–91.

69. For instance, the fragmentary “Ammuna Chronicle” demonstrates that this king campaigned successfully in northernmost Syria; see S. de Martino, “La cosiddetta ‘cronaca di Ammuna,’” in *Studi e testi*, vol. 2, ed. S. de Martino and F. Imparati (Florence: LoGisma, 1999), 69–82.

70. G. Beckman, “Inheritance and Royal Succession,” 22.

71. Translation by Th. P. J. van den Hout, in *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 1, 202 (§10b), with modifications.

72. See A. Archi, “The Propaganda of Hattusilis III,” *SMEA* 14 (1971): 181–215.

ruins of the Hittite capital were recently excavated several clay bullae bearing impressions of stamp seals of Urḫi-Teššup on which he is accorded the title of *tuhkanti*, or “Crown Prince.”⁷³ Thus Ḫattušili’s nephew and rival had in fact been designated as heir to the throne during the reign of his father, and did not owe his elevation to his uncle. One might also suspect that Urḫi-Teššup’s mother was actually a high-ranking wife and not a lowly concubine.

The lesson to be drawn from this superficial exegesis of three texts is obviously, Don’t believe everything you read on the tablets. But please note that each of the elements we can now recognize as misrepresentation in itself tells us something significant about Hittite society or its ideals. In “The Siege of Uršu” calumny underlines the unique role of the king in the universe. Telipinu’s self-interested characterization of past eras as golden or otherwise illustrates a Hittite’s view of an optimal political situation, internally as well as internationally. Finally, Ḫattušili invokes Hittite conceptions of both fraternal piety and political legitimacy through his claims of high regard for his brother’s memory and his disparagement of his rival’s birth.

Thus while I concur with Bill Hallo that the historian must take the ancient source seriously, I feel that skepticism as well as trust must always be deployed in their interpretation. I hope that I do not thereby lay myself open to Marc Bloch’s charge of simplemindedness!

73. See J. D. Hawkins, “Urḫi-Tešub, *tuhkanti*,” in *Akten des IV. Internationalen Kongresses für Hethitologie Würzburg, 4.–8. Oktober 1999*, ed. G. Wilhelm (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2001): 167–79.