

## Ideologies and Encounters of Ideas at the Crossroads of the Ancient World

Andrew SCHUMANN<sup>1</sup>, Zozan TARHAN<sup>2</sup>, Vladimir SAZONOV<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract.** *In the article introducing this special issue, we consider the prospects of cultural diffusionism. We show that diffusion is not a uniform phenomenon since it includes direct, partial, multi-layered, and reverse forms. The complex approach to diverse forms of diffusions is called by us the crossroads concept. It aligns with cultural relativism which examines cultural traits through diffusion and modification. In world-systems analysis, cultural diffusion is analyzed within the world-economy framework, rooted in the classical Marxism view of economic systems as foundational with culture as a superstructure. Neo-Marxism and dependency theory highlight a division between developed and developing countries, positing that cultural influences often flow from the center to the periphery. However, this view oversimplifies cultural diffusion's complexities, as we demonstrate. Moreover, cultural diffusion often precedes trade route establishment, with religious diffusion frequently facilitating subsequent trade communications. This special issue, edited by us, explores cultural diffusion and its varied forms, challenging the notion that it fits neatly into a center-to-periphery movement.*

**Rezumat.** *În articolul care introduce acest număr special, analizăm perspectivele difuzionismului cultural. Vom demonstra că difuzarea nu este un fenomen uniform, deoarece include forme directe, parțiale, multistratificate și inverse. Abordarea complexă a diverselor forme de difuzie este numită de noi conceptul de răscruce. Acesta se aliniază relativismului cultural care examinează trăsăturile culturale prin difuzie și modificare. În analiza sistemelor mondiale, difuzarea culturală este analizată în cadrul economiei mondiale, înrădăcinată în viziunea marxistă clasică a sistemelor economice ca fundament, cultura fiind o suprastructură. Neo-marxismul și teoria dependenței evidențiază o diviziune între țările dezvoltate și cele în curs de dezvoltare, afirmând că influențele culturale trec adesea de la centru la periferie. Cu toate acestea, acest punct de vedere simplifică prea mult complexitatea difuziunii culturale, după cum am demonstrat. În plus, răspândirea culturală precede adesea stabilirea rutelor comerciale, răspândirea religioasă facilitând frecvent comunicările comerciale ulterioare. Acest număr special, editat de noi,*

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<sup>1</sup> PhD, Professor, Head of the Department Cognitive Science and Mathematical Modelling, University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszow, [andrew.schumann@gmail.com](mailto:andrew.schumann@gmail.com); ORCID: 0000-0002-9944-8627

<sup>2</sup> PhD, Recognized Researcher (R2), Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Faculty of History; [Zozan.Tarhan@uni-sofia.bg](mailto:Zozan.Tarhan@uni-sofia.bg); ORCID: 0000-0002-7772-4977

<sup>3</sup> PhD, Associate Professor in Ancient Near Eastern Studies, University of Tartu, Research-Professor at Estonian Military Academy and Visiting Professor at The Institute of Theology of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, [vladimir.sazonov@ut.ee](mailto:vladimir.sazonov@ut.ee); ORCID: 0000-0001-9738-1329

*explorează răspândirea culturală și formele sale variate, contestând ideea că aceasta se încadrează perfect într-o mișcare de la centru la periferie.*

**Keywords:** ideologies, encounters, civilizational approach, historical particularism, diffusion, world-systems analysis, world-economy, cultural relativism, crossroads.

According to the civilizational approach of some philosophers such as Oswald Arnold Gottfried Spengler,<sup>4</sup> humanity has experienced the emergence of a number of independent civilizations which then developed in parallel. However, according to world-systems analysis,<sup>5</sup> facts have been discovered that indicate the existence of stable economic systems that unite different peoples with very different cultures. Within this world-economy, which dates back to the Mesolithic and Neolithic periods, and eventually when irrigation, urbanization, domestication and other civilizational processes began in the Ancient Near East, deep cultural, political, economic connections and interactions were established in the Ancient World. After the invention of bronze, the spread of civilizational processes accelerated and, as a result, developed cultures of the 4<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE arose in the Levant, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Elam (in Susiana), as well as in Central Asia, in particular in the Indus Valley, and then later in China.

As early as in the Late Bronze Age there was “globalization” and active international trade throughout the Mediterranean and much wider. It was then that active ideological, cultural and religious mutual influences and interrelationships formed, so that even conservative cultures such as Egypt began to be more actively influenced from the outside. The advent of international diplomacy (such as the Amarna correspondence) and increasing trade, as well as human migration, led to establishing intercultural crossroads. This occurred especially during the Bronze Age collapse and when the “Sea People” and other groups began to migrate to the Ancient Near East, as well as other regions of the Eastern Mediterranean. This also led to economic, ideological and political nodes forming in some areas of the ancient Near East, especially in Mesopotamia, the Levant, the Caucasus and the Aegean world, as well as in the territory of the Iranian Plateau, very long ago.

In the third to first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE a high culture appeared in Mesopotamia. Its lands, kingdoms and even empires were well organized, but the main political players—that is, the kings—had to find a way to continue to develop and at the same time maintain stability.

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<sup>4</sup> SPENGLER 1972.

<sup>5</sup> CHASE-DUNN AND GRIMES 1995.

Kings, especially the Assyrians, found a way to justify their wars by talking about the will of the gods.<sup>6</sup> That is why, in order to understand how a particular land with a highly advanced culture developed over time, it is necessary to deeply study its traditions, the characteristics of its culture and especially its political ideology. Some forms of culture already existed in the periphery, but they began to be remade by borrowing or introducing some ideas and motifs typical of the developed center. However, eventually these cultures on the periphery also achieved a high culture, a well-organized society and state apparatus, and in some way also contributed to the Ancient World. So, in order to trace the emergence and development of such cultures, we should proceed from those cases and circumstances that set this chain of events in motion. This often happened at borders or crossroads.

“Crossroads” touches on many themes such as cultural contacts, frontier encounters, diffusion, transfer of knowledge, etc. There must be ways to bring these themes together, i.e., the ideologies and how cultures from the periphery develop through contacts. This special issue aims to analyze the various cultures of the Ancient World in the context of contacts and connections while simultaneously taking into account two trends: centripetal and centrifugal. Our approach based on “crossroads” critically evaluates the possibilities of historical particularism according to which cultures develop independently and autonomously. The main problem of particularism is that it leads to a narrow focus on the unique cultural practices of a single society, potentially overlooking broader cultural patterns and connections between societies. As a consequence, it leads to an incomplete and biased understanding of historical phenomena, overlooking a society's historical context and cultural practices while ignoring the dynamic and evolving nature of cultures. On the other hand, the concept of crossroads moves away from classical diffusionism, which focuses on cultural evolution and universal patterns, by suggesting that cultural practices and inventions originate from a single source and spread to other societies through contact, emphasizing understanding of the spread of cultural elements across societies. Versions of diffusionist thought include the beliefs that all cultures originated from a single cultural center (heliocentric diffusion); the more plausible view that cultures originated from a limited number of cultural centers (cultural circles); and the idea that each society is influenced by others, with the diffusion process being random and contingent.<sup>7</sup> Our concept of the crossroads describes diffusion as a process by which individual cultural traits are transferred from one society to another through migration, trade, war, or

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<sup>6</sup> SAZONOV 2016.

<sup>7</sup> WINTHROP 1991, 83–84.

other forms of contact, but holds that this process is not linear and does not only have a direct relationship.

In this special issue we have collected seven research articles that examine different forms of diffusion, from the classical form, where the center influences the periphery, to complex forms, where multilayer diffusion or reverse diffusion is possible.

In the article “Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts Outside of Ugarit: Evidence for an Overland Trade Network in the LBA Levant?” Joanna Töyräänvuori traces the cuneiform alphabetic script used in the Late Bronze Age (1550–1150 BCE) which is primarily associated with ancient Ugarit, a key maritime hub in the international trade network of that era. Most textual finds have occurred at Ras Šamra and Ras Ibn Hani. While the origins of the script are unclear, it is generally believed to have been invented by local scribes, given the abundance of findings within Ugarit and their scarcity outside it. Thus, this writing system emerged as a local invention, combining elements of both alphabetic and cuneiform writing. Despite its strong association with Ugarit, the cuneiform alphabetic script has also been found outside the kingdom, with ten inscriptions having been discovered across the Eastern Mediterranean. These finds highlight Ugarit’s significant role in the Late Bronze Age trade network and may offer insights into its overland trade connections which remain largely unexplored. However, the cuneiform alphabetic script did not receive further development and, despite accompanying trade contacts, did not lead to diffusion.

In world-systems analysis, the classic case is cultural diffusion from the center of the world-economy to its periphery or semi-periphery. One example of this would be the diffusion from Neo-Assyria to Urartu. So, under King Išpuini (ca. 830–820 BCE), the cuneiform writing system was adapted for the Urartian language, and bilingual inscriptions in Urartian and Akkadian emerged. In the paper “The Assyrian Impact on Urartu: Toponyms and Ideological Motifs” Zozan Tarhan analyzes how the Urartians borrowed Neo-Assyrian cuneiform along with various aspects of Assyrian culture, such as royal titles, epithets, and ideological motifs. The article examines how these Assyrian elements were incorporated in Urartian royal inscriptions. It also discusses the toponyms Nai’ri, Urartu, and Bia, exploring their connections and development over time.

Diffusion can also come from conquered peoples in relation to the conquerors. Thus, the religious doctrines of the Babylonians and Assyrians had a certain influence on the religious doctrine of the Iranians. In the contribution “Mithra and the Sun vs. Mithra as the Sun. How did Mithra Become the Sun God?” Jaan Lahe and Vladimir Sazonov delve into the historical and

religious development of the relationship between the Iranian god Mithra and the Mesopotamian Sun god Šamaš. Their goal was to trace the evolution of these two initially distinct deities and to elucidate the process by which they were associated by the Iranians. By analyzing historical texts and religious practices, the authors show how Mesopotamian concepts of solar divinity and justice were integrated into the Iranian understanding of Mithra. This integration resulted in a redefinition of Mithra's identity, aligning him more closely with solar characteristics and attributes. This sheds light on the dynamic nature of the religious syncretism of the Iranians and the ways in which cultural and religious interactions can lead to the transformation of divine figures such as Mithra over time. This serves as a prime example of religious diffusion, where Mesopotamian religious practices influenced the development of the Mithra cult in Iranian religion. However, this diffusion was only partial, resulting in a syncretic form of the god Mithra.

But the religious movement itself can be formed as a result of numerous diffusions coming from very different cultures. Andrew Schumann's article "On Pre-Śaiva Deities: From the Indus Valley Civilization to Buddhist Syncretism" explores several layers of pre-Śaivism in India. The earliest layer dates back to the ancient Mother Goddess cults of the Neolithic period, particularly in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (c. 10,000–8800 BCE).<sup>8</sup> These cults thrived in the Indus Valley Civilization (in its mature form from 2600–1900/1800 BCE) and other select Bronze Age societies. The second layer focuses on the cult of Inanna (also known as Nanaia), the goddess of fertility, who was significant in the Mittani state (c. 1550–1260 BCE) alongside prominent Indo-Iranian deities such as Indra, the Mitra gods, the Varuna gods, and the Nasatya gods. The third layer reveals a syncretic cult among the Iranians in India which combined the Mazdean tradition of Οηβο (Wēšparkar) and Βορζαοανδο Ιαζαδο (*burz'wndy yzdy*) with the Buddhist deity of Maheśvara, as well as Νανα (Nana) along with Αρδοχβο (Ardoxšo) with the Buddhist goddess of Hārītī (or Umā). Additionally, Buddhism integrated syncretic fertility cults involving various demonesses such as Hārītī, Umā, Mārīcī, and others, incorporating iconographic elements from Hellenistic goddesses like Athena, Tyche, Cybele, Hecate, Baubo, and Demeter. As we can see, pre-Śaivism was formed as a result of multi-layered and multi-cultural religious diffusions.

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<sup>8</sup> The Pre-Pottery Neolithic is divided into two periods: the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A, to which the early phases of Göbekli Tepe belong, is dated to between 9600–8800 BCE; the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B, to which the late phases of Göbekli Tepe belong, is dated to between 8800–7000 BCE.

However, religious diffusion can influence social practices without necessarily altering the core religious doctrines. One prime example is the art of Babylonian divination which was widely adopted and integrated by neighboring cultures. While Homer does not provide definitive evidence of direct contact between Assyria and the Ionians, there is a clear sequence of cultural interactions: Assyrian-Hittite contacts, Hittite-Lyidian contacts, and later Persian-Lyidian and Lyidian-Greek (Lyidian-Ionian) relations. This sequence suggests that Mesopotamian influence gradually permeated the Greek world over centuries, with regional variations. This process is thoroughly examined in Krzysztof Ulanowski's article "Transferring Divinatory Practices: An Anatolian Intermediary between Assyria and Greece". In particular, it shows that the Hittites appear to have borrowed divinatory methods from the Babylonians through the Hurrians (and/or Luwians), as evidenced by the Hurrian names for various parts and features of the exta. The Hattusa archive contains 25 cuneiform texts related to Ahhiyawa, seven of which are oracles. Arzawa, within the Hittite empire, was renowned as a center for divination, particularly for preventing plagues. In the *Iliad*, Apollo from Troy is depicted as a god associated with such divination, suggesting that his sanctuary specialized in this practice.

Diffusions can also be observed in the spread of military technologies. Kiril Temelkov compares the military practices of the Neo-Assyrian with Greek infantries in his article "Peculiarities and Utilitarianism in the Fighting Tendencies of the Assyrian infantry during the 9<sup>th</sup> Century BCE in an Eastern Mediterranean Context". Thus, he analyzes the fighting styles, tendencies, and military tactics of the Neo-Assyrian Empire's infantry and their Greek counterparts during the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE. As a result, the following aspects of infantry are compared in detail: infantry armaments used by both armies, methodological parallels and differences in military behavior, defensive equipment and its hierarchical significance, infantry subdivisions and their utility.

In cultural diffusion, the perception and interpretation of a foreign cultural object can significantly change its modality, so that this object becomes a new cultural phenomenon. For instance, several Greek and Roman authors mention that Alexander III and his troops saw a monument near Anchiale in Cilicia with an inscription of the mythical king Sardanapalus. Scholars, using Greek accounts and the Aramaic rendering *srbnbl* (closely matching Σαρδανάπαλος), suggest that the figure might be based on Ashurbanipal (Aššur-bāni-apli). However, while some aspects of Sardanapalus may be inspired by Ashurbanipal, neither the moralistic views of Classical authors nor the historical context align with known Assyrian records. For some reasons, in the Greek world, Sardanapalus became known for his hedonistic

character.<sup>9</sup> As is often the case with legendary kings, an initial historical basis evolves into a distinct fictional identity. All of this is explored in the article “Revaluating the Sardanapalus Monument in Cilicia. Greek Travelogues and Ancient Near Eastern Hedonism” by Julian Degen and Sebastian Fink. This article highlights Greek perceptions of the East and the influence of Assyria’s intellectual heritage on its neighbors.

Hence, the seven research articles contributing to this special issue demonstrate that diffusion cannot be described as a single phenomenon. It can be direct, partial, multi-layered, reverse, etc. As we see, the crossroads concept developed by us is close to the cultural relativism proposed by Franz Boas<sup>10</sup> who sought to understand cultural traits through two historical processes: diffusion and modification. He employed these fundamental concepts to elucidate culture and its significance, asserting that the cultural repertoire of a society largely accumulates through diffusion.

In world-systems analysis, cultural diffusions are viewed as occurring within the framework of the world-economy.<sup>11</sup> This approach draws from classical Marxism which posits that class contradictions are inevitable in society and that the economic system forms its basis, with culture seen as a superstructure. Additionally, it incorporates neo-Marxism and dependency theory which suggest a division between developed and developing countries, with cultural influences typically flowing from the center to the periphery. However, we have shown that this perspective oversimplifies the complexities of cultural diffusion. Furthermore, cultural diffusions may precede the establishment of trade routes, and it is often religious diffusions that later enable trade communications to be established.

To sum up, this special issue is devoted to the problem of cultural diffusion and its diverse forms, which are difficult to fit into a single scheme such as movement from the center to the periphery.

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<sup>9</sup> FINK 2014.

<sup>10</sup> BOAS 1938.

<sup>11</sup> WALLERSTEIN 1974.

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