MARK WEEDEN

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00:00

Sofia Bongiovanni:

Welcome everybody to the second season of the podcast series, ancient world new voices. Each episode will discuss the exciting collaborative research projects that the Department of Greek and Latin at UCL is engaged in at the moment. Today's special guest is Mark Weeden. Hi, Mark Welcome.

Mark Weeden:

 Hello.

Sofia Bongiovanni

 Before joining UCL, Greek and Latin, Mark worked at SOAS University of London for 10 years. Before that, he was a British Academy research Fellow, worked briefly as a lecturer at Oxford, and did his PhD and MA a SOAS again, he originally did a degree in Greek and Latin at Oxford, is currently the chair of the London center for the ancient Near East. He also serves on the editorial board of a number of journals and monographs series. Go ahead, it's new journal, Iraq. And he is editor in chief of the real series and book of Oriental Studies Ancient Near East. Mark works mainly on the history and literature of the cuneiform world. So, welcome Mark to the podcast. We are happy for you to join us, especially as a new member of the department. And so, what I wanted to ask you first is what are you currently working on?

01:25

Mark Weeden:

Thanks very much for having me. It's really nice. This is an amazing project.

So yeah, what am I working on? Oh, always working on so many things at once. That's always the big problem. But I've my main two things I'm working on at the moment. I suppose, from different parts of the cuneiform world, and cuneiform world spreads from Turkey down to Iran, I suppose. And I'm working on these hieroglyphic inscriptions that have been discovered recently in Turkey, which are found in relationship with a mountain that some Turkish colleagues of mine have been surveying, that seems to be very interesting. And this mountain stands in relationship to a border.

 That was very important during the Hittite period. That's in the second millennium BC. And the Hittites had an empire say, and towards the end of the Hittite Empire, they established a secondary kingdom, let's call it like that, called Turan Hattusa. And this is associated with the sort of fall of the Hittite Empire. So its quite historically important. And these hieroglyphic inscriptions are on that border between the Hittite central area, and this kingdom of Turan Hattusa, which belongs to the Empire, but it's also quite independent from it. So that's one thing I'm working on.

And then at the other end, down in Iraq, that's sort of halfway between southern and northern Iraq. towards the east, I'm working on a group with Iraqi colleagues, I'm working on a group of clay tablets with cuneiform writing on that are from the 24th century BC, so 1200 years earlier than the other things I'm writing on and in I'm working on end, in a different script as well. So this is cuneiform. And these are clay tablets that deal with agricultural matters. So So sizes of fields and stuff like that, and allocations of fields and possibly also allotments of fields to people in different areas and stuff and produce and whatever, and allocations of grain and things. So really nitty gritty, day to day, details of everyday life sort of thing. So those are the two, two projects I'm mostly concerned with at the moment.

03:53

Sofia Bongiovanni:

Well, thank you. That sounds very fascinating. And from what you said, you're working closely with archaeologists, what role does materiality by which your work?

04:05

Mark Weeden:

Yeah, I mean, this is, this is a really important thing for me, I'm glad you asked about it. Because these cuneiform tablets, these texts that I work on, they are three dimensional objects that, you know, come directly from the ancient world. So that's something you don't often get if you're studying texts in, say, Greek and Latin and that kind of stuff. Usually, you're dealing with manuscripts that have been copied and copied over 1000s of years, or whatever. But these are actual documents that were actually used in the ancient world. And it's really important to consider their archaeological context, which unfortunately, is very frequently not known, because there's an awful lot of looting. And a lot of the early excavations were also very careless and didn't note where they found things or museums, just bought things from the bazaar or whatever. From collectors, and when you have an archaeological context for these objects, it's really, really important to research it and to use it as much as you can. Even the shape of the tablets. And the way they've been made is really important too, because that tells you about how they were used. different genres of tablets have different shapes, whether they were kept in a kind of library environment, or whether they were kept for immediate use, or just for record keeping and stuff like that, and might have been destroyed after a short time, you can tell all of this from the way the cap tablet has been made. Also, the writing on the tablets, everyone writes in their own way. And we're trying to develop methods of identifying scribal hands, but that's quite difficult for cuneiform, because you're not using a pen, you're using a stylus and imprinting impressions into the clay, it's quite difficult to do paleography. But that's another one of the really important things that we try to, we're trying to work on that where materiality also plays a very important role. You can usually date texts, if we don't have a context for them, you can date texts from their handwriting and stuff like that, from the way they're using the stylus, you can tell all sorts of sorts of things about the writing process from the kind of status they're using, whether it's made a read, or whether it's made of metal, this is all stuff that's going to tell you about the kind of lives that the people are leading who are doing the writing. And again, that's just something that you just don't have access to, from other disciplines, really, what I mean, or even you can go as far as a lot of people do scientific analysis of the clay that these things are made of, you know, and sometimes some tablets have bits of seashells in them, you know. But yeah, you can find out absolutely all sorts about the material world in which people live by looking beyond the text into the actual material objects on which it's written.

07:05

Sofia Bongiovanni:

Wow, thank you that that is very insightful, especially coming from such a different perspective. Especially myself, for example, I'm very literary based. So this is very interesting. And following from that can you tell me more about the civilizations that wrote these tablets?

07:27

Mark Weeden:

Absolutely. Right. So the cuneiform world spreads from well, let's say, southwestern Iran, southern Iraq, right the way up to Turkey, although they used cuneiform at different periods, and in different ways over this area. So you can't say that everyone's using it in the same way.

And cuneiform was invented, say around 3200 BC, something like that. Maybe a bit earlier. And we think it was probably invented to write Sumerian and Sumerian is this this language that is certainly later, mainly associated with Southern Iraq, places like or Uruk these kinds of places that people have heard of perhaps. So, you've got this this culture that we refer to as the Sumerians, or whatever who live in Southern Iraq. And they're using cuneiform early on. And after, let's say around 2500 BC, you start getting writing in a Accadian, which is a Semitic language, using the cuneiform that had been adapted to write Sumerian. And they use this cuneiform. First of all, it's like, it's a bit like early Chinese and Japanese. I don't know if you know about that. But, you know, if you look at early Japanese texts, they kind of write with Chinese words, but it's in Japanese word order and stuff like that. And so Acadian speakers were using Sumerian cuneiform in a similar way. And Akkadian speakers we generally think we generally associate with Northern Iraq. And you have the Akkadian Empire, which is around 24th century BC Sargon of Akkad. It's referred to as the first world empire, for example. And that goes on, and Acadian speakers carry on using cuneiform for another couple 1000 years. And you get Cardenas divided into Assyrians and Babylonians, for example. And in the second millennium BC, particularly you start getting cuneiform being used also in Anatolia. It had also in the third millennium BC, been used in Syria as well. So there's a place called Abla in Syria, which is really important, and where they were also using cuneiform, but speaking a Semitic language basically. So yeah, up in animation Turkey, you've got the Hittites, who were using it for their imperial purposes, not for display inscriptions, but for sort of mainly religious texts they had. And then it gets used in Iran as well. So, this accordion gets used as a lingua franca for the whole of the area really. And cuneiform script gets adapted to right lots and lots of different languages throughout the area, basically dies out around 100 AD, I suppose is, I think one around when one of the last cuneiform documents is dated.

10:36

Sofia Bongiovanni:

Wow, that is not only a vast area, but also a vast period of time. Yeah. And for one script to be used, though, describing different languages mazing. Following especially, well, you mentioned you are looking at descriptions that are found the border of Turkey, and are those tablets, all for the same purpose? Or do they range in on different topics or different uses?

11:10

Mark Weeden:

Okay, well, they're not cuneiform inscriptions that the ones I was looking at on the border. They're actually in a local hieroglyphics script, which is referred to as Anatolian hieroglyphs nowadays, sometimes called hieroglyphic luwian, because the language that was written in using these hieroglyphs is actually Louie and not Hittite. But it's a solution related to Hittite like Spanish is to Italian or something like that, you know, it's very, very close. But for some reason, they only wrote these big display inscriptions and in luwian, and they're written in these hieroglyphs. Now the cuneiform that you have among the Hittites is very, very different to that which is used in the Mesopotamia, in ancient Iraq and ancient Syria, where the majority of inscriptions are of economic nature. So everyday life I'd say the majority, yes, administrative and economic. But we've got very, very few of those cuneiform inscriptions among the Hittites, we've got about 30,000 Hittite tablets, but they're mostly religious, and mostly concerning festivals, that kind of stuff. There are annalistic texts. So, you get, there is quite a bit of historical writing letters, that kind of stuff. But it's all restricted to the area of interest of what concerns the extended royal family of the king. It's a much more elite practice in Anatolia, the cuneiform writing so. So yes, it is quite different in Anatolia to what it is in the rest of the cuneiform world, I'd say that.

12:50

Sofia Bongiovanni:

Thank you. And while this may seem like a strange question, but because obviously we're talking about two different places, between the, the hieroglyphics and on the border, and the stuff that you found in Iraq, and such different periods of time, but sometimes it gets in common knowledge, these places get squished together. Can you point out some big differences between them?

13:24

Mark Weeden:

Yeah, well, they're the main the main difference between Turkey and southern Iraq, I would say is that central Turkey is you're on the Anatolian plateau. It's well over 1000 meters above sea level. It is extremely mountainous. And it is divided up into all sorts of plateaus and, and planes, which foster a multiplicity, basically a multiplicity of different communities over history. And the Hittites were the first people who established territorial integrity. A territorial state, if you like, in Anatolia, it's very different difficult to do that there. Whereas Iraq is an alluvial plain, it's extremely flat, southern Iraq is extremely flat. And the methods of farming, irrigation and that kind of stuff are extremely different. So possibly, that is what leads to a different kind of use of cuneiform in the two different places. It's all very much environmentally conditioned. I do not like to use the word environmental conditioning because you know, we don't like to say that history is sort of determined by the environment and stuff but that's the most obvious distinction I would say between these places is the one is very, very mountainous and the other is very, very flat and entirely dependent on this this these two main rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris that run through them, and the irrigation that is built out of them. So they are really into building canals down in southern Iraq, whereas you don't get so much of that kind of activity up in Anatolia. And it's very clear that these environments have contributed to completely different political forms emerging.

15:22

Sofia Bongiovanni:

Thank you. That is very clear. And also interesting on how one can look at language in different ways. Following from the base, you mentioned, the Tigris and the Euphrates, and you mentioned or an ORAC before, and that at least makes me immediately think of the Epic of Gilgamesh. And have you studied or do you study the tablets on the Epic of Gilgamesh?

15:52

Mark Weeden:

Yes, absolutely. That's what everyone who learns Akkadian has to study. And quite rightly so it's absolutely fantastic as a work of literature. And yes, I've worked on it a little bit recently, I've been trying to make some correlation between the words that are used in The Epic of Gilgamesh, and words that occur in school texts that we have from Babylonia. In Babylonia is one of the most amazing things about the cuneiform collections is we have all this evidence thousands of tablets of evidence for how people learned how to write, so we can reconstruct the whole curriculum that you went through in order to learn how to write quite easily. Now, it's not the same everywhere. But so what I've been trying to do is to put the knowledge we have this curriculum of learning to write and stuff like that, into some kind of comparison with particularly the Epic of Gilgamesh, but also other literary works in order to approach the question of, to what extent these literary works are the product of a written environment as much as an oral environment. Everyone sort of assumes that their oral poems like, you know, we think about Homer and stuff like that, but we only have them in writing. And I'm interested in looking into how the written education or the education of learning how to write has contributed to if it has the text of the poems as we have them.

17:29

Sofia Bongiovanni:

Well that is very helpful. Understanding how learning works throughout the ages as well. We are used to our own way of learning that is very interesting. Thank you. And following from that, as visiting the British Museum or museum, I've seen that there are a lot of tablets from the, of the Epic of Gilgamesh around. Was this because they were really studied does cool, and it would copy it and then they got transmitted.

18:01

Mark Weeden:

Yeah, I mean, that's a subject for study in itself, I think is where all these tablets of the Epic of Gilgamesh came from. Most of them come from the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal’s library, or at least the sort of foundational texts that allowed us to put the epic together were excavated in the late 19th century in Nineveh, which is where he had his capital. And we know that they come from his library because he stamps them with little stamps on them saying this belongs to actual Ashurbanipal’s library. And so yeah, their library tablets rather than anything else, whether that means that anyone else would ever have seen them, apart from them is another question. It's not like a public library or something like that. But so those are really nice library copies, and they are nicely written and usually on several columns, and there's handwriting's very nice and stuff like that. But then you do also get school tablets where they've been used where people are clearly writing down a bit of the Epic of Gilgamesh that they know from memory, in order to demonstrate the fact that they've learned how to write and we get them from around 1800 BC onwards. So, it can be just a couple of lines, or it can be a whole tablet of, you know, a whole a whole section of the Epic of Gilgamesh that they've written out. At least that's what we think, is happening with a lot of these, I think in the early period as well. There are probably some sort of fine copies to but it's difficult to separate them from the school context, you know, even if there are fine copies and they're probably the ones that you know, you've produced as your sort of graduation final graduation exam kind of thing to show that you really know how to write cuneiform. And maybe you take it home and keep it in a pride of place and your and your mental peace or something like that.

19:53

Sofia Bongiovanni:

That it's funny actually makes me think of in high school learning ancient Greek I have been writing the opening of the Iliad and it's framed. Yes, learning how to write Greek. Thank you for that. I wanted to ask you for our audience, if you could sum up the Epic of Gilgamesh for me just to give them information on what it is about.

20:20

Sofia Bongiovanni:

Sure. Absolutely. Yeah. Okay. Well, I mean, if you haven't read it, you have to basically and you have to read it in the translation by Professor Andrew George. But anyway, okay, so the Epic of Gilgamesh is about a king called Gilgamesh, who rules over Iraq. And he is not a very nice King and the people of Iraq complain that he is oppressing them all the time. And he does things like taking the bright He's the first person to sleep with the bride when she gets married, and the people over at complain. And then the gods decided to make him a friend, a companion, who will sort of distract his attention. And so they make this this wild man called Enkidu, who is born in the desert waists as it were outside of civilization. And Gilgamesh hears about him and sends a well, a prostitute is one translation, but send that so it's usually translated harlot, how it's, I think, how Andrew George translates it to tame Enkidu in the wild, which he does, by having sex with him, and then he returns to civilization. Or he goes to civilization with her to work. And he hears about all this awful stuff that Gilgamesh is doing and he decides he's going to stop it. So he goes and wrestles with him. And Gilgamesh wins and then they become the best of friends you know, it's all very sort of male camaraderie and that kind of stuff. And then they decided to go off on a mission and they killed this beast called who are who guards the entrance to the cedar forest. And then, once they come back from the mission, and they've killed the monster, the goddess Ishtar asks if you can sleep with Gilgamesh, and he says no. And insults are terribly, and Ishtar asks if you can use the Bull of Heaven, the constellation tourists to kill Gilgamesh and she tries to and Gilgamesh and Enkidu end up killing the Bull of Heaven. And then the gods say, Oh, this is too much. Now this is really too much. We've got to kill one of these people. So they killed in Kido. And after that Gilgamesh sits with his body for a long time and sees a maggot crawling out of his nose, and he's absolutely terrified of the fact that he's going to die. So he then goes on a quest for eternal life, which he loses because you can't live forever. And his quest for eternal life takes him to the island where the only survivor of the flood lives, who tells us the story of the flood. eaten a PhD he's called and tells him the story of the flood and he says, Look, I'm the only person who was given this eternal life by the gods. And it's not going to be given to anyone else. And Gilgamesh. You think you can live forever, but you can't even stay awake? Can you and Gilgamesh then falls asleep and wakes up a week later, because after he had all his travails and journeys, and he says, I haven't been asleep. No, I haven't been asleep at all. But then they say to him, no, look, you have been, here's all the bread that was laid out for your breakfast every day and you haven't eaten it. And the first ones got moldy already. And Gilgamesh is very unhappy and goes home back to work, having failed entirely but as a constellation president, he gets given a plant with that will rejuvenate him. So the plants have eternal youth, but then he loses that as well. And eventually he gets back to work. And he just goes up onto the city walls with his companion and looks out at the city and just says it's actually quite a nice city. And the conclusion is possibly under one interpretation that you don't need to be a wonderful, heroic King and live forever and that kind of stuff. You just need to be able to live with other human beings.

24:17

Sofia Bongiovanni:

Amazing. That is a great summary. Thank you for that. And I just have one last question for you. And that is the I think the dreaded question. Why should one study the history and literature of the cuneiform world?

24:36

Mark Weeden:

Yeah, why should one? Absolutely. Well, it depends on what angle you're looking at it from. If you're looking at it from the study of the ancient world, which is frequently reduced to classics, Greek and Roman, then I think the Middle East, which is much older, provides a context for Greek and Roman antiquity in the first place. And also, It's just such a wildly different way of looking at the world that you get from reading these texts. So, whether you are into the ancient world at all, or not reading these texts opens up an entirely different way of viewing the world to you. I suppose you could say that for all classical texts, really, you know, we are always entering into other worlds when we read these ancient texts, but it really is very radically different. And learning to look through other people's eyes in this very ancient world is something that is very, very useful for anyone I would say. And certainly, if you're interested in the ancient world, then it actually doesn't get any more ancient than this, as far as written texts are concerned.

25:47

Sofia Bongiovanni:

Well, thank you very much, Mark. And that is truly a compelling answer. And thank you for joining us in the ancient world New Voices Podcast. And yeah, thank you for your amazing talk.

26:01

Mark Weeden:

Thanks so much. It was really nice.

26:04

Sofia Bongiovanni:

Thank you for listening to this episode of ancient world new voices. You can drop your comments in the feedback form on the podcast webpage. And we look forward to welcoming you back for the next episode in a month's time. You can find more information about this podcast guest speakers, hosts and materials on UCL department of Greek analyzing website. This podcast is brought to you by Mateen Arghandehpour, Giovanna Di Martino, Sofia Bongiovanni and Mélissa Pires Da Silva.