Migrations in the Ancient Near East
(3500–500 B.C.)*

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Abstract   Human migrations in the ancient Near East are attested from the earliest historical times, and continue intermittently throughout the ages. The archaeological evidence for population movements is attested primarily by new pottery assemblages and changes in burial customs. In addition, ancient Near Eastern texts and the writings of the Classical historians provide rather extensive data on the extent of human dispersals in the ancient world. These ancient migrations were primarily of two types — voluntary and forced. This paper discusses the circumstances leading to the former type, such as famine and warfare, as well as the reasons for the latter, namely, the imperial policies which resulted in mass deportations and population transfers.

Key Words: voluntary migrations, population transfers

In this paper, the ancient Near East is chronologically defined as the period of approximately three millennia — from the appearance of writing in Sumer about 3500 B.C., to the end of the Neo-Babylonian empire shortly before 500 B.C. From this era, spanning the Chalcolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages, there are three primary sources which provide detailed evidence as to the extent and impact of migrations. The data is contained in archaeological, linguistic and literary sources, each of which provides some partial picture of human dispersals in the region.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

The traditional archaeological indicators for the arrival of new peoples in a territory, at least in the post-pottery ages, has been the appearance of a new assemblage of material culture, chracterized by three factors: pottery, burial customs and new cranial types. All three of these are attested at the end of the Chalcolithic Era (4500–3500 B.C.) in Syria-Palestine. The new ceramic assemblages exhibit regional groupings, namely, "Jezreel Valley Culture," Jerusalem, Jericho and other areas (Ussishkin, 1970; Epstein, 1976). They doubtlessly indicate the arrival of new

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peoples settling amongst the existing Neolithic populations of the area. During this process, the older groups, such as the Ghassulian culture, were absorbed by the newcomers. This settlement process was completed by 3500 B.C. and was the catalyst which ushered in the Bronze Age (3500–1200 B.C.) in the Near East.

The newcomers can be identified as the ancestors of the Canaanites, the dominant ethnic and linguistic group of the western and coastal Near East. The incursion of this group is evidently connected with a large scale devastation of the Chalcolithic villages in Palestine, dated before 3400 B.C. (Albright, 1960, p. 69). While we cannot be certain that this destruction was caused by these Proto-Canaanites, it is indeed significant that the following period — the Early Bronze Age (3500–2000 B.C.) — was characterized by a new concept of defensive measures, not previously common.

The Early Bronze Age settlements exhibited a rapid transition from unwalled villages to fortified towns, a trend which became the hallmark of all future towns and cities of the region. These fortification walls, often quite massive, suggest that security concerns of the rulers were now allotted the highest priority. They indicate a fear of attacks by outsiders, and probably by neighbors as well. Even a casual survey of subsequent Near Eastern history reveals thet these fears were well founded, for Syria-Palestine was never politically united and warfare among its numerous city-states and ethnic groups was exceedingly common.

LINGUISTIC AND LITERARY EVIDENCE

Philological studies of the Afro-Asiatic languages have demonstrated that the speakers of the Canaanite dialects were themselves members of a larger family of languages. The original homeland of this group must be sought in North Africa. The reason for the migration of this Proto-Afro-Asiatic people from their native domicile in the Sahara can only be conjectured. It appears to be due primarily to desertification, probably combined with over-grazing of their herds (Diakonoff, 1965; Horowitz, 1979).

The common group then bifurcated into five linguistic branches, each settling in its own geographical region. The astute glottochronological study by Diakonoff (1965) proposed that the Chadic group separated first and migrated to Sub-Sahara Africa. The next to detach was the Egyptian branch, migrating into the Delta and the Valley of the Nile. The bearers of the Proto-Semitic branch, according to this proposal, still dwelt in North Africa after these divisions. They then passed through the Egyptian Delta, from West to East, in the 5th millennium B.C.

During the Chalcolithic era, the Proto-Semitic branch was diffused throughout the Levant, developing distinct dialects in the various regions. Thus, Eblaite, Amorite and Canaanite were formed in Syria-Palestine, certainly by the beginning

of the third millennium B.C. Akkadian, with a significant Sumerian substratum (Salonen, 1973, p. 10), developed in Mesopotamia, and Proto-Arabic in the Arabian Peninsula. The remaining branches of the common group — Berber and Cushitic — then dispersed to the Western Sahara and Sub-Sahara areas respectively (Fig. 1).

This linguistic reconstruction fits rather well with the archaeological evidence, noted above, indicating that bands of newcomers had entered the region of Syria-Palestine during the Chalcolithic and were instrumental in the creation of the Early Bronze Age urban civilization in the Near East. To be sure, the formation of this new culture in the Levant must also be tied to political developments in the centers of high civilization, in Egypt and Sumer (Albright, 1960, p. 71), but this topic remains outside the scope of our discussion here. We should only note here that the Sumerians themselves were also immigrants, having arrived in southern Mesopotamia during the Chalcolithic era (Sandars, 1964, p. 14; Zarins, 1992, p. 68). Their homeland is still unknown.

The third source for the study of ancient migrations is the considerable body of literary material — epigraphic, historical and even mythological — now available from such diverse sources as Eblaite cuneiform texts of the third millennium B.C. and the writings of Greek and Roman historians. The advantage provided by ancient epigraphic materials — that of providing names and numbers — must be treated critically due to the blatant political propaganda often found in royal inscriptions. The later literary and mythological sources are often unreliable, as they contain garbled versions of ancient events. The historical kernel underlying these tales must also be extracted with care. Nevertheless, the written data is often invaluable for the reconstruction of events, when it is combined with archaeological interpretations.

VOLUNTARY MIGRATIONS

We can distinguish two basic forms of migrations in the ancient Near East: (1) voluntary movements, which were certainly the predominant form, and (2) involuntary transfers of whole populations. The latter was a limited phenomenon, resulting from certain foreign policies of empires. Population transplants are already attested, on a limited scale, in the second millennium B.C. (see, for example, the legend of Sesostris in Herodotus 2.102–110), but were carried out on a massive scale by the Assyrian Empire, particularly in the first millennium B.C.

The primary form of migration resulted when a human group made a collective decision to move. More often than not, it was due to some economic hardship. Sometimes, it was due to a mixture of motivations. The crisis was usually a natural catastrophe, such as prolonged drought, and the inevitable famine which followed.

Other well-known grounds for migrations, attested in documents and archaeology, are the ravages of wars — whose frequent occurrence throughout the Near East was a major source of refugees — and the colonization movements. The latter witnessed the establishment of daughter settlements by a metropolis, the most significant enterprises being the wide-spread activities of Phoenician and Greek city-states in the Iron Age. To be sure, some colonies were first established as mere outposts, to secure trade routes, raw materials and wealth for the mother-city. Others become a focus for immigration, often due to the pressure of overpopulation in their homeland.

A familiar problem causing migrations was pasture depletion. Most of it was caused by large and ubiquitous herds of sheep and goats, over-grazing the land of the pastoralists. The depletion of the land prompted tribal groups to seek greener pastures, thus accelerating the dispersal of the tribes. As noted above, it is possible that such depletion of the steppes was a factor prompting the original dispersal of the Afro-Asiatic peoples (Fig. 1). What is certain from later times, when we have textual evidence, is that there were repeated attempts on the part of semi-nomadic tribes to penetrate the fertile river-valleys of the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates regions.

These infiltrations were of great concern to the urban rulers, and brought about offensive military responses, as well as the construction of defensive lines. The latter consisted of networks of fortresses — to forestall the unwanted incursions. Two such networks are attested in the 20th century B.C., at opposite ends of the Fertile Crescent. At the eastern frontier of Egypt, the Pharaohs constructed the "Wall of the Ruler"(Egyptian *Inbw-Ḥq3*) to keep out nomads whom they designated as "sand-dwellers." At the other end, in Sumer, the king of Uruk, Utuḫegal, succeeded in halting the advance of the Qutû people from the north, about 2050 B.C. A little later, King Shu-Sin of the Ur III dynasty established (c. 1975 B.C.) a defensive border named *Muriq Tidnum* "The Repeller of the Amorites." These Amorite tribesmen were the widely diffused, often troublesome, groups encroaching on the urban centers of lower Mesopotamia. Their homeland was apparently in the Jebel el-Bishri region of Syria.

It may well be that constructing these two lines of defense (Fig. 2) was a coinciding reaction to the very same symptom — a slow but steady series of migrations from within the Near East towards the cultural centers of civilization, located at the extermities of the region. It is likely that the disintegration of the Early Bronze Age Semitic urban culture in Syria-Palestine (c. 2100 B.C.) and the contemporary breakup of the Sumerian Ur III dynasty (c. 1950 B.C.) were both caused by such pressures on the established urban centers (Zarins, 1992, p. 72). Needless to say, the "walls" could not keep out the barbarians knocking at the gates.
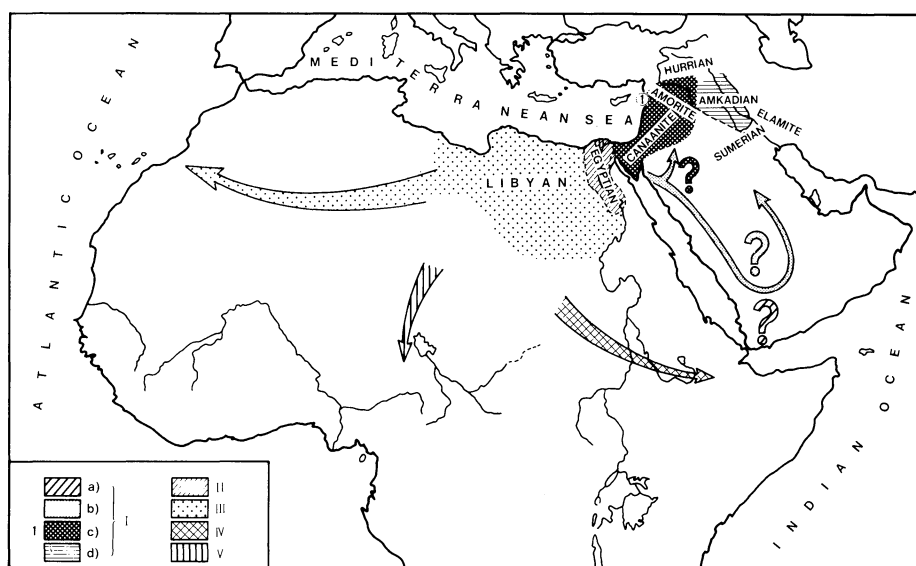
Fig. 1. Dispersal of the Afro-Asiatic languages, from their homeland in North Africa (after Diakonoff, 1965). I = Semitic: (a), (b) = Proto-Arabic; (c) = Canaanite and Amorite [1 = Ugaritic]; (d) = Akkadian. II = Egyptian. III = Berber. IV = Cushitic. V = Chadic.

The phenomenon of intermittent migrations, due to famine and other reasons, is attested in texts throughout the history of the Near East. By the Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 B.C.) such movements, usually on a small scale, were actually quite routine. Indeed, the travels and impact of these wanderers were the subject of regulations, which we find in the contemporary international treaty conventions. The agreements include standard clauses about the mutual responsibilities of rulers, when such tribal groups cross the frontiers of states. The treaties call upon the hosts to feed the migrants, and then to return them to their homeland without detention (Pritchard, 1969, p. 531). Other references (Pritchard, 1969, p. 259) indicate that hungry nomads were permitted to cross borders, under the watchful eyes of the guards, who dutifully reported all movement to their superiors.
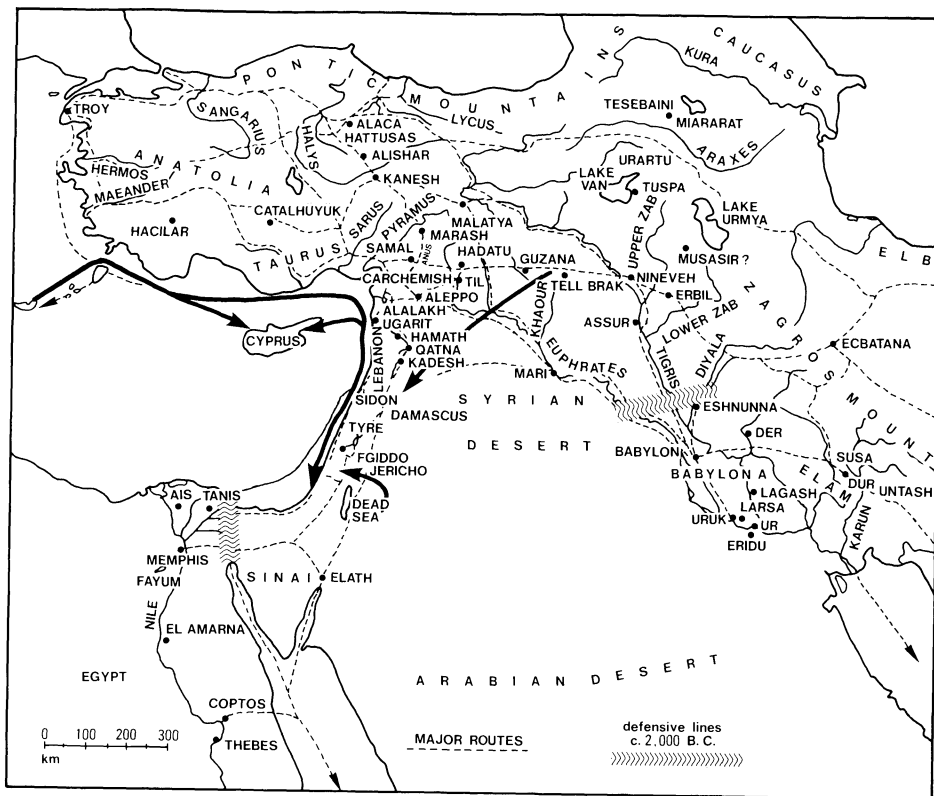
Fig. 2. Migrations at the end of the Bronze Age, ca. 1200 B.C. Original map published in Lampl (1968), p. 49.

THE SEA PEOPLES MIGRATION

At the end of the 13th century B.C., the Near East was overwhelmed by an unprecedented series of major migrations to, as well as, within the region. The impact of these movements was to dramatically alter the ethnic and political makeup of the area. These upheavals brought about the first major cultural break in the Levant since the end of the Early Bronze Age, some 1000 years earlier.

A great wave of Aegean immigrants — an alliance of tribes called the Sea Peoples by the Egyptians — is attested both archaeologically (Dothan, 1982) and textually (Pritchard, 1969, p. 262). They came by ship, wheeled vehicles and on foot. They were primarily warrior groups with their families, who were accompanied by chariots and bulky wagons, seeking a new home. Their primary thrust was east from the Aegean, along the coasts of Anatolia, Cyprus and Syria, southward towards Egypt. Several of these tribes, the best-known among them being the Philistines of

the Bible, settled permanently along the coasts of Canaan. These Sea Peoples quickly established themselves as the military masters of the coastal plain south of the Lebanon.

Inland the situation was more complex, for shortly before the arrival of the Sea Peoples, the Israelite tribal league had entered central Canaan from the east, settling in the central highland. Another tribal confederation — the Aramaeans — migrated from the northwest. They had left the land of Qir (see *Amos* 9:7) in northwestern Mesopotamia, and established themselves in former Canaanite territory, with their primary kingdom around Damascus (Fig. 2).

ASSYRIAN POPULATION TRANSFERS

At the beginning of the Iron Age (1200–586 B.C.), a major military power arose along the Tigris River, in the form of the Assyrian Empire. During the course of the following centuries, this monarchy brought about great population changes, as it steadily expanded its territory by conquest. It eventually ruled the entire Near East, including Egypt. During this expansion, the kings of Assyria pursued of policy of exiling large population groups (Oded, 1978).

This form of involuntary migrations saw the forceful removal of peoples, and their transfer to remote regions in the empire. On occasion, whole populations were exchanged, by actually transposing peoples within the numerous provinces. This policy endeavored to avert rebellion against imperial rule (Fig. 3).

The Assyrian royal annals have preserved detailed records of such deportations, a sample of which will suffice to illustrate their scope. King Shalmaneser I (c. 1263–1234 B.C.) stated that he moved 14,400 people from Hanigalbat, in northwest Mesopotamia, to Assyria. His successor, Tukulti-Ninurta I (c. 1233–1197 B.C.), deported 28,000 from the Hittite territory, west of the Euphrates River, to Assyria. Tiglath-Pileser I (1114–1076 B.C.), relocated thousands of Phrygians and others, to reduce their pressure on his northwestern frontiers. Emperor Shalmaneser III boasted of having moved 110,610 people in his first 20 years as ruler. The total number of deportees for his reign (858–824 B.C.) is listed as 167,500 people (Na'aman, 1989, p. 43). Even if exaggerated, as some figures may be, they indicate large-scale transfers as a routine policy of the emperors.

After the Assyrians captured Samaria (721 B.C.), the capital of the kingdom of Israel, they deported 27,280 people of the upper classes to their northeastern provinces, and then imported diverse immigrants from North Syria and Babylonia. The newcomers to Samaria amalgated with the remaining Israelites and created a new people — the Samaritans (*II Kings* 17:6; 24).

The Neo-Babylonian empire, which succeeded the Assyrian, perpetuated deportation practices, but to a lesser extent. After the Babylonians conquered the kingdom
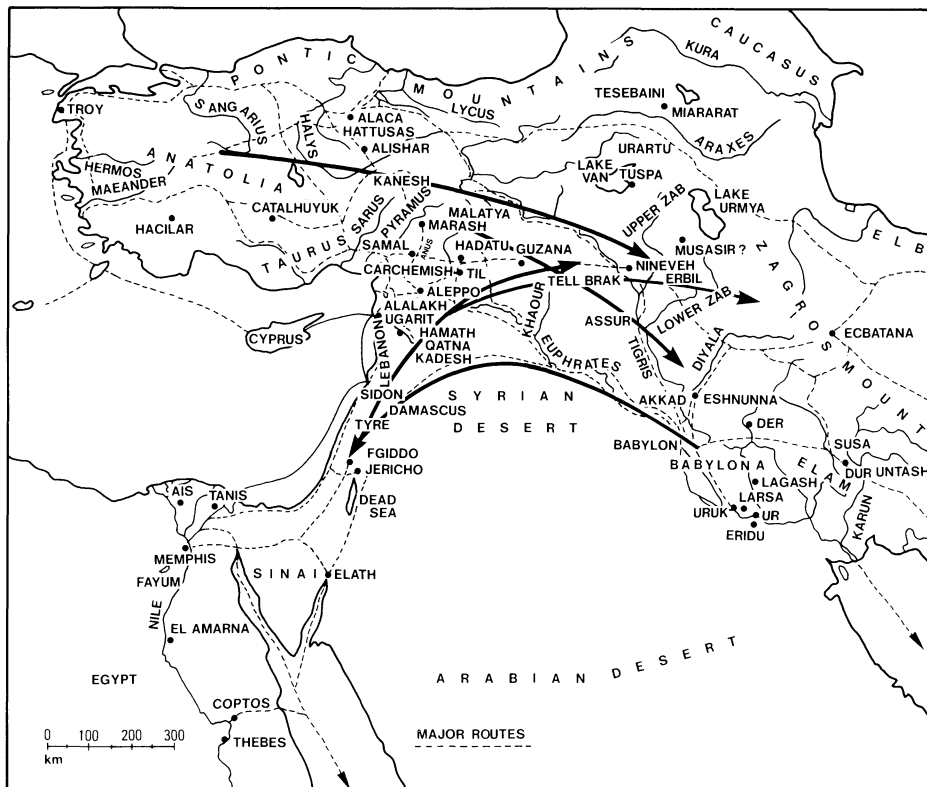
Fig. 3. Involuntary migrations in the Iron Age. Original map published in Lampl (1968), p. 49.

of Judah (597 B.C.), they exiled part of its population to Babylonia, and another wave was deported when Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 B.C. (*II Kings* 24:14; 25:11). Such involuntary movements, coupled with ongoing voluntary migrations, eventually created a truly complex ethnic mosaic in the entire Fertile Crescent.

CONCLUSIONS

Even from our necessarily brief survey, we can already discern a general pattern common to these developments in the ancient Near East. It would appear that in the historical periods — soon after the rise of high civilizations — the phenomenon observed most readily is that the likelihood of migrations increased, and was directly proportional to the external influence of the political centers in the region.

A model which suggests itself is that the urban centers often served as a focal points for immigration — certainly in cases of famine — attracting the influx of

people from the hinterlands of the city-states to their core. This was also the case in Egypt, the only true nation-state in the region, from the very dawn of its history. It seems obvious that the reasons for this development were the great surpluses of foodstuffs and wealth stored in the cities — a fact well established by the accounts in numerous economic texts of the third millennium B.C. Another factor which invited migration towards the cities was their energetic involvement in local and long-distance trade (Stieglitz, 1984).

Even when the movement of people was away from the urban hub, as in the case of colonization, the primary factor behind such migration was still the action of the metropolis. When the systems of city-states were supplanted by great empires, as occurred periodically in the Near East, the patterns of human dispersals became more complex. This was due to the long-range impact of the newly instituted imperial deportations coupled with the effects of conventional migrations. In conclusion, we can say that the phenomenon of human dispersal in the ancient Near East (3500–500 B.C.), although caused by various considerations, was throughout much of history the rule and not the exception.

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