PILGRIMAGE AND HOUSEHOLD IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

In this book, Joy McCorriston examines the continuity of traditions over millennia in the Near East. Tracing the phenomenon of pilgrimage in pre-Islamic Arabia up through the development of the Haj, she defines its essential characteristics and emphasizes the critical role that pilgrimage plays in enabling and developing socioeconomic transactions. Indeed, the social identities constructed through pilgrimage are key to understanding the long-term endurance of the phenomenon. In the second part of the book, McCorriston turns to the household, using cases of ancient households in Mesopotamian societies, in both the private and public spheres. Her conclusions tie together broader theoretical implications generated by the study of the two phenomena and offer a new paradigm for archaeological study, which has traditionally focused on transitions to the exclusion of continuity of traditions.

Joy McCorriston is Associate Professor of Anthropology at The Ohio State University. She has published more than forty academic articles and book chapters on the origins of food production, the development of agricultural economies through the Bronze Age, and Southern Arabian pre-history. She currently leads the Ancient Human Social Dynamics in Arabia Project in Oman.

PILGRIMAGE AND HOUSEHOLD IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Joy McCorriston

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521137607

First published 2011

Printed in China by Everbest

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
McCorriston, Joy, 1961–
Pilgrimage and household in the ancient near east / Joy McCorriston.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-521-76851-1 (hardback) – ISBN 978-0-521-13760-7 (pbk.)
1. Pilgrims and pilgrimages – Arabian Peninsula – History. 2. Arabian
Peninsula – Antiquities. 3. Households – Iraq – History. 4. Iraq – Antiquities.
I. Title.
BL619.P5M43 2011
203′.50935–dc22 2010023543

ISBN 978-0-521-76851-1 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-13760-7 Paperback

To Kevin

CONTENTS

FIGURES

TABLES

PREFACE

Deep in the Syrian desert lies an ancient caravan city at Palmyra, still today some four hours drive from the last oasis. Until a few years ago, modern autos and traffic still followed an old route across the grand axis of the city. Camels and their drivers rest in the shade of a monumental arch, while on the southern rise Palmyra's Bel temple dominates the oasis ruins. Even stripped of its original marble cladding, cult statues, treasury, and solemn pageantry, the temple's central cella and huge colonnaded precinct embody a powerful idea. Like the greatest mediaeval cathedrals, the relict cella ceiling soars above the heavy pavement, built, like pavement and precinct, of massive exotic stone blocks hauled great distances through a barren desert. A visitor is dwarfed by its monumental proportions, imagery not lost on the Orientalist painter Gustav Bauernfeind, whose view of nearby Baalbek ruins accentuates the lost splendor with tiny bedouin shepherds. No visitor can come away without wonder – What god and purpose did this grandeur once serve?

The Bel temple was almost as impressive in scale and wealth as its contemporary rivals and neighbors – the Haddad temple in Damascus, Heliopolis temple at Baalbek, and the massive Jerusalem temple, to which every male Jew was enjoined to travel for a sacrificial offering at least once a year. Two thousand years ago, these sites formed the loci of interwoven economic, social, and ideological practice – pilgrimage – that is a distinctive and very significant motif in many latter Near Eastern complex societies. In material terms, the lavish and ostentatious construction of the massive temples that attracted pilgrims displays the core

1. First-century AD cella of the temple of Bel, Palmyra (Syria). Author's photo.

role that the ritual played in economic networks, in ideologies of human relationships to the natural and supernatural worlds, and, not least, in constituting a society of believers whose practice of pilgrimage affirmed their collective identity. This book is about the continuity of those core ideas and practices and their epochal inheritance from a Neolithic past before the dawn of history.

This project came to me on a return journey from Palmyra – a Road-to-Damascus conversion – where my family visited extraordinary archaeological ruins and my three-year-old son rode his first camel. On the bus home I finally wondered why peoples past had traveled to Palmyra. Was it indeed, as Yale historian Michael Rostovtseff (1932) claimed, a "Cavavan City" built and prosperous because of its historical location on trade routes? I mused over a phrase in Ross Burns's (2005) excellent guidebook that connected the imposing Bel temple at Palmyra with its

2. "Temple Ruins of Baalbak," Gustav Bauernfeind, 1880. Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, New York.

contemporaries. All Semitic cult centers sought to entice the maximum number of visitors through rival displays of wealth and scale.

But why would relatively small urban populations seek to draw in large numbers of visitors with a huge outlay of time and resources? The answer then seemed obvious to me – trade and the economic side benefits of pilgrimage. I was at once reminded of the controversy over Meccan trade before Islam – was trade or was it not still significant in Arabia? (Crone 1987) – and of the social contexts of pre-Islamic Arabian

states and economic transformations that accompany the emergence of state societies. In the case of pre-Islamic Arabian states, the so-called Frankincense Kingdoms, archaeologists are still frustrated by very little real evidence, but they have a wealth of ideas and general models about what should have happened or could have happened to bring about the impressive urban centers that organized, authorized, and secured the caravans bearing incense to the Mediterranean world. Palmyra is in one sense but a northward extension. Suddenly the mechanisms evident in pilgrimage to Semitic cult centers in the northern kingdoms seemed key to me in understanding similar mechanisms in ancient Southern Arabia. Pilgrimage played a key role in Near Eastern societies for thousands of years and continued to do so as states rose and fell. And a closer look shows that pilgrimage was key before states arose.

What interests me so profoundly about pilgrimage is its resistance to change, its dramatic manifestation of meta-structure that seemingly lies outside a theoretical canon dedicated to the explanation of change. When we visited Palmyra as a family, I was co-teaching a seminar at Damascus University on the history of theory in Americanist anthropological archaeology. Class discussions revolved around the Marxist historical materialist model and the articulations of American archaeological theory with the general premise of that model – that tensions between economic base and ideological superstructure are the basis for the historical transformation of societies and cultures. In these most basic historical-materialist terms archaeologists have sought to understand and explain history, what some call "the science of change" (Knapp 1992: 16, Lyon 1987). Alongside evolution, historical materialism has underlain virtually all theoretical contributions in sociology and anthropology: Darwin and Marx set the stage for all that followed. And these great theories are all about change.

As I recognized the durability and longevity of pilgrimage as a core institution, I became increasingly interested in archaeologically revealed meta-structure itself and the explanation of its persistence. Some of what this project concerns, such as pilgrimage, has been studied by anthropologists under the rubric of ritual institutions and ritual practices and their roles in structuring social identities and history (Kelly and Kaplan 1990). But I am not interested in examining ritual itself, nor in the anthropological discussions about what ritual is and the roles it plays.

This project instead focuses on the meta-structures that ritual manifests, that is, core cultural ideas that endure over extremely long time frames, beginning in the Neolithic. Anthropologists and historians struggled with core cultural idea sets in the first half of the last century, calling such phenomena "Great Cultures" (Spengler [1922] 1926, Kroeber 1944), "Civilizations" (Toynbee 1934–1954, Bagby 1959), and "Great Traditions" (Redfield [1955] 1967, Redfield in Singer 1974). But the full duration of such institutions has been previously unrecognized and indeed continues throughout what earlier anthropologists differentiated into Primitive Cultures and Civilizations, Little and Great Traditions. Archaeological evidence unavailable in the last century now demonstrates extremely long temporal frames of meta-structural phenomena. With this new recognition comes new questions: why did meta-structures of ideas and their manifestation as practices persist across long time frames and how did they do so across tremendous social, economic, and ideological changes?

In the answers to these questions and the making of this book, I have many to thank, for this has not been a journey alone. First and foremost, I thank my friends in the Middle East who have transformed my lifetime of visits into true pilgrimage. When I look back at thirty years of exploring and documenting archaeology in the Near East, I appreciate above all the indescribable hospitality of strangers: the bedouin pickup-driver who detoured a pair of young hitchhikers in the Wadi Hasa to his family tent for full supper before driving us many midnight miles to our destination; the young woman met on a bus to Madaba who insisted we eat at her home while she and family stood by; Jerusalem Palestinians – one patriarch sheltering young, single American girls in a family apartment and providing safe escorts, or a family-run hotel that effaced distinction between client and guest; and Damascenes who are surely the most hospitable people on earth. When I think of ancient peoples, I see before me the faces of modern strangers, not as the changeless stand-ins for a Biblical Lot or living proof of an "Oriental Mind" but as the real inspiration for my lifelong reach to understand cultural differences and their broader humanistic meanings. With grateful acknowledgment of all who have helped me on my way, I humbly hope this effort honors my many hosts abroad. Among these I especially acknowledge the influence of ʿAbdalazīz Bin ʿAqīl, Youssef Barkoudah, the ʿAwad-Hanoush family

from Damascus and Marmarita, the Tazas of Hasseke, and Thuwaiba Al-Riyami.

In a wider circle are the Bayt al-'Alī Humūm bedouin and the many Syrian, Yemeni, Jordanian, and Omani colleagues too numerous to name who have so patiently welcomed, aided, and tolerated my research and taught me so much. Mostly we met through the Syrian Directorate General for Antiquities and Museums, the General Organization of Antiquities and Museums in Yemen, the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, and the Ministry of Culture in the Sultanate of Oman, and I bear deep gratitude for the opportunities and trust they have offered me. My thinking has been heavily influenced through archaeological field research, and I thank the unstinting efforts, under very trying conditions, of the incredibly talented field team at the core of the RASA (Roots of Agriculture in Southern Arabia) and AHSD (Arabian Human Social Dynamics) Projects: Eric Oches, Michael Harrower, Tara Steimer, Remy Crassard, Catherine Heyne, Matthew Senn, Jennifer Everhart, and Kimberly Williams. The American Institute for Yemeni Studies has been critical to our success, as has been funding from the National Science Foundation and Wenner Gren Foundation. We are all enormously grateful to Canadian Nexen Petroleum Yemen and Canadian Nexen in Calgary for extraordinary logistical and financial support to us and to archaeology in Hadramawt.

Closer to home, I acknowledge the encouragement of friends and family. What are the odds that one would find forty crumbling cattle skulls in Yemen when one's intimate friend is a world expert on Neolithic Near Eastern cattle? Louise Martin always fires my enthusiasm and gave a memorable New Year's holiday to analyzing cattle skulls in Mukalla with conservator Lisa Usman. Robert Wenke has encouraged every step of this project from concept (with which he surely disagrees) to completion. Frank Hole taught me to think outside the paradigm of what everyone else is doing. I miss Michael Zwettler's deep knowledge and thank him posthumously for his patient gifts of time when he had so little left.

For illustrations and technical support I sincerely thank Manuel Clerc, Mac Gibson, Alexander Sedov, Mike Harrower, Herb Wright, Iris Gerlach and the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Allison Grimes, Matt Indrutz, and Jen Everhart. Robert Odenweller generously provided

an index, for which I am most grateful. Kevin Johnston, David Wengrow, Norman Yoffee, and Michael Zwettler offered very helpful suggestions that improved the final manuscript, and I have been honored in my interactions with students who have read, commented, and drawn upon chapters in process. I have transliterated Arabic terminology using the Library of Congress (LoC) system with the following exceptions: where terms and places have a conventional Anglicized form, I have retained that form (e.g., "Mecca" not "Makka," "Wadi" not "Wādī") and for toponyms whose roots I could not guess, I have retained the transliteration used in the reference I cite. For authors' names, I use LoC except where an author has himself used or acquiesced in a different transliteration (e.g., "Ibn al-Mujawir," but "Alatas" not "Al-'Aṭṭās"). Site names derived from Arabic but widely published in English likewise retain their published transliteration (e.g., "El-Geili" not "Al-Qailī"). Terms from Old South Arabian languages appear as consonants (e.g., "byt" not "bayt"), following convention. I acknowledge with gratitude Serge Frantsouzoff's vocalization of Old South Arabian places, divinities, and offices, but any error is mine.

At last my greatest thanks go to my beloved husband Kevin Johnston and son Keoki for the sacrifices they made while I wrote.