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HENRI FRANKFORT, 1952

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1897-1954

ARCHAEOLOGY has often been regarded as a technique and is liable to remain an auxiliary discipline, its documents to be mere illustrations to written records. It is perhaps Henri Frankfort's highest contribution to the social sciences to have realized that it is itself a source and to have so distilled history from archaeological data as to convince even sceptical colleagues. That is not to say that he was not also a master of technique. History is enacted in time, and archaeologists have to construct the chronological framework for their historical events. Both by comparative typological studies and actual stratigraphical excavation, Frankfort contributed substantially to building the stage upon which we can watch the birth of civilization in the valleys of the Nile and of the Tigris-Euphrates.

Coming to London in 1922 trained at Amsterdam in the rigorously exact but exclusively philological traditions of Dutch historiography, Frankfort became the pupil of Flinders Petrie and Margaret Murray and soon fell under the spell of J. L. Myres. From Petrie and Myres Frankfort learnt the value of archaeological data as historical documents and scientific methods for their classification and interpretation. After gaining field experience in Egypt under Petrie, Frankfort was awarded the M.A. of London University for a thesis published in 1924 as Volume I of *Studies in the Early Pottery of the Near East (Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt and their earliest interrelations)*. The second volume, published in 1927 earned him the doctorate of Leiden. But Volume I had already won general recognition for its author's unique genius for synthesis. In 1924-5 he was a student of the British School at Athens and held a grant from the Philologisch-Studiefonds in Utrecht. In 1925 he became director of the Egypt Exploration Society's excavations at Tell el-Amarna and elsewhere.

His conspicuous success as an excavator in Egypt caused Breasted to invite Frankfort to become field director of the Iraq expedition of the Oriental Institute of Chicago, a post he held till operations were wound up in 1937. For the exploration of the Diyala sites, Frankfort had a unique opportunity for organizing a model excavation. For certain extravagances the expedition's American sponsors, not its field director, may be

blamed. The latter showed the necessity and the value of a laboratory and staff equipped to treat the rapidly decaying objects, extracted from the salt-impregnated soil of Iraq. In excavation technique and recording he achieved a happy mean between the excessive refinements of the Germans at Warka and the sometimes over-summary methods of some understaffed English and French expeditions. In publication Frankfort followed the admirable precedent set by Evans at Knossos and every year made available to his colleagues the most important results of the excavations in Preliminary Reports. By 1935 the tripartite division of the Early Dynastic (*alias* 'Pre-Sargonic') period, that is now a cornerstone of Sumerian history, was firmly established on a stratigraphical basis to be published with conclusive documentation in the Fifth (and last) Preliminary Report in 1936.

On the closure of field-work in Iraq, Frankfort took up residence at Chicago where he had held the Chair of Research Professor in Oriental Archaeology since 1932, concurrently with the post of Extraordinary Professor of the History and Archaeology of the Near East at the University of Amsterdam. Finally in 1949 he was invited to become Director of the Warburg Institute and given the title of Professor of the History of Pre-classical Antiquity in the University of London. His further appointment by UNESCO as one of the two editors of the first volume of the 'Cultural and Scientific History of Mankind' may be regarded as a crowning international recognition of Frankfort as an historian and so of archaeology's rightful place among the historical disciplines.

His first published work, *Studies in the Early Pottery of the Near East*, not only established its author's reputation but foreshadowed the lines along which his genius would develop. To turn back to it today is in one sense to turn to a page in the prehistory of Oriental prehistory. When Frankfort published the first volume of *Studies*, al Ubaid, Ur, Kish, Mari, Warka were still undug, Arpachiyah, Gawra, Brak and Hassuna undreamt of. The only clue to the relative age of the attractively painted prehistoric sherds already known from Anau, Eridu, and Samarra was the—largely illusory—sequence at Susa as expounded by de Morgan and Pottier. The 'EBA' of Palestine, now so clearly defined and reliably subdivided, was virtually unknown, to say nothing of the unsuspected Chalcolithic and pre-pottery Neolithic that precede it. Even in Egyptian prehistory the Badarian prelude was lacking. Yet the volume is far from being of merely

antiquarian interest; it is still in constant use and cited as a source of ideas as well as of facts. For Frankfort's genius overcame to an astonishing degree the hazards to which archaeological pioneers are peculiarly exposed—the unpredictable surprises revealed by the spade. He had already grasped and expounded the very links between protodynastic Egypt and archaic Sumer that ten years later the excavations at Warka were to document conclusively and set in a more precise context. So too, with no locally dated comparative material, he correctly diagnosed the Levantine imports in early pharaonic tombs and deduced from them the Early Bronze Age cultures of Palestine very much as excavations in the succeeding decade were to reveal them. By 1923 in fact Frankfort had outlined a framework within which the prelude to the birth of civilization could be presented, and from the Nile to the Middle Euphrates and the Taurus that frame still stands. *Relative Chronologies in Old World Archeology* by nine American specialists, published in 1955, just fill in details and add prefatory sections. Beyond the Euphrates not even Frankfort could anticipate the results of systematic excavation. In *Archaeology and the Sumerian Problem*, published in 1932, a new frame is presented based on Ur, Warka, and Kish instead of Susa, and this is substantially intact today. In Anatolia and the Balkan peninsula the fruits of systematic exploration may have been still more startling. One result has been to cut the ground from beneath the feet of those who raised *a priori* objections to Frankfort's account of trans-Balkan relations. Since not all farmers were potters, it no longer follows that, because cereals spread northward, all kinds of pottery must have followed the same direction. It is now just as legitimate to assume an independent focus of ceramic art beyond the Balkans as to ascribe all Danubian-Aegean parallels to influences from the latter area.

But all history should be the history of thought; and the extraction of history from archaeological data is not just their arrangement in a coherent chronological pattern nor the induction therefrom of ethnic movements and commercial interchanges. Already in *Studies* pots are more than durable and convenient labels for ethnic groups. They are at the same time expressions of thought, works of art. The contrast between Amratian and Gerzean, between the earliest African and Asian ceramics is expressed in terms of 'abstract' or 'naturalistic' mentality. And 'mentality' is not used in a racist sense nor as a mere clue to the genetic constitution of societies. Frankfort's interest

was rather to discover how the societies that, as consumers and producers, set the standards of form and ornament, felt and thought.

If any historian can 're-enact in his own mind the thoughts and motives of the agent' it is the historian of art. In the case of a folk-art such as pottery expresses, the 'agent' is the collective personality of a community, the thoughts, the traditional modes of perceiving and feeling, transmitted and maintained by sociological, not biological, inheritance. That is what Frankfort successfully aimed to recapture and revive for his readers. The same sympathetic appreciation and disciplined imagination found ampler scope in the fine achievements of more sophisticated crafts. *The Mural Paintings of Tell el-Amarna* allowed him glimpses of individual, if still anonymous, artists. His next major contributions to art-history, *Cylinder Seals* (1939), *Sculpture of the IIIrd Millennium B.C.* (1939) are frankly directed, if not to folk-art, at least to national art. *Cylinder Seals* will remain a classic and a standard text-book, not only as a collection of documents wisely selected and classified by penetrating stylistic analysis, but also as a masterly interpretation that revives the aesthetic aspirations of various peoples through successive ages. This line of study has culminated superbly in *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*, published posthumously last year as Volume V of the Pelican History of Art.

All archaeological data are at the same time in some degree wordless documents in art history. But the seals and carvings, the temples and paintings of the Orient are no longer dumb. Many illustrate myths and rituals described in written texts that we can read. They are in fact graphic versions of the speculative thought of Egyptians and Babylonians. 'The religion of Eshnunna in the 3rd millennium' and 'Gods and Myths on Sargonid Seals' (both published in 1935) were brilliant essays in the revivification of this kind of philosophy expressed in mute architectural monuments and glyptic. *Cylinder Seals* goes beyond artistic classification and appreciation to interpret the plastic symbols engraved on the cylinders. In the concluding and introductory chapters (written in collaboration with his first wife) of *The Intellectual Adventure of Early Man* (1946, republished here as *Before Philosophy* in 1949) Frankfort re-evoked the to us curious logic wherewith the worlds of the Egyptians and Sumerians were constructed as surely and convincingly as Durkheim recovered the still more curious logic of preliterate hunters and fishers.

These chapters, together with *Kingship and the Gods* are outstanding contributions to the history of thought in the narrower sense of that word. They form in a sense a prelude to *The Birth of Civilization in the Near East*, published in 1951. This short book gives not only the best succinct account of Egyptian and Mesopotamian prehistory available, but also a noble portrayal of the spiritual achievement the 'birth' symbolized. The underlying philosophy of history may be debatable, the contrast between Egypt and Sumer exaggerated, the reference to the Saqqara mastabas almost disingenuous; the book remains a fitting crown to Frankfort's literary achievements.

Not that it should be imagined that Frankfort's contributions to human knowledge and to our civilization are to be measured by his written works alone. He trained and inspired a galaxy of expert excavators and gifted interpreters—Braidwood, Kantor, Lloyd, McCown, Perkins, and others—to carry on his work, to say nothing of those students who, while not themselves pursuing archaeology professionally, have learned from him to appreciate its historical implications.

V. GORDON CHILDE