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Part I

Territory and Borders

1

Inner vs. Outer Territory

The notion of a homogeneous, qualitatively indifferent space, viewed as the geometrical locus of reciprocal positioning among objects, which in consequence is unchanging from any point of observation, is an abstraction which is appropriate only to particular fields of analysis. In political activity, and more generally in human relations, however, space – or territory – has hardly ever been viewed as homogeneous. This is so today because, while we are ‘Euclidean’ and rational beings when dealing with problems of geometry or physics, we are not when facing other persons or other political communities. This was even more true in the period which is the subject of this study, when ideas and symbols in official texts found a free application that in modern political documents tends to be less obvious – partly hidden by rewriting in the terms of hegemonic rational thought.¹

Qualitative differentiation in territorial perception is based on obvious psychological impressions, basically centred on the quest for security. The most influential approach in the past stemmed from theorizing about ‘mythical’ (or even ‘primitive’) thought,² which also found its way into studies of the ancient Near East.³ The prejudice to be removed is that all this applies only to the ‘primitive’ and ‘archaic’ mind, while ‘our’ thought is normal and rational – a pretty mythical idea in its turn.⁴ Once this prejudice is eliminated, the studies of mythical thought retain a great deal of heuristic value and are still commonly employed in the phenomenology of religion and related fields.⁵ We do not need to analyse here the psychological roots of the differentiated appreciation of space. Suffice it to state that they find a concrete application in preferring the known to the unknown, the light to the dark, the enclosed to the open, the solid to the weak, the compact to the scattered, the fixed to the moving, the familiar to the unfamiliar, and so on. The concentration of all the positive qualities

in the above alternatives makes up (at its best) the area where the subject is, all the negative qualities being pushed toward the periphery. It is not only and not so much a question of practical behaviour, but also and even more a question of symbolic representation of reality, a system of values.

The opposition between centre and periphery can be perceived at different levels and influences social organization to a greater or lesser extent.⁶ There is the personal (house or family) level of relationships; the local (community or settlement) level, encompassing the people and places with whom we are accustomed to deal in daily life; and the larger application to the national or cultural unit. People sharing language and values, customs and procedures, who are inserted into the same administrative, economic and political system, are led to view their own territory as different from the surrounding areas. This difference can appear even in terminology: for example, in Sumerian the inner country is *kalam* and the surrounding lands/mountains are *kur.kur*,⁷ in Egyptian the flat Nile valley is *t'* while the surrounding mountains are *h'swt*, and the black agricultural land is *kmt* while the red outer steppe is *dšrt*.⁸ A similar juxtaposition between 'our' population and foreign peoples seems to be a development of the first millennium,⁹ not yet to be found in the territorial (as opposed to national) states of the Bronze age.¹⁰

Now, the clear-cut opposition between inner and outer land may in some cases have been influenced and made easier by topographical and ecological factors – which in fact influenced the very constitution of some political units, as well as the establishment of cultural and linguistic frontiers. The most obvious case is Egypt, where the differences between the fertile and irrigated valley and the arid steppe or desert, between the intensively populated countryside and the surrounding 'empty' space, are quite impressive. Egypt is also a rather closed area, with only a few 'gateways' linking it to other (but looser and distant) areas of intensive settlement.

Mesopotamia is somewhat different, bordering on desert to the south-west and mountains to the north-east, but much more open to contacts with the surrounding areas. It is also endowed with a greater internal complexity and mobility of social and ecological borders.¹¹ Other countries (Anatolia, Syria-Palestine and Iran) have still fewer compelling geographical reasons to consider themselves well defined and qualitatively different from their neighbours – yet they also developed a centralist view and a diversified cultural appreciation of space.

In effect, we have to take into due account the uneven spread of settlement in the Near East in the Late Bronze age.¹² People (especially those enjoying city life and state organization) were concentrated in relatively limited areas, ranging from the large alluvial plains of Egypt and

Lower Mesopotamia to quite small enclaves in the highlands, separated from one another by steppe or woodland or mountains inhabited by a sparse population – if any at all – of lower technological and organizational development. Consequently, contacts with and even knowledge of what was beyond the ecological and political borders were rather difficult, and did not belong to the daily experience of the common people.

This tendency to isolation was effective in keeping alive a ‘nuclear’ or ‘centralist’ perception of territorial relations, a perception which will fade away only if more contacts with the outer world become frequent enough; and an experience of different peoples makes it clear that this diversity is cultural rather than natural, quantitative rather than qualitative. In other words, the ecological barriers are not the reason for the differentiated appreciation of geographical space (which springs from basic psychological features), but are a factor in its organization and reinforcement into cultural (and eventually ‘national’) stereotypes.

The geographical elements and cultural characteristics of the inhabitants of the peripheral world are considered not only different but inferior to those in the central country. If the periphery is a desert, it is the seat of death and emptiness (even the image of the netherworld);¹³ if it is a woodland, it is the seat of darkness; and if it is a highland, it is difficult of access. Its economic resources (see Chapter 21) are limited and insufficient for human life: they acquire a reasonable value only as a function of the complex and substantial needs of the central country. The culture of the foreigners is viewed either as lacking the basic requirements of the civilized world (as in the Mesopotamian stereotypes of the nomads who ‘do not know/have house/city/grain/etc.’),¹⁴ or else as being the very reverse of ours. In a Ramesside royal hymn, the Asiatics are ‘those who plough in summer and reap in winter’.¹⁵ Among the many topics suitable for analysis, we will select here just two of them: language as a qualifying item of culture, and water as an essential for life.

In the scribal milieu of the Ramesside period the training of children, foreigners and animals is unified and contrasted to the culture of the male, adult, educated Egyptian. The Instructions of Any, a wisdom text that goes back to the late eighteenth dynasty, provide the most detailed picture:

The savage lion abandons his wrath, and comes to resemble the timid donkey. The horse slips into his harness, obedient it goes outdoors. The dog obeys the word, and walks behind its master. The monkey carries the stick, though its mother did not carry it. The goose returns from the pond, when one comes to shut it in the yard. One teaches the Nubian to speak Egyptian, the Syrian and other strangers too.¹⁶

The same perspective is reflected in the scribal miscellanies: ‘The ape understands words, yet it is brought from Kush.’¹⁷ The difficulty for an ape to speak ‘Egyptian’ (but remember that ‘Egyptian language’ [*ns n rmt*] is literally ‘the language of men’)¹⁸ derives not from its being an animal, but from its being from Kush. We have to presume that apes normally understand, and perhaps speak, the language of Kush. Animals and foreigners alike can learn Egyptian, but their original language is physically different, their tongue/language is ‘inverted’ in comparison to the ‘human/Egyptian’ one:

Having been brought into Egypt, (the Libyans) were settled into fortresses ... They heard, while in the service of the king, the Egyptian language, and the king let them forget their own language, he overturned their tongues.¹⁹

Also in Asia we can trace the idea that foreign languages are objectively ununderstandable, and rather similar to animal (especially bird) calls. But wherever bi- and multilingualism become a common experience, the different languages are evaluated to the same level, there is ‘correspondence’ (*mithurtu* is the technical term) between them,²⁰ which finds expression in the arrangement of bi- and multilingual vocabularies,²¹ in inter-linear translations,²² in the widespread use of interpreters.²³

The case of water is somewhat similar. If a foreign river, comparable in size to the Nile (e.g. the Euphrates), is ever encountered, it is classed as ‘inverted water’ (*mw qd*) because it flows the wrong way.²⁴ But generally foreign countries are assumed to lack rivers, relying instead on rainfall for their agricultural needs – a rather inferior and unreliable substitute:

You made the Nile in the underworld, you bring him when you will, to nourish the people, for you made them for yourself ... All distant lands, you make them live, you made a heavenly Nile descend for them: he makes waves on the mountains like the sea, to drench their fields and their towns. How excellent are your ways, O Lord of eternity! A Nile from heaven for foreign peoples, and for all lands’ creatures that walk on legs; for Egypt the Nile who comes from the underworld.²⁵

This is the Aton hymn of Amenophis IV, an unusual attempt at a universalistic and balanced vision of the world in which all enjoy the benefits of a universal god, yet the Egypt-centred evaluation remains an all-pervading feature.

Of course the inner country too can be considered at different levels, from the mythical to the technical. In the case of Egypt, the mythical idea is centred on the 'union of Both Lands' (*sm' t'wy*), a political myth quite central in pharaonic ideology.²⁶ Texts of a more realistic kind range from those providing a theoretical/generalizing calculation of the extent of the country,²⁷ to those containing a quite technical/administrative knowledge of its partition into large (temple or palace) estates and single fields, as in the extensive survey of the Wilbour Papyrus.²⁸

The same range of possibilities applies to foreign lands: from a mythical and stereotyped list of the 'Nine Bows',²⁹ to the technical tool of the 'Itinerary'³⁰ – like the one that found its way into the Annals of Tuthmosis III,³¹ or the one that can be reconstructed from the Anastasi I letter.³² By rearranging the information contained in this text, we can also reconstruct a differentiated appreciation of Syria as viewed by the Egyptian messengers and officials travelling through it. Some places under Egyptian administrative control, like Jaffa, are quite safe (apart from thefts and minor problems with the inhabitants) and quite efficient (the chariot can be repaired by local craftsmen). Other sites, like Tyre and Byblos, are somewhat strange but at least urban and civilized. But the space between them is quite hostile: the physical difficulties (mountains and rivers to be crossed, bad roads, forests) are increased by the presence of wild animals, including men who are also wild and ferocious.³³ Civilized control on the chaotic periphery is difficult, the territory is so large and different, at the same time empty and filled with dangers, everything moving, everything hidden or in the dark. The general feeling is one of insecurity.

Hittite control on the Kashka territory is not too different from Egyptian control in Syria-Palestine. The Instructions for the *bēl madgalti*³⁴ (the chief of the garrison in a watchtower) can be analysed in a similar way. There is a closed and well protected space: the *madgaltu* itself, the fortified castle of the garrison, and inside this space everything must be run with a care and an exactitude so obsessive as to reveal a good deal of anxiety. Every year the walls are to be plastered, the drain channels cleaned and the locks verified; beams and planks must be of exact dimensions (cubits and fingers are given); and so on. The greatest care is devoted to keeping watch from the walls and opening and locking the doors of the castle – the most critical element, giving access to the outer world (and vice versa!) which is not under firm control.³⁵ Beyond the walls, where robberies and various kinds of crime take place, the Hittite garrison has to proceed with the utmost caution: scouts go ahead of the troops, who must not pursue enemy forces for more than three days; the garrison chief must not be

absent for more than two. Beyond a day's walk security is believed to disappear.³⁶

Between the closed and fortified castle and the dangerous and unknown territory, there is an intermediate belt: the local villages, inhabited by foreigners and deportees, themselves foreign in nature. In the villages Hittite control must be enforced and civilization established. These tasks must be accomplished in a cautious way, always in tune with the wishes of the local authorities, and showing maximum concern for two matters especially close to the needs and values of the local population: the restoration of temples and cultic furniture, priestly personnel and feasts, and the administration of justice:

As it has been from olden times, in a town in which they have been accustomed to imposing the death penalty, they shall continue to do so. But in a town where they have been accustomed to imposing exile, they shall continue that (custom).³⁷

So 'ethnologically minded' and so capable of appreciating cultural diversities when dealing with peripheral peoples,³⁸ and trying to enlarge their cosmos at the expense of the chaos surrounding it, the Hittites become much more ruthless and 'centre-minded' when some strange custom from the barbarian periphery challenges the inner country and even the royal palace. In this event – as shown unmistakably by the norms applying to the marriage of a Hittite princess to the 'barbarian' chief of the Hayasha – deviance becomes a crime.³⁹

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