



## Disaster Stories

How Local Narratives  
May Have Influenced  
the Ancient Reactions  
to Ecological Calamity

DUSANE XVII

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## A Talk that Is Not a Disaster

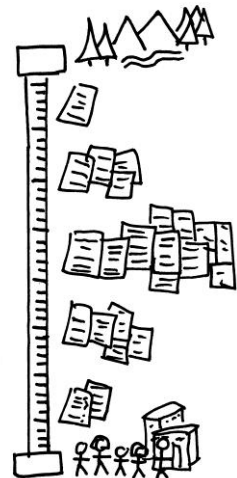
- A Spectral Analysis of the Ancient Reactions to Ecological Calamity
- Three Settlements, Three Choices
- Stories as a Repository for Knowledge
- A Few Examples from West-Asia
- Concluding Remarks



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# A Spectral Analysis of the Ancient Reactions to Ecological Calamity

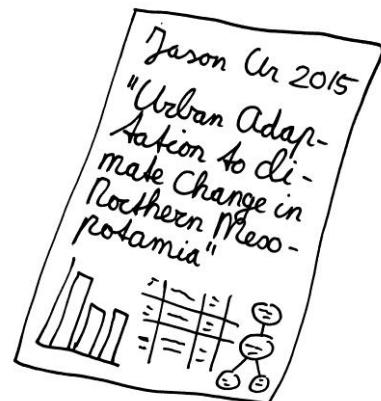
- A spectrum between two extremes
  - Natural Determinism
  - Social (or Cultural) Determinism
- Human actions can both dampen and appear like the impact of (some) ecological calamities
- Complexity: double-edged sword



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## Three Settlements, Three Choices

- A surprising range of choices in the ancient world when ecological calamity struck
- Archaeological data shows us different decisions under similar(ish) circumstances
- In Hamoukar, Tell Brak, and Tell Leilan divergent reactions to increasing aridity around 2200 BCE

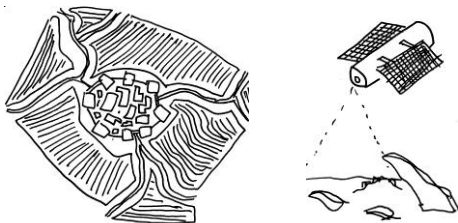


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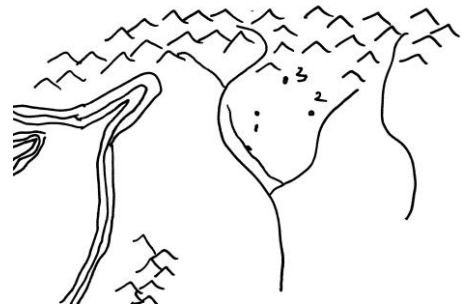
# Three Settlements, Three Choices

How do we know?

- “Hollow roads” in the fields
- Inorganic agricultural remains
- Settlement lay-out



Northern Mesopotamia



1. Tell Brak  
2. Hamoukar

3. Tell Leilan

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# Three Settlements, Three Choices

- Hamoukar
  - Extension agriculture
  - Intensifying agriculture
  - More small settlements
- Tell Brak
  - Extension agriculture
  - Intensifying agriculture
  - Populations detracts



- Tell Leilan
  - Extension agriculture
  - No Intensification
  - Dramatically abandoned

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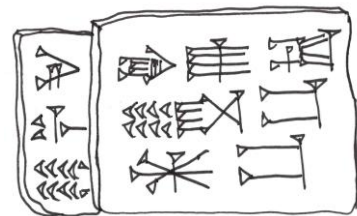
# Stories as a Repository for Knowledge

- An idea from the environmental humanities
  - Places humans back in nature as an explicit part of it
  - No ancient solutions to modern problems, but a reservoir of alternative ideas, mindsets, etc.
- Resilience through stories
  - Johnston 2018: “[Stories] are especially good at describing events that have not been experienced by either the narrators or the listeners themselves so persuasively that those events become credible, thus enlarging the audience’s sense of what might be possible.”

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## A Few Examples from West-Asia

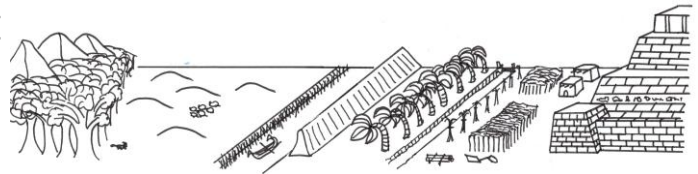
- Stories that present us with the natural world as a prerequisite for a flourishing human existence
  - City Laments
    - *Lament for Sumer and Ur*
    - *The Curse of Agade*
  - Creation Myths
    - *Marduk, Creator of the world*
  - Legends that feature devastated environments
    - *The Epic of Gilgamesh* – Environmental choices go wrong



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# Concluding Remarks

- Natural nor Social (or Cultural) Determinism
- Evidence: hollow roads, pots, settlement lay-out
- Different reactions to ecological calamity around 2200 BCE at Hamoukar, Tell Brak, and Tell Leilan
- Theory: Stories as a repository for knowledge
- Stories from ancient West-Asia seem to fit this framework



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## Thank you for your attention!



### Very (very!) concise Bibliography:

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### Attribution of the Images Used:

- Slide 1: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TellBrak-NE.jpg>, Archaeological site that is today known as Tell Brak (Licence through [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/))
- Slide 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9: drawn by Erwin Dijkstra © 2024-2026

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