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# Assyriology at the Liberal Arts College: A Report from the Field

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## **Assyriology at the Liberal Arts College: A Report from the Field**

When I saw on the second circular that this year's meeting would include a workshop entitled "Teaching and Assyriology," I got the idea for this unusual paper, which is practically and professionally oriented rather than a research report. Since the advertised workshop has a different focus than I assumed, but the organizers were kind enough to accept my paper, I am here in a section called "Assyriology Now and Then" to speak about my experiences as an ancient Near Eastern scholar teaching at a Liberal Arts college or university.

If you earn a PhD in Assyriology, chances are fairly high that you will not teach the kinds of courses your advisor taught. (SLIDE 2) Leading philologically-dense seminars on selected Akkadian or Sumerian texts from some sub-discipline of Assyriology is perhaps the ideal. (SLIDE 3) But, as we all know, the reality of the academic job market makes this career path available to relatively few scholars.

(SLIDE 4) A recent recollection of all tenure-track Assyriology positions in North America in the last ten years yielded just over a dozen advertised positions, which is really an astonishing number in light of the otherwise lousy academic job market. (Baby boomers in our field are retiring!) But still, that's just a little better than one job a year on average. And one is competing for that job with Assyriologists from around the world. (SLIDE 5) There are a couple of regular post-doc opportunities, of course, and short term or leave-replacement positions. But over all, there are really precious few jobs "out there" for people in Assyriology. And finding something

permanent is quite difficult (as our European colleagues know all too well) unless you branch out.

So those of us who don't land an R1 position but want to remain in academia find ourselves competing for jobs in departments of history, religious studies, art history, comparative literature, or, more recently, digital humanities, and most of our teaching is directed at undergraduates. The present paper shares my experiences of doing precisely this for the last ten years (SLIDE 6) in a religious studies department at a relatively small university with a liberal arts college at its core and a number of pre-professional programs attached to it.

After I offer a little background information about my training, I describe how I have incorporated Assyriological materials into a majority of my classes, identify the professional challenges and the benefits of working in an academic unit not focused on Near Eastern Studies, and finally offer some perspectives on how PhD students in Assyriology can shape their education (and dissertation research) so as to become an attractive candidate for jobs outside of a NELC department (without completely undermining chances of landing such a position).

In each section of the paper I consider the ramifications of the topic under discussion in terms of both the individual scholar and the field as a whole. I apologize in advance that my report has a decidedly American flavor. I can only report what I know. But perhaps some of what I say will be of use to my non-American colleagues.

I'll start with a little background. (SLIDE 7)

I went to graduate school at Brandeis University because of my interest in Hebrew Bible, which developed while earning a masters at a divinity school.

The Brandeis program required students to take courses in Bible, Northwest Semitics, and Akkadian for three years (SLIDE 8) with qualifying exams in each area before choosing a dissertation topic. After one year in the program, I was hooked on Mesopotamia and ready to go full-blown Assyriologist. But my advisor dissuaded me. Brandeis was not an Assyriology program. To do it right, I'd need to transfer elsewhere, which posed a difficulty for me, since I already had a family by this time and needed funding. Then there was the issue of getting a job. This was 1998, before the Baby Boomer "mass retirement" started. So, I decided to stay at Brandeis, (SLIDE 9) get excellent training in Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitics, but also shape my course work to include more Assyriology courses. I completed a Mesopotamia-Hebrew Bible comparative dissertation in December 2005 and in spring 2006 (SLIDE 10) I flew out to interview at the Department of Religious and Classical Studies at University of the Pacific for a position that required candidates to do both Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern studies.

Before I talk about Pacific, let me say one thing about my decision to work comparatively in Bible and Assyriology. (SLIDE 11a) Although I think this was a very good decision and my contribution was a solid piece of scholarship, there are consequences for taking this route: (SLIDE 11b) for example, professionally I am neither a Biblicist nor an Assyriologist in the eyes of purists in the respective fields. It would be easy to say, "whatever, who cares what they say."

But it does matter. If you want a chance at doing Assyriology at an R1, you probably shouldn't do anything with Bible in your dissertation.

(SLIDE 12) During the interview stage at Pacific, I learned that the position would be a bridge between the religious and classical studies halves of the department; so I would teach in religion but also offer ancient Near Eastern history and culture courses that would complement the courses offered by the Classicists. All teaching would be to undergraduates and, since the department had so very few majors, most of what I would do would be in general education courses rather than upper-division ones. If I were to get the job, they asked, would I be willing and able to teach periodically a course on Islam, a comparative religion course, a course introducing the academic study of religion, and a section of the fall freshmen seminar that addresses the question "What is a Good Society?" (This latter course, I learned, uses a common syllabus that did not include any reading related to my graduate training.) I said yes to everything and did so in as convincing a manner as possible because I wanted the job. And I got it. I was lucky.

I emailed five other people last week to ask how they landed their first permanent teaching job outside of a NELC department. All of them said very similar things: They were asked to teach outside their discipline (Assyriology), and they all felt extremely lucky to get the job, especially since their PhD program had not prepared them to teach what they were asked to teach.

I have to say that my first five years at Pacific were like being in grad school again. I prepped something like 10 new courses, most of which were taught only once due to low enrollment. As

it turns out, there's not a lot of interest in ancient history among our student body, which overwhelmingly comprises pre-pharmacy, pre-dentistry, engineering, biology, and business majors. About half of my new courses were only tangentially related to my graduate training. Several were well outside my field. I had to teach courses that I had never taken myself. I had to teach students how to write. And I had to learn A LOT about the study of religion and religions, since my training at Brandeis was mostly philological.

I remember mentioning this to the chair of economics, (SLIDE 13) who was interested in my teaching since he was president of the local synagogue. He basically said, "Welcome to the small college. Very few of us teach exclusively in our research specialization. You're a religious studies scholar. So you teach about religion."

In other words, my experience was not unusual.

Now about my teaching:

Since I was hired for Hebrew Bible and ANE, (SLIDE 14a) I teach an Intro to Hebrew Bible/Old Testament course in the fall semester of almost every year. And this, thankfully, has allowed me to integrate a great deal of Mesopotamian material into the course. (SLIDE 14b) We read Enuma elish, Atrahasis, some Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions, a number of incantation-prayers, and Ludlul bel nemeqi while also bringing other items into lectures. This has been an easy course to integrate with my interests in Assyriology, as you can imagine.

Teaching Hebrew Bible in this manner has allowed me to think of connections that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. And so I've generated a few research ideas from my teaching. Also, this interdisciplinary teaching has an impact on both Hebrew Bible and Assyriology. In fact, I think the ANE context of the Bible is one of the most interesting kinds of scholarship going on in Hebrew Bible today, injecting new research potential to a very, very, very well-trod text. One need not be religious to see the connection Assyriology has to the Bible. And because it is considered scripture by contemporary groups, the Bible remains an important means to argue for Assyriology's contemporary relevance. As small and underfunded as we are as a field, we would be foolish to undercut this relationship.

Another course that I developed early on is an (SLIDE 14c) Egyptian and Ancient Near Eastern History course. Although it was on the books as a religious studies course, I eventually got the history department to cross-list it as an elective for their major. Teaching ancient Egypt was a stretch for me since it was outside of my training. And although it was hard to see it back when I was up late prepping the lectures that first time I taught it, I would argue that teaching this course was really good for me. And it's good for the field to have courses like this, since it keeps anyone who teaches it in touch with the big picture of the ancient Near East (SLIDE 14d). Moreover, the panoramic view of 3000 years of history often impresses our students, who rarely understand that our field covers the first half of documented human history.

Another course that I created and regularly teach is a (SLIDE 14e) comparative religion course centered on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In the first four weeks, however, we survey three related religious traditions: Ancient Mesopotamia, Zoroastrianism, and pre-Christian European

traditions (esp. Norse materials). The ancient Mesopotamian material offers many useful opportunities to talk about (SLIDE 14f) environment and religion, imperialism and religion, and intersections with living traditions today (e.g., we discuss Enuma elish in relation to creation accounts in the Hebrew Bible, the notion of a divine image in relation to Genesis 1's concept of "the image of god," and the mis pi ritual in relation to the idol polemic passages in Second Isaiah). Granted, I only get to do this for about two weeks at the start of the semester. But it's a lot of fun. And it demonstrates for students the relevance of cross-cultural thinking with regard to something as revered as the Bible. Moreover, we can make connections to other living traditions as well, since, e.g., Mesopotamia's anthropomorphic concept of divine image offers a stark contrast with the aniconic tendencies in Islam.

Perhaps one of the best opportunities for me to integrate my Assyriological training into my course offerings has been in the freshmen seminars. The first semester is a set syllabus that falls nowhere near my training. It's a read, discuss, write kind of class that you don't "teach" so much as "facilitate." So there's no Assyriology and little religion in it. (SLIDE 15) The second semester, however, is a different matter. In this semester professors are asked to address the question "what is a good society" from the perspective of their respective disciplines. I've taught this course six times, I think, in the last ten years. Five of those times it was centered on mythology, old and new, by which I mean Mesopotamian myth and American myth.

This course is great because it allows me to teach material that I really enjoy while also requiring me to think about the material in both a theoretically more sophisticated manner than is required



by philology as well as in a typological/comparative manner. This has sharpened my ideas about the use of these myths in ancient Mesopotamian society.

I have not been able to incorporate Assyriological stuff in all of my courses. But I would say that a majority of my courses reflect something from the field, and some have a rather good bit of it. This is a good thing for me intellectually. And if others, like some of you, end up doing this kind of thing, too, at liberal arts college, it will also be a good thing for the field because more people will learn about Assyriology in a broader context than the field itself (i.e., in relation to the Hebrew Bible or in a comparative religion context or in a panoramic survey of ancient history).

It would be easy to underplay the importance of teaching Assyriology in the context of these other classes. But where do graduate students in Assyriology come from? Also, the more society knows about our field the more potential there is for us to flourish in terms of funding for research and maintaining or creating academic positions. I'll never forget what a student in my first Egypt and Near Eastern history class wrote in her class evaluation: "You're right, Prof. Lenzi. The clay of Mesopotamia is so much sexier than the gold of Egypt." Winning hearts and minds matters. Who knows, this student may be living in Chicago right now and regularly donating to or volunteering at the Oriental Institute.

Teaching in a non-Near Eastern Studies setting has its benefits and challenges.

(SLIDE 16) As you have heard, one thing that I have to do—that you will have to do in my kind of context—is to teach outside one's area of specialization, which comes with several benefits.

For example, learning so much about the theoretical issues in the study of religion has made me a more informed interpreter of religious texts from ancient Mesopotamia. And I have colleagues who can share their expertise in these areas with me so I can easily find guidance in the field. Broadening one's historical perspective will do the same, I think, for thinking about Mesopotamian history. And again, you will have colleagues to help you along the way.

Although I had a course on ritual in the ANE in which we did readings in anthropology, ritual studies, and religious studies back at Brandeis, it was only when I taught Intro to Religion (something I teach every year) that I could really put all of that critical theory into an intellectual framework and start to think *with it* as applied to texts rather than just think *about it*. This has enhanced my research questions and interpretations.

I think this kind of thing is good for the field, too. When different perspectives are brought to bear on our material, we gain new insights. We shouldn't all just do the same philological thing all the time. Philology for many of us, I think, is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. I don't think all of our Assyriological PhD programs agree with me on this in practice—perhaps in theory but not practice.

Another challenge in teaching at the liberal arts college is that I am (SLIDE 17) isolated geographically from other people working in my fields of interest. This is especially challenging for Assyriologists, who are a rare breed internationally. Your significant other or non-Assyriological friends or your kids aren't the best people with whom to talk Assyriological shop. I am grateful that Berkeley is only a 90 minute drive away. Niek and Laurie and Chessie have

been super welcoming. And I really enjoyed getting to know the grad students there, some of whom are now my colleagues.

The internet is another place to find community, even if disembodied. Still, one misses the camaraderie and cohort experience of having real life colleagues in the office down the hall.

Geographic isolation, of course, is endemic to academia. How one deals with it (or is affected by it) will vary from person to person. Of course, one of the reasons academic fields develop conferences is to provide some remedy for this isolation. So going to conferences, if you can get the funding, can help keep you connected.

Another challenge: (SLIDE 18a) my institution's beautiful library mostly buys materials suitable for undergraduates and not so much for the research interests of the faculty. (SLIDE 18b) It's not the OI Archives. Unless one is independently wealthy, it will be difficult to stay up on the literature. Personally, I'm on very friendly terms with the inter-library loan person on campus. And I always appreciate offprints from colleagues. I think Assyriology recognizes this problem to some extent in efforts such as ETANA and open-access journals/monographs. Another way to deal with this is to look for fellowship and sabbatical opportunities, if your personal circumstances allow for such, to go to the intellectual hubs of Assyriology for a few months or a year. There's always summer travel, too, if your circumstances allow for it.

One of the benefits of teaching at a liberal arts college is that, although your teaching takes more time, your research requirement is typically not as demanding as at an R1. This can be frustrating if you want to have a high output. But knowing that this frustration is self-imposed rather than

the result of a due-or-die, top-down, publish-or-perish requirement can be liberating. (SLIDE 19) So, life can be a little more relaxed, if you want it to be. If you like to learn but feel no sense of destiny to be the top person in your niche of the field, the slower pace at a liberal arts college nicely facilitates a life of the mind that some of your colleagues at an R1 may find enviable. And the relative leisure that you have to pursue your intellectual interests can foster thoughtful scholarship. Also, many liberal arts colleges have beautiful campuses. (SLIDE 20) I ride my bike to this place every weekday, where I spend about eight hours teaching, reading, writing, translating, and thinking in my own office. If I didn't have to go to committee meetings or worry about enrollment numbers, this would be about as good as it could get!

In conclusion, I offer a few remarks to PhD students about how you might prepare yourself for a non-NELC teaching position without completely cutting off a possibility for such.

First, (SLIDE 21) be intellectually curious; maintain broad interests. You probably already are all of these things, if you are in a PhD program. But it is easy to get so focused on one's sub-sub-sub niche within Assyriology that one loses perspective. Interest in Old Babylonian letters, for example, while writing a dissertation on Neo-Babylonian administrative documents doesn't qualify. Revisit some of the things you may have learned in literature or history or religion or sociology undergraduate classes. If you think you are lacking in some of these areas, sit in on a class or two while dissertating or make time to read outside your discipline. Most of us know less than we wish we knew. If you want to teach in a history department, for example, start reading up on Greece and Rome because, according to my email correspondents, more than likely,

you're going to be the ancient historian at your liberal arts college. So make time to keep learning, which is related to my second point.

(SLIDE 22) If you are planning a dissertation, start thinking early and often about how your research might connect to issues or questions in fields other than Assyriology—things in the Humanities or Social Sciences. I credit Pamela Barmash for this advice, who asked me this very question when she interviewed me for an adjunct position while I was writing my dissertation. That question changed my thinking about my research and about my teaching. Thank you, Pamela.

I wrote a comparative dissertation on secrecy in Mesopotamia and the Bible. While working on this I found a whole body of scholarship on secrecy and society that was fascinating, and it helped me frame what I was proposing in a theoretically sophisticated manner. Furthermore, learning about secrecy in society more generally gave me a sociological perspective that I hadn't had before, which allowed me to converse with colleagues outside my field (including one scholar at my first campus interview with the same interest but different data). I found the same to be true when I started thinking about prayer in ancient Mesopotamia. And I've been reading widely on the problem of evil as well as in the area of comparative literature for a bit now as I prepare a monograph of criticism on *Ludlul*. Reading outside the field can open one's eyes to different perspectives. Of course you have to frame a dissertation within the concerns and issues of Assyriology. But that's not the only frame you have to use. You don't have to be insular. You may find it easier to get a job or funding or opportunity to teach a class if you can connect your Assyriological interests to something larger.

Third, (SLIDE 23) develop a course that is essential to the kind of department you want to teach in. Have it ready to go before job interviews begin. For example, if you are going to teach in a history department—from which most of my correspondents hailed, be ready with your syllabus for “Western Civ up to 1500” and be prepared for another class like “History of Ancient Egypt and the Near East” or “Ancient Empires: Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome.” Look at course catalogs from several schools to get a sense of their course offerings. Work one of these up for teaching. And develop something that would complement their current offerings, too.

Fourth, (SLIDE 24) if you have the opportunity, teach some classes before you finish your dissertation. Teaching experience is a huge bonus for job applicants at liberal arts colleges. Research is important. But teaching experience is just as much and often more so. Yes this may slow you down a little. But teaching experience may be the best way to distinguish yourself from the other 100 people who applied for the job you want. I heard the same from all of my email correspondents.

Freshmen writing seminars may be one of the best opportunities for getting experience. These courses are quite popular right now at liberal arts colleges and even some large state schools, and they are an excellent opportunity for you to teach something relatively close to your interests, sometimes including your research. We had a visiting professor a couple years ago offer a freshmen seminar on the Stoics. It went over very well. I’ve already mentioned how I taught Mesopotamian mythology paired with American mythology. You might consider something to

do with empire or international diplomacy in the ancient world or everyday life in Babylon or whatever. Examples aren't hard to find online.

(SLIDE 25) Fifth, start to think about best, student-centered practices. An R1 program may be most interested in your research. Great. Be ready to explain how your research makes an original contribution to the field in about 45 seconds. The elevator pitch. But also know that at a liberal arts college, it will be every bit as important to be ready to talk to a hiring committee about your teaching philosophy and how you foster discussion, open engagement, and inclusiveness in the classroom. Experience is ideal here, since you can exemplify your teaching philosophy with anecdotes from what you've already learned in the classroom. And teaching experience also provides networking opportunities with and recommendations from the other scholars at the school you are teaching for. This is invaluable.

These are all personal reflections. Others will have had a different path and different experiences.

I'd be happy to open the floor up to questions, concerns, and advice. Thank you.