

Seth Richardson

Between teaching the ninety-eight students of his Neo-Assyrian empire, Mesopotamian History, Babylonian Knowledge, and Historiography classes, **Seth Richardson** was happy to shepherd several articles, notes, and reviews to publication while setting to work on several more.

Most important of the studies to appear was his “Babylonian Countrysides” article. Babylonia, touted as an urban civilization since its nineteenth-century A.D. rediscovery, was nevertheless in antiquity an overwhelmingly rural culture. Experimenting with an investigation of a “civilization of villages,” the essay looks at the wide variety of village types and terminologies, the appearance of rural zones in belles lettres and the law, and their role in shaping the development of ancient states. Shifting the focus of attention away from states and cities helps us see those entities as competitors for control over countrysides and their varied populations — in farming villages, fishing camps, trading posts, and military garrisons.

Aiding in this effort was data supplied by the Oriental Institute’s MASS Project, from which Carrie Hritz was able to generate mapped images such as the one shown in figure 1. The map displays in white the agricultural sustaining areas of all known and surveyed Babylonian settled areas of the period ca. 2100–1600 B.C., large and small, against a dark backdrop of uncultivated lands. Even the simple aspect of inverting the map’s color scheme highlights the minority of productive areas, their lack of contiguity, and the natural isolation of even large cities within their hinterlands. Seen through this lens, the Mesopotamian landscape appears dominated by countrysides rather than cities.

Also appearing was Richardson’s “Death and Dismemberment” study, which looked at deliberate inversions of funerary ritual and related ideal types of social practice as a way of elucidating ancient sentiments about mortality and practice. Corpse abuse and abandonment were powerful literary motifs that acted on and reflected Mesopotamian social anxieties about death and the body. Such anxieties were precisely the complex of hopes and fears that gave ideal and optimizing practices of funerals, burials, and the dead their operational force.

A reconsideration of a rare but critical Akkadian term (*girginakku*) led to Richardson’s conclusion in “*gir₃-gen-na* and Šulgi’s ‘Library’” that its early use to mean “procedure” rather than “library” had implications for the early development of Mesopotamian liver-omen literature. If Šulgi’s important twenty-first-century B.C. mention of his “*gir₃-gen-na* of omens” referred to his way of interpreting signs — rather than to his written collection of omens — this strongly supports an Old Babylonian authorship of the vast ominous corpus rather than a continuous compilation of observed phenomena.

As co-sponsor of the Ancient Societies Workshop for a third year, Richardson helped to welcome seventeen speakers for a year’s focus on urbanism. Workshop discussions ranged from

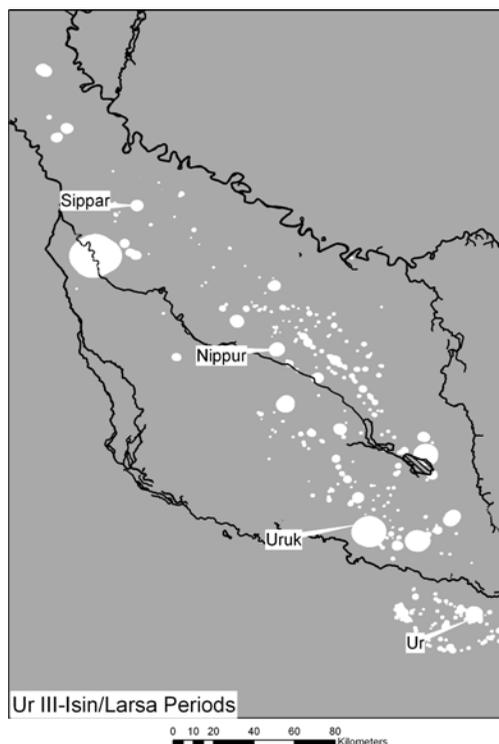


Figure 1

INDIVIDUAL RESEARCH

early prehistoric urban forms to settlements of late antiquity — from early Syrian cities to Aramaean nomadic sedentarization to the city in Roman imperial ideology. He also spoke during the University of Chicago’s Humanities Day on “How to Build a God: Mesopotamian Icons and Biblical Parodies,” as well as delivering a paper on historical methodology at the Chicago meeting of American Oriental Society. For the coming year, he looks forward to a host of invited projects and lectures with the Association of Ancient Historians, the American Schools of Oriental Research, the Smart Museum, and Chicago’s Humanities Festival. Last but not least should be the completion of work on his Old Babylonian historical monograph — and another full roster of students.
