



Before Nature: Cuneiform Knowledge and the History of Science

Francesca Rochberg

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In the modern West, we take for granted that what we call the “natural world” confronts us all and always has—but *Before Nature* explores that almost unimaginable time when there was no such conception of “nature”—no word, reference, or sense for it.

Before the concept of nature formed over the long history of European philosophy and science, our ancestors in ancient Assyria and Babylonia developed an inquiry into the world in a way that is kindred to our modern science. With *Before Nature*, Francesca Rochberg explores that Assyro-Babylonian knowledge tradition and shows how it relates to the entire history of science. From a modern, Western perspective, a world not conceived somehow within the framework of physical nature is difficult—if not impossible—to imagine. Yet, as Rochberg lays out, ancient investigations of regularity and irregularity, norms and anomalies clearly established an axis of knowledge between the knower and an intelligible, ordered world. Rochberg is the first scholar to make a case for how exactly we can understand cuneiform knowledge, observation, prediction, and explanation in relation to science—without recourse to later ideas of nature. Systematically examining the whole of Mesopotamian science with a distinctive historical and methodological approach, *Before Nature* will open up surprising new pathways for studying the history of science.

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