

BOOK REVIEW

Highways, Byways, and Road Systems in the Pre-Modern World. Edited by SUSAN E. ALCOCK, JOHN BODEL, and RICHARD J. A. TALBERT. *The Ancient World: Comparative Histories*. Malden Mass., Oxford and Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. Pp. xx + 289. Hardcover, £85.00/\$140.95. ISBN 978-0-470-67425-3.

This volume contains 14 contributions concerning roads in pre-modern societies all over the world, dating from the second millennium BC until the 19th century AD, thus covering a period of ca. 4000 years. In the Introduction, the editors state that they were forced to make a selection; it was impossible to include all contributions concerning pre-modern road systems. There are two contributions concerning the Chinese road system and even three concerning the Roman network, but contributions discussing, e.g., Russia, Crete, the Carolingian and Aztec Empires are lacking.

At first sight, the order of the articles is unclear. They seem to be placed neither chronologically, nor geographically. The majority of the contributors are working at American universities and for some reasons they have chosen to start exactly on the other side of the world: India. The journey around the world goes eastward from here: via China and Japan to Meso-America and South America, crossing the Atlantic Ocean and, then in order, the Sahara Desert, the Persian Empire, Egypt, the Roman Empire and, finally, the Holy Land. The sequence of the last contributions especially—8 to 14—is strange. The other part of this volume suggests a journey from west to east—so why not at first the Sahara Desert, and then Europe, Egypt, the Holy Land and, finally, the Persian Empire, to the boundaries of India, the theme of the current first article? In that case, the circle of the earth might have been closed.

Starting at the first article and travelling through the entire volume, the reader meets many types of road systems. Empires with a central capital—the Persian, Roman, Chinese and Japanese Empires—have an extended road system of well-built roads, staging posts and lodges. Civilizations where a central capital is absent are not equipped with a long-distance road system: India, the Maya area and the Southwestern part of (nowadays) the United States. Some articles do not discuss roads at all, but routes, like the article on Masonen: the theme of this con-

tribution is the caravan route system in the Sahara Desert. The last article (by Silverstein) does not discuss roads or routes, but Jewish social networks. In the present volume, only inter-urban and inter-regional road systems are discussed; roads and streets inside cities are not mentioned at all.

Not only do the different articles show different types of roads, but the scientific approach of the articles also differs. On the one hand, some articles discuss the routes, the histories and the archaeology of the roads widely; the article by Vaporis contains a large number of beautiful pictures of the Japanese road system. On the other hand, the information in some other articles concerning the roads themselves is scarce, but they focus on the interaction of the roads and their landscapes (Julien) and on even more abstract aspects like Hinduism (Neelis) and the road gods in China (Nylan). In some articles, roads are even mentioned as metaphors. The main goal of this book is to compare not only different road types but also the backgrounds and functions of roads.

Talbert points out rightly that we have to be careful not to consider, study and research roads too much from our modern point of view, i.e., considering roads as concentrated means of communication. Road maps, for example, were unknown in any pre-modern society, as far as we know. Moreover, traffic in former times cannot be compared with traffic nowadays (see, e.g., my *Traffic and Congestion in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 2007)).

Because of the divergent points of view in the articles included, a comparison between different road systems is almost impossible. In some articles (Nylan on China, p. 35 and Vaporis on Japan, p. 91), the road systems are actually compared with the Roman road systems, but it is difficult to compare, e.g. the Chinese and Maya road systems. All articles, however, are equipped with sufficient bibliographies.

The volume would have profited from an overview—or appendix—providing all measures (linear, cubic etc.). On p. 15 (Neelis), it is said that “every eight *kos* I have had wells excavated.” What is a *kos*? Another example: p. 36 (Nylan) speaks about “30 *zhong* of grain.” How much is a *zhong*? Even in the endnotes of these articles an explanation concerning the different measures is lacking.

The layout of the volume is well done; the number of typographical errors is low (e.g., Neelis, p. 15, mentions Hultszch but in the bibliography it is Hultzsch). A useful index with many cross-references is added. The title, however, *Highways, Byways and Road Systems*, suggests that byways are also discussed, but according

to the index, there are only three references to “byways,” all in India. A subtitle like *Constructions, Functions and Metaphors* would have given a more accurate indication of the book; as it is, the reader first encountering the book’s cover might expect a merely archaeological and historical approach.

In short, the articles offer good starting-points for further research, and they provide as well good and elaborate bibliographies, but more uniformity would have been helpful.

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