

## BOOK REVIEW

*A Companion to the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East. Edited by D.T. Potts. Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World: Literature and Culture. 2 volumes. Malden, MA; Oxford; Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. Pp. xxxi + 1445. Hardcover, \$400.00. ISBN 978-1-4051-8988-0.*

This *Companion*, consisting of two volumes, counts a total of 58 contributions. These cover about 20,000 years of human history throughout the Ancient Near East, geographically from India via Iran through Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and the Levant to Egypt, in the time from Late Pleistocene hunters and gatherers (in the Levant and Anatolia) to the Byzantine (in Asia Minor and the Levant) and Sasanian Empires. One or two caveats are in place: the attention paid to India is, in fact, quite marginal and limited to its relations with the Ancient Near East (henceforth: ANE) proper, a situation similar to Egypt's role (Blackwell's *A Companion to Ancient Egypt*, edited by Alan B. Lloyd, already covers much of that ground). Nevertheless, this *Companion* is a huge enterprise that offers—in spite of the fact that real in-depth studies should not be anticipated beforehand (if only because of the amount of ground covered in these volumes)—much to read and appreciate, not only for and by an interested greater audience but also for and by students and, be it likely not in their own particular field of experience, scholars.

The *Companion* consists of six sections: “The Framework,” “Late Pleistocene and Early Holocene Hunters and Gatherers,” “Developments in Farming, Animal Husbandry, and Technology,” “Varieties of Early Village and Town Life,” “Bronze Age Cities of the Plains and the Highlands,” and “The Archaeology of Empire” (by far the largest section, taking nearly the whole of volume 2), each divided into several chapters. They reflect “[T]he explosion of knowledge and its diversity” (xxviii) of ANE studies over the last decades, in spite of (or perhaps thanks to) the wars and strife that have struck the Near East in this period. A consequence of these upheavals is, apart from the human sufferings they may convey, the threats they too often pose to cultural heritage. The looting of the Baghdad archaeological museum in 2003 (in which ultimately about 15,000 items were

robbed) and the aftermath of the U.S. invasion throughout Iraq underline the importance of our awareness of the potential consequences of such occurrences. Some of these issues are the subject of the penultimate chapter of Section 1, “The Framework,” a chapter written by Reinhard Bernbeck entitled “The Political Dimension of Archaeological Practices” (87–105), in which the U.S. invasion in Iraq also plays a part.

As an increasing number of countries try to recover objects from their cultural heritage that have been transported to foreign museums in the sometimes not so distant past, it is time for scholars to realize that their work has several dimensions—of which they may or, frequently, may not be directly aware. Some of these play a role in Oscar White Muscarella’s paper, which, as the last chapter of Section 1, is devoted to one of the scourges of ancient studies in general and of ANE studies in particular, “The Antiquities Trade and the Destruction of Ancient Near Eastern Cultures” (106–24). This chapter outlines the problems illegal excavations, plundering, and theft and their many and various by-products (in which also museums of repute frequently do not act as responsible guardians) pose to a proper reconstruction of the past. Though the chapter might, at first sight, look somewhat disappointing, it is nevertheless very much to the point and factual, its lessons vital for the curriculum of students of archaeology. Like all chapters in the *Companion*, it also ends with a useful “Guide to Further Reading” (124).

Precisely because the Near East (i.e. the Eurocentric—or Western—Near East!) is, in many respects, a volatile region, it is important that we remain constantly conscious of the many pitfalls that await those unprepared for it. Therefore, too, it is sensible of Potts to insert these chapters on legal and ethical issues, basically fundamental to all ancient but certainly to ANE studies, in the first section next to such elementary chapters as, e.g., “Introduction to Geography, Climate, Topography, and Hydrology” (T. J. Wilkinson, 8–26) or “Early Excavations (pre-1914)” (Nicole Chevalier, 48–69). Moreover, since the political (in its widest sense) dimension of Near Eastern studies, certainly also including ANE studies, is so vast, I have paid relatively much attention to these subjects.

Naturally, politics do not dominate all contributions in these two volumes. It is, though, apt to consider Bernbeck’s words: “[S]ince we live in times of fast social and technological change, our interests in the past are likely to change at the same pace, resulting in a need to rewrite the history and archaeology of Western Asia and neighboring regions in the not too distant future. The next attempt will not be a better history because our factual base has grown; rather, histories mirror

the times in which they are written more than we might want to admit" (103). This observation underlines the fact that these volumes, impressive as they are, (merely) reflect the character of our age, a character that is bound to change, and those changes will lead to different questions to be asked of the evidence available from the past. That being said, it does not alter the fact that the volumes under scrutiny very much consider the present questions that can (and should) be put to the evidence available at present.

It may be obvious from the above that the field of ANE studies is so wide that one naturally feels that some subjects have been omitted in this project. Some apparently have, sometimes due to the fact that assigned subjects were not submitted to the editor, sometimes undoubtedly because the space available is not limitless or because subjects have been overlooked. Nevertheless, I have the feeling that, as far as I can see, the final result presents a reasonably representative picture of the field of ANE studies today. As it is impossible to pay attention to all contributions within the limits reasonable for a review, I will try to highlight a number of them. This is not intended to detract from either the value or the interest of the contributions I do not discuss. It reflects, above all, my personal interests and the fields with which I am, to some extent, familiar.

From Section 3 ("Developments in Farming, Animal Husbandry, and Technology"), consisting of 11 contributions, I was particularly interested in the contributions by George Willcox, "The Beginnings of Cereal Cultivation and Domestication in Southwest Asia" (163–80), Cameron A. Petrie, "Ceramic Production" (279–94), and Lloyd Weeks, "Metallurgy" (295–316). I found Willcox's paper fascinating reading, detailing how the cultivation of nine odd hard-grained annual plants, facilitated by favorable changes in climate, so fundamentally changed life. As ceramics are one of the main determinants, if not the most important, for the archaeologist, Petrie's contribution is, in itself, a useful review of techniques and methods, though perhaps too full of too varied information. It is, moreover, a contribution where several photographs and/or drawings might have greatly enhanced the text. Among the major indigenous technological advances of the ANE, metallurgical innovations played a critical role. Weeks documents the "discovery" and use of various metals and alloys clearly and conveniently, though here, as well, some drawings might have served the reader well.

In Section 4 ("Varieties of Early Village and Town Life"), counting 8 contributions, I especially focused on "Southern Mesopotamia" by Joan Oates (466–84) and "Southwestern Iran" by Abbas Moghaddam (512–30), regions situated

not far apart but with no apparent frequent interrelations. Even though the early prehistory of southern Mesopotamia is little understood, if only because changing levels and flows of water have covered much information, Oates succeeds in painting a coherent picture of this region, mainly focusing on both central (Samaritan sites) and southern (Ubaid and Late Chalcolithic periods) Mesopotamia. Moghaddam's "portrait" of "the best studied region in Iran" (512) deals with the major issues regarding work in this region, i.e. illustrated with a convenient table, showing that the evidence available is not necessarily sufficient to answer new questions. Occasionally relics of modern-day warfare (viz. the first Gulf War between Iran and Iraq) still interfere with necessary research.

As regards the penultimate section, "Bronze Age Cities of the Plains and the Highlands," counting 6 chapters, the most relevant chapters for me are "The Anatolian Plateau" by Christoph Bachhuber (575–95) and "Iran" by Christopher P. Thornton (596–606). Bachhuber focuses to a large extent on two cities, sc. Kültepe-Kanesh and Boğazköy-Hattusha, and provides a sufficient description of life on the Anatolian plateau, notably in the Early and Middle Bronze Ages, though also the Late Bronze Age is (relatively) amply discussed, especially as regards Hattusha. Thornton's account deals with the centers (specifically not cities!) that reappeared on the Iranian plateau from the mid 3rd millennium bc, first in eastern Iran, from around 2000 bc again in southwestern Iran. As examples, Thornton touches upon Tale Malyan, Susa, Tepe Hissar, and Konar Sandal but unfortunately breaks off too early. To make his point, "that the Bronze Age centers of Iran existed primarily as centers of craft production, commerce, and ideopolitical administration" (605–6), some more detailed elaboration of the evidence would have been most welcome.

The last section, "The Archaeology of Empire," consists of 25 contributions. Most are of excellent quality, though I found some papers, like Possehl's ("India's Relations with Western Empires, 2300–600 bc," 758–69), regrettably short. In view of the space available, I would like to pay special attention to two contributions and especially the method applied in them, by Trevor Bryce ("The Hittite Empire," 722–39) and Wouter Henkelman ("The Achaemenid Heartland: An Archaeological-Historical Perspective" 931–62). Both chapters are successful examples of a multidisciplinary approach, combining the *available* (my italics) literary and archaeological evidence to create a fairly comprehensive view of the subject described. I know that such an approach is not always feasible, but, in my view, it shows the direction for which ANE studies in particular should aim. Luckily, these two contributors are by no means the only ones in this volume who

applied this approach (even though these volumes primarily are on the *archaeology* of the ANE), but as regards my personal interests, they stood out.

From some of my remarks above, it may be apparent that I am slightly ambivalent as regards this *Companion*. On the one hand, I applaud the sheer courage to have embarked on it and to bring the project to completion. On the other hand, I have the feeling that the dissemination of the present knowledge of the ANE perhaps might have been better served by a number of works on separate regions so as to do full justice to all knowledge and insights gained over the last century as well as to the changing perspectives in the various fields of research. That goal, though, might perhaps better be achieved by a series of proper handbooks on these subjects (even though such works often tend to be too static for dynamic fields like modern ANE studies): as it is, this is (merely?) a companion, in fact a guidebook, but one with, after all, relatively balanced contents. Among the (many) bonuses surely are an excellent and extensive bibliography (1117–1379) and an accessible and useful index (1380–1445). The latter makes these volumes, at the very least, very suited to (quickly) look up some main outlines, certainly for periods or areas with which one is not completely familiar. In the end, Potts, therefore, deserves our well-earned compliments for his achievement. Moreover, the volumes are—as is usual at Wiley-Blackwell's—well-edited as can be seen, i.e., from the fact that the number of typos is really very limited and from the good quality of the maps.

JAN P. STRONK

*Oude Geschiedenis, Universiteit van Amsterdam, j.p.stronk@uva.nl*

