

### REVIEW ESSAY

*The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant c. 8000-332 BCE*. Edited by STEINER, MARGREET L. AND ANN E. KILLEBREW. Oxford Handbooks in Archaeology. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xxi + 885. Hardcover, \$175.00. ISBN 9780199212972[1]

*State Correspondence in the Ancient World: from New Kingdom Egypt to the Roman Empire*. Edited By KAREN RADNER. Oxford Studies in Early Empires. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xiv + 306 p. Hardcover, \$74.00. ISBN 9780199354771.

At first sight it might seem odd to combine a review of these two books. Nevertheless, I think it does make some sense. Though Radner's *State Correspondence in the Ancient World* theoretically covers both a shorter period and a more extended territory, it does add in several cases an extra aspect to Steiner's and Killebrew's *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant*. Moreover, both books are intended for a similar audience, graduate students and scholars, though I believe that undergraduates might well benefit from them as well, although with some difficulties. Finally, it seems worthwhile to combine wherever possible the research into the material and the literary evidence of antiquity: a combination that the work of Jonathan M. Hall tries to stimulate and on which he has written an inspiring guide.<sup>1</sup> With this starting point in mind, I offer an assessment of both books in combination, taking into account the difference in methodology that characterizes the work of the archaeologist and the ancient historian.

The book edited by Steiner and Killebrew essentially consists of three parts (apart from the introduction), the first two consisting of 4 chapters each, part three divided in 7 sections (each representing a distinct period: Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Early and Intermediate Bronze, Middle Bronze, Late Bronze, Iron Age I, and Iron Age II), all of them discussed in several chapters, creating a book of in total 55 chapters written by 54 scholars, both 'established' and younger. It pro-

<sup>1</sup>*Artifact and Artifice: Classical Archaeology and the Ancient Historian*. HALL, JONATHAN M. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

vides the reader with an overview of the status quo of research in the archaeological record of the Levant of these periods to date.

All chapters end with a bibliography of the relevant—and frequently very recent—titles. The three parts explore the following themes: archaeology of the Levant: background and definitions; the Levant as the crossroads of empires; and the archaeological record proper. To avoid the religious and political implications of the term “biblical archaeology”, the editors have opted for “archaeology of the Levant”, even though the latter term can be taken ambiguously as well. In this handbook, the term refers to the countries that border the eastern littoral of the Mediterranean.

The book edited by Radner is the result of a project at University College London, resulting in a volume with seven contributions, of which the final one (by Simon Corcoran) discusses the “State Correspondence in the Roman Empire: Imperial Communication from Augustus to Justinian”, the penultimate one “The King’s Words: Hellenistic Royal Letters in Inscriptions” (Alice Bencivenni). The remaining five are generally much more connected to the (Late Bronze and/or Iron Age) world detailed in Steiner’s and Killebrew’s *Handbook*. The objectives of Radner’s book are, as she explains in its introduction, twofold. First, to describe the available material and its original context and transmission: what do we have and what do we not have, and why. Second, to highlight the correspondences’ role in maintaining empires. To do so, a comparative approach is used as much as possible, to draw out similarities and differences between the different empires.

I can only admit that, in spite of the obvious differences, both books by their contents, the scope of the contributions, and the obvious mastery of the subjects discussed, exceeded my expectations: both Steiner and Killebrew and Radner are to be congratulated for works that deserve to be on the bookshelf- or the desk- of anyone working in the field of, notably, Ancient Near Eastern research.

The books also meet in several chapters: e.g. chapter 5, “Egypt and the Levant”, by Gregory Mumford in Steiner/Killebrew meets with chapter 1, “Egyptian State Correspondence of the New Kingdom: The Letters of the Levantine Client Kings in the Amarna Correspondence and Contemporary Evidence”, by Jana Mynářová in Radner; chapter 6, “Anatolia (Hittites) and the Levant”, by Horst Klengel in Steiner/Killebrew meets with chapter 2, “State Correspondence in the Hittite World”, by Mark Weeden in Radner; chapter 7, “Mesopotamia (Assyrians and Babylonians) and the Levant”, by Tammi Schneider in Steiner/Killebrew meets with chapters 3, “An Imperial Communication Network:

The State Correspondence of the Neo-Assyrian Empire”, by Karen Radner and 4, “The Lost State Correspondence of the Babylonian Empire as Reflected in Contemporary Administrative Letters”, by Michael Jursa, both in Radner; and chapter 8, “Achaemenid Persia and the Levant”, by Josette Elayi in Steiner/Killebrew meets with chapter 5, “State Communications in the Persian Empire”, by Amélie Kuhrt in Radner. In this respect, meeting does not at all imply that the results are congruent or even supplementary: it merely indicates that the subjects are, to some extent, identical and that the chapters show that a different set of methodological tools may generate another (not necessarily altogether different) picture of a given society.

Much more direct is of course the relation of Mynářová’s contribution in Radner, focusing on the El-Amarna archive, with the first five chapters of section E in Steiner/Killebrew, dedicated to the Late Bronze Age of the Levant (the last chapter of this section is on LBA Cyprus). However, here as well the results of one study cannot directly corroborate those of another: Hall makes, rightly, very clear that literary and material evidence is not to be linked immediately, at least as long as it is not “labelled” unmistakably. Such a “positivist fallacy” tends to overlook that, though both kinds of evidence might appear to support each other, we should constantly bear in mind that other explanations remain possible or feasible. One of the major reasons to entertain such prudence—and one that becomes notably clear from the various contributions in both books—is the fact that our evidence, of both kinds, ultimately is extremely fragmentary. In this respect it is essential first to try and define a “broader literary or material context and only then to consider whether there might be a relationship between the two” (Hall 2014, 208).

Most of all, however, the enormous advance in knowledge, both in the fields of archaeology and letters, over the last twenty-five years alone should make us cautious to make any overly bold statement. What these chapters taken together do make clear, though, is that it is necessary, both for historians and archaeologists, not to look too one-dimensional to the other field and to be—or become—aware of the potential the other trade has to offer. After all, both historians and archaeologists—be it each with their different set of methodological tools—are concerned with elucidating the past.

Despite the general excellence of both books, I have some reservations regarding the *Handbook* (Steiner/Killebrew). The first remark is directed at biblical scholars. As regards the later periods discussed, notably the LBA and IA, with

which they are probably most familiar, the chapters offer helpful landmarks to navigate some of the tangled archaeological/historical debates (“Who were the Israelites?”, “Was there a Davidic/Solomonic kingdom?”, “What did it look like?”). However, the different authors (guided by the editors?) steer away from getting too much involved in these matters, probably aware of another pitfall Hall is warning for, sc. that both archaeology and history can be profoundly political- or ideological--disciplines: therefore “[a]ncient historians and classical archaeologists need to be sensitive to the politics of the past” (Hall 2014, 211).

A second remark really is on a matter of contents for a book that states to be a handbook of the *archaeology* (my italics) of the Levant. Some of the authors spend more time discussing the history of events as described in texts (sometimes texts discovered in excavations, sometimes the Bible, sometimes both) than they do describing the nature of the archaeological data. In itself a discussion of texts is, naturally, altogether legitimate, but I do not believe this handbook is the right place to do so: here some more guidance by the editors would have been necessary. Thirdly, I missed a contribution on Mitanni and/or the Hurrians (in Part II). And, finally, I find that the Iron Age receives (relatively) a little too much attention compared to other periods (even though I am perfectly aware of the fact that the IA yields, and has yielded, more material).

In comparison, my remarks on Radner seem minor, though I believe it of some to be on a matter of respect to the reader. For some reason either Radner or the publisher has opted for endnotes instead of footnotes. I find that inconvenient and distracting from the attention both the authors deserve and the audience needs to do the authors full justice. Moreover, though I normally applaud a central bibliography, I believe that for purposes of review in this case a bibliography per chapter would have been preferable, even if it would mean that some books appear at the end of more than one chapter. Finally, I do regret that Mynářová has not been able to include the latest edition of the El-Amarna tablets (*The El-Amarna Correspondence*, Rainey, A.F. (ed.). 2 vols. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015 [already available]) in her contribution: it would have added to the great value her contribution already has. All these remarks, though, do not detract of my appreciation for both of these books, that are, moreover, well prepared. Of course both books have an index that in either case considerably facilitates their use and accessibility.

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