

The Babylonians: An Introduction. By Gwendolyn Leick. (London & New York: Routledge, 2003; pp. vi + 182. 13 figures. \$25.95 US (£12.99 UK edition), pbk).

The book that is the subject of this review is not a grand, sweeping book trying to address the full breadth of Mesopotamian history. Although it is entitled *The Babylonians: An Introduction*, it does not seek to be a fully preparatory book for such studies. It is unlikely that Gwendolyn Leick, author of several more thematic works in the field, such as *Mesopotamia: The Invention of the City*, intended it to be such. For what it is, a brief book, *The Babylonians: An Introduction* achieves admirably what I believe to be the author's central goals, namely, to gain the interest of general readers and bring to them a taste of Babylonian history. In the introduction, the skeleton of the book is laid out, and some of the considerations needed to understand textual limitations are outlined. This scheme is followed more or less consistently throughout the rest of the book.

Chapter 1, 'Setting the Scene', and Chapter 2, 'History', cover the obligatory basics. As this is a book aimed at the novice, the first chapter covers much of the material necessary to follow the rest of the book. The fundamental characteristics of the southern Mesopotamian region, the importance and the fickle nature of the river arteries, and the development of writing and cartography are mentioned in order to provide a conceptual framework for further study. No book on any facet of the ancient Near East is complete without paying homage to the social and economic importance of the writing phenomenon, and to the very genesis of recorded history in third-millennium Mesopotamia. Both the revolutionary aspects of cuneiform, such as its ability to render other languages, and its limitations, such as multiple meanings of the same signs (which could be used to denote either 'letters', syllables, or whole words and ideas), are touched upon. As with other sections of the book, the major limitation of this chapter is the constraint of space.

The second chapter comprises a short history of Babylonia from the Third Millennium through to the post-Alexandrian Seleucid Dynasty. The text manages to cover all this ground superficially in forty-six pages, without feeling terribly rushed. Special mention is made of the Sumerian King List, upon which much of our knowledge of royal succession and chronology is based. The 'linear' nature of history, shown to the reader through the author's analysis of the Babylonians, is illustrated in one of the few charts or figures in the book, an overview of 'Dynastic' succession on page 24. Leick also presents the phenomenon that is the seemingly total historical continuity as time flows through occupation, after disaster, after dynasty. Despite the limitations of space, the overview is well written, if not thematic, and continuity is maintained fairly seamlessly.

There are two points of interest in this chapter. While it is indisputable that the codification of the Babylonian Law by Hammurabi was a landmark, and the Code of Hammurabi was revolutionary, and there is mention here and elsewhere in the book of the severity of these laws, the biased nature of class-orientation (in which those of a lower class were treated far more harshly than those of an upper class when in breach of the law, and one of an upper class paid far less in reparations than his inferiors) feels downplayed. The other point of interest (and perhaps this was done to allow new readers to find the theory more accessible, or at least not to overwhelm them) is that while Leick is obviously writing this book from an anthro-historical (as opposed to a strictly historical) position, almost every form of dating system is mentioned, except hardcore archaeological methods like sherd dating. Again, due to space constraints, it is likely that this was left out to allow room for fuller discussion of a few select topics. Many topics omitted from this text require far more than the little space this volume can offer to be done any manner of justice. Often another book, rather than another chapter, would be appropriate for further investigation. The book also delegates aspects of theory and culture to other chapters, such as the discussion of the classes of the enslaved, the inferior, and the freeman (*wardum*, *muškēnum*, and *awīlum*), which is found in the chapter on society and economy, where it fits comfortably.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the household-based system, and the pivotal nature of this social edifice. As the book correctly states, the whole of society, from the Royal and Temple Estates to the lowest of common urbanites, was organized into a household-based system. This system became the basis of all life, including the celestial life of the gods. An interesting point that is explored in a later chapter is the permeation of patriarchy from the household system of the temporal citizens into the household of the gods, where even the great goddess Ishtar was domesticated. The presentation of the material is easy to understand, yet informative and thorough. The sources cited for the subsection on the merchant community are a mix of both established sources and new research blended together and focusing, as unfortunately we are often forced to focus, on data from trade routes through Anatolia, in lieu of any hard data from Babylonia. Other economic factors, including the loan and debt scenario, prostitution, and the silver standard are also covered. In the last subsection of the chapter, the themes that seem lacking in other areas of the book are found, as the author delineates the premeditated exploitation of the weak by the ruling power elite. Up to this point the book felt slightly pro-Estate (those land owners and traders with the ear of the King and royal household). However, as much of the evidence surrounding Babylonian history comes from an economic documentation and a legal code with a 'view from above', as opposed to the point of view of the commoner, it is difficult truly to see the elite class from any point of view but their own.

In the opening paragraphs of Chapter 4, the author reveals one of the unfortunate realities of Ancient Near Eastern history. Quoting the great Assyriologist A. Leo Oppenheim, she

elucidates this issue: we can know where the ancients practised their religions, who they were, when their rituals were, and how much libation they poured, but it is likely that we will never understand why. Separated from them by this great chasm of time, true understanding of this topic will forever be lost to us. With that said, the chapter is an exercise in anthropology. It is an affable outline of interesting information for the newcomer. How did a temple look? What was the pantheon like? From what did Babylonian theology evolve? The author addresses all these questions. Pages 109-28 deal exclusively with who the temple workers were, and what they did for society. The novice may find information from unexpected origins, such as how important a name can be for understanding ideologies and ideals. In addition to the obligatory mention of the priests and their class, there is a satisfying section on personal gods and personal spirituality, including a passage of the poetry of one who felt rejected by his 'guardian angel'. In a book of this length, it is hard truly to do justice to this complex system or its repercussions, but it is likely that the author would be satisfied if this section prompted the reader to explore the topic further.

In the last chapter, on material culture, Leick does not attempt to explore all aspects of her subject, but does a good job of bringing some interesting facts to an audience who might be hoping to find something in the book beyond numbers, graphs, and names of kings and warlords. The use of information such as excerpts of the work of Jean Bottéro, involving food, consumption, and drink, is central to the discussion of society, but is also an interesting aside for the lay public who view the history of the ancient Near East as somewhat less than accessible. The necessary attention is given to standard topics such as urban housing and water management, which are indispensable to the discussion of urban life in the ancient Near East in any volume. Other topics such as hygiene, health, and sexuality, expand on the author's views of the individual, and display sound anthropology. The book is wrapped up with a short, perhaps anticlimactic, section on death and the afterlife.

Overall, this book is too short (roughly 155 pages of text, including figures) to completely cover the subject. However, it does not appear to be Leick's intention to present a comprehensive text. This is a well-referenced work for beginners and, if the proper amount of attention is given to the information within, for intermediate students as well. There is a navigable index including many of the main issues and people, as well as a short glossary of Sumerian and Akkadian terms and words. The amount of authentic terms is large, given the intended audience of the book, but they neither break up the flow of the text nor obfuscate the intentions of the author.

This book, along with others of its ilk, is part of a new category of text, bringing to the non-professional information otherwise contained by books that are not only outdated by current standards, but are also obscure, and difficult for such readers to approach. Many

of these older texts need be taught or interpreted by an expert. There are a handful of authors leading the pack, publishing books that are not just approachable, but also thorough and up-to-date, incorporating facts, evidence and historiographical or theoretical debates into manageable volumes. Works such as Susan Pollock's *Mesopotamia: The Eden that Never Was*, Marc Van De Mieroop's *History of the Ancient Near East* and Jean Bottéro's *Everyday Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* illustrate the topics of archaeology, history and culture for beginners and enrich them for the initiated. Leick is such an author, whose modern style allows her to reach modern audiences.

These new and updated texts breathe new life into the field – a field that still, to those who are unacquainted with newer literature, may seem beyond comprehension. New theory and methodology in the disciplines of history and anthropology lead to the necessity for new texts, which can fill the void left by the dated offerings of the past. New research and new analyses of the ever-growing body of cuneiform economic and political tablets, stela and religious literature, as well as the archaeological data we gain from excavating the mounds formed by the ruins of ancient cities (often called *tell* or *hüyük*), constantly call for new avenues through which to display data and express opinion. The integrity of Leick, Pollock, Van De Mieroop and Bottéro can clearly be seen in their scholarly publications; but talent for prose and style, such as that evident in Gwendolyn Leick's book (and in the writings of all of these authors), in addition to solid fact, is what determines the reception of works such as this.

Aside from a handful of spelling and grammatical errors, the prose is tight and clean, with a constant flow enhanced by the recurring and thematic issues explored and explained in the various sections. The book's readability and price should attract the interest of the uninitiated, and fulfil the author's intention of bringing a short summary of crucial material to readers, who might then be motivated to seek out more in-depth studies.

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