

Reviews

Karen Radner, *Ancient Assyria: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: University Press, 2015, pp. 136, ISBN 978-0-19-871590-0

“**V**ery Short Introduction” is a series of books from Oxford University Press containing hundreds of titles covering almost every subject and research area. One of the most interesting fact is that the topics are presented in a catchy way. The ideas and the analyses are combined in a highly readable way, making this “pocket-sized” book a perfect source for the non-professional reader who is interested in one subject or another and wants to become familiar quickly with a certain subject. Karen Radner’s *Ancient Assyria: A Very Short Introduction* it is such a book, exploring in a very colorful and intriguing manner the ancient history of the city of the world’s first empire: Assyria.

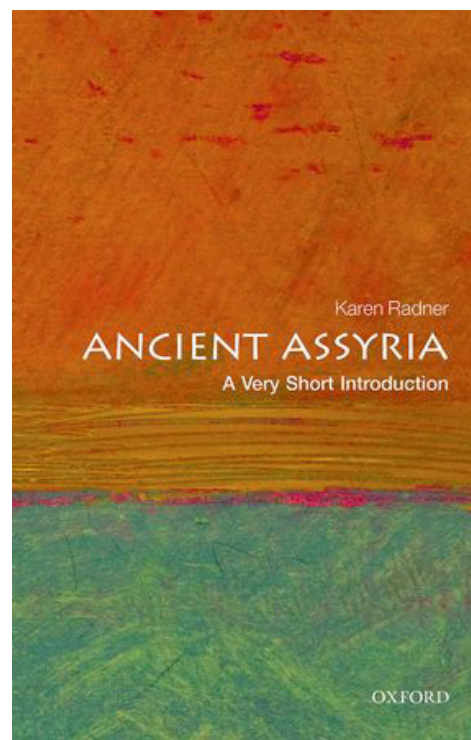
Karen Radner is Professor of Ancient Near East History at the University College London, her interests aiming the period of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. *State Correspondence in the Ancient World* (2014) and *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture* (with E. Robson, 2011) are the previous books of the author on the topic.

Assyria: A Very Short Introduction condense in its pages an introductory history of the Assyrian Empire suitable for those who want to know the key points of Assyrian history and archaeology. The author tries (in a very limited space) to illustrate the major features of the Assyrian culture and society. The book is divided into 6 chapters, leading the reader through the Assyrian world, from the birth of Aššur in the early third millennium B.C. to the Sassanian conquest of the kingdom of Hatra in about 240 A.D.

The first chapter, *Introducing Assyria* (pp. 1-7), familiarize the reader with the main segments of the Assyrian history. The city-state of Aššur, where the “Assyrian history begins” (p. 2), is brought to the attention of the reader. The author explain the history stages of the city, from the third millennium B.C. when the city was integrated in the possessions of the Akkadian kings, a local ruler and after that under the kings of Ur until 2000 B.C. when, as we know from several sources, the kingdom of Ur is disintegrated and Aššur became a free city-state. Further, the author explains the process of the divine manifestation of god Aššur which “shared his name and was the divine manifestation of the site”(p. 3), and the mechanism by which Aššur represents the sovereign in whose name Silulu, the king, exercises his kingship. The second section of the first chapter explains how the Assyrian Empire was born. In the 14th century B.C. the power of Hanigalbat (Mittani for us) who controlled the city-state Aššur, collapsed, the vacuum being used by the rulers of the city-state to establish a centrum, a core, of a territorial organization in the area of what we know today as northern Iraq. Through a skilful diplomatic policy with Mesopotamia and Egypt, and using a strong cultural identity, Aššur managed to establish itself as a considerable force of Near East. The heartland of the state was constituted, as the author claims, by the triangle formed between Aššur, Niniveh and Arbela. In the third section of the chapter, the author shows how Assyria expanded the realms in the detriment of its neighbours using military and socially ways.

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In the 9th century, Assyria, using a “pan-Assyrian” ideology of “rescuing those Assyrians who had been left behind the retreating border” (p. 4) re-established the maximum extent. Until in 7th century, Assyria was the most important power of the Middle East. The next section deals with the end of the Assyrian Empire bringing into question the religious disruption of the imperial ideology and most important for the history of the decline and fall of Assyria, the war started by Nabopolassar and a Median army led by Cyaxares who conquer Aššur in 614 B.C. and destroyed the temple of the god Aššur. In 612 B.C., Nineveh was also conquered. The final section discuss several aspects regarding some events from the history of Assyria, after the empire, with attention paid to the Christian community from Hatra.

The second chapter, *Assyrian places*, (pp. 8-44) is focused on the most significant sites of Assyrian Empire, explaining their key role in Assyrian heartland and the impact of expansion, trade and the integration of neighboring areas into Assyrian’s sphere of influence. The first examined site is Aššur, the city of the god, the settlement situated in the south of the core region of the Assyrian Kingdom. In this section, the author describes the particularities of the physical landscape of Aššur, underscoring its topographical features in relation with other important activity centers and geographical particularities. There is also a description of the inner organization of the city. The next section explains why the city name and the name of the god Aššur are inseparable with the reference of Qal’at Sherqat, the rocky crag near Tigris where the 3rd millennium people found shelter. That is why in the second millennium Dur-makî- Aššur-A fortress for the week is the god Aššur (p.11) and Aššur-šaddî-ili-The god Aššur is a divine mountain (p. 11) were popular names for the god, represented as bearded men from a rocky peak. In the third section are presented very succinct the archaeological excavation led by Walter Andrae from the 1903-1914 and the Iraqi excavations beginning with 1978. The fourth section represents a detailed insight into the architecture and functionality of the “one temple” of the god Aššur. The author explains how this temple was built; the relation of the authority and the social mass with the god and especially how the ideological dimension functioned. The last section dedicated to Aššur deals with the fate of the city after the fall of Assyria until the invasion of Hatra by kings Ardashir I and Shapur I, from 240 A.D. and the destruction of the city.

In the following part, the 6th, the author leads the reader miles away from Aššur, in Central Turkey, on the territory of Kaneš, modern day Külltepe. It is the merit of the famous Czech orientalist, Bedřich Hrozný, for deciphering Hittite. Thanks to his archaeological expeditions and finding of Assyrian tablets we know today that Kaneš was a *kārum*, a harbor, the trading post of Assyria in Anatolia. The tablets found here constitutes a big archive for different Assyrian trading firms. In the next part, the author reveals some facts about the Assyrian trade in Anatolia. The 8th part brings into question the second major city of Assyria and a very important site of Iraq: Kalhu. Its importance is because King Aššurnasirpal II moved the imperial court here, in 879 B.C. The strategic position and the domination of the physical landscape were the main criteria of choosing this location

by Aššurnasirpal II to exercise his hegemony. Next part deals with the archaeological diggings at Nimrud (Kalhu) led by the famous 19th century British explorer Austen Henry Layard. In close connection with this part, the next one analyzed the relation between the King and people at Kalhu. The last two parts of this chapter point out how the kingdom of Assyria integrates the West into its realms using ideological, social, political and economic strategies. The best example given by the author is the western city of Dur-Katlimmu.

In the third chapter, *Assyrians at home*, (pp 45-60), the author illustrates “the great variety of living conditions and human experiences in the Assyrian Empire” (p. 45). The given examples are all from the 7th century due to the source material available in urban context. The first case is the almighty king, “the ruler of the universe”, and the one known to us as King Esarhaddon. The younger son of Sennacherib. King Esarhaddon’s life is discussed here based on known inscriptions. As a common fact in this society, the Chief Scribe immortalized him focusing on the characteristics demanded by people: building and maintenance temples, palaces, cities, and the protection and if possible the expansion of the Assyrian realm. The other side of king’s personality, steeped in paranoia, is illustrated in relation with his son (and killer) Urdu-Mullissi. The third part of the chapter illustrates the lives of two scholars, Urdu-Gula and his cousin Šumaya, both of distinguished birth but excluded from court by Aššurbanipal. The author explores the individual destiny of the two frustrated scholars in very interesting way. The wealthy landowner Šulmu-šari, the subject of the fourth part of the 3rd chapter, is another example of a contemporary of Aššurbanipal. This rich man had a big house (the Red House) at Dur-Katlimmu. The excavations revealed 150 tablets written in Assyrian cuneiform alphabet and 50 clay docketts in Aramaic that contains data of Šulmu-šari’s wealth and household. Šulmu-šari received the title of *ša qūrbute*, which means “he who is close” (with the king). The last example of a very well documented person from the time of King Aššurbanipal is the wine merchant Duri- Aššur. This person, acquainted with the king, lived in a huge house (for that time and place) in the center town of Aššur. The tablets showed that Duri- Aššur and three partners were involved in wine trading with the northern regions of Assyria.

Assyrians abroad (pp 61-78) is the fourth chapter of the book. Keeping the same parameters as in the 3rd chapter, the author illustrates, based on documents, the lives of some Assyrians away from home, away from the city of Aššur. “Some happy, some not” (p. 61). The first case shows, based on some family records, family matters of a merchant from Anatolia. Mothers, fathers and wives worried about the ones who are far away from home asking them to come back or to remain there to take care of family business. There are also attested individuals who married local women and start a second family long way from Aššur. The second example of Assyrians away from home are the ones who are envoys. In this case, it is about the envoy of Aššur-uballit I sent at the court of Pharaoh Akhenaten (about 1340 B.C.) The third example illustrates how the Assyrians fled from the Aramean invasion caused by famine, into the mountains, more accurate on the high plain of Herir situated east of Arbela, on the western side of Zagros Mountains (1082 B.C.).

Habriuri was lost for the Assyrians, but Aššur-dan II and Aššurnasirpla II regained the region and brought back the Assyrian people. The unpopular ambassador Aššur-rešuwa is the fourth example. The ambassadors were “the trusted ones” of the kings and represented the empire’s interest in the region; they were permanently in contact with the kings. Aššur-rešuwa was the ambassador of Kummē, but his activities were “oppressive and invasive” (p.73). The last example is probably the prototype of the biblical tale of “The two brothers”. Aššurbanipal and Šamaš-šumu-ukin were the sons of Essarhaddon. The first one was elevated to the rank of crown-prince of Assyria in 672 and the second one was elevated to the rank of crown-prince of Babylon. This part is focusing on the evolution of relations between these two brothers after their father’s death focusing on Aššurbanipal’s lust for power and the occupation of Babylon.

The fifth chapter, *Foreigners in Assyria* (pp 79-94), is focusing on some foreigners in the city of Aššur, how they got there, and especially on the interaction between them and Assyrians. The first part of the chapter deals with Samsi-Addu, the conqueror of Aššur in the 18th century. This character, a foreigner in the city of Aššur, conquered it and added it to his growing realm. By his reconstruction works at the sanctuary of the god Aššur, Samsi-Addu became a “role-model” of the city, remembered by Shalmaneser I in the 13th century and Essarhaddon in the 7th century as the one who reconstructed the temple of the only god, Aššur. The second foreigner, which drew attention of the author, is Marduk-nadin-ahhe, a royal scribe from Babylon who came to Aššur around 1328 B.C., in the time of Aššur-uballit, in the context of external relation between Aššur and Babylon. He built his house, with royal permission, near the shrine of Marduk. Royal hostages were another category of foreigners in Aššur.

The example given is from 1112 B.C. when Tiglath-pileser defeated at Manzikert a coalition of 23 local chiefs. The other example given is the practice of taking royal children into royal captivity. As the author claims, it is a very good method for pro-Assyrian indoctrination (p.87). Another example is the Iranian family traced in sources by the author from 715 to 614 B.C. Walter Andrae digged their house in 1906. We know this family from two family documents signed by the head of the family Muddamiq- Aššur for his six sons (family estates). The last example of foreigners in Assyria are two female persons, mother and daughter, slaves captured by the Assyrian forces of Aššurbanipal in Elam. Nanaya-ila’I and her daughter were sold to an old man, named Mannu-ki- Aššur.

In the final chapter, *Assyrian world domination: pathfinder empire* (pp 95-112) the author analyses the constitutive models, which allowed the Assyrian expansion on the known geographical, political, ideological and cultural parameters. The first one is the army. In this part, the author explores briefly the military tactics and methods of the Assyrian army, as well the moral impact on the enemy. The concept of Assyrian monarchy expressed by the royal ideology of kingship, who saw the king separate from the rest of the humans, is another functional principle of the Assyrian monarchy. The long-distance communication, which is presented in the third part, is the mechanism who permitted a better communication between the Assyrian provinces, between the king and his governors, between ordinary people. The resettlement programme, the program of integration of foreigners into the Assyrian social mechanism exploited the labour abilities of the settlers in behalf of the state. Finally, the appetite for culture of kings like Aššurbanipal and Tukulti-Ninurta I reflected in the royal library shows us that despite of cruel biblical accounts, the Assyrian society, at least among the elites was based on a certain level of knowledge and culture.