

Reviews

Amanda Podany. *The Ancient Near East: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press: Oxford 2014. xix + 148 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-537799-6

The *Very Short Introduction* series is a book series published by Oxford University Press which spans several academic disciplines and numbers well over four hundred volumes. Pocket sized volumes, each entry in the *Very Short Introduction* series is designed to give the general reader a quick and accessible introduction to that subject.

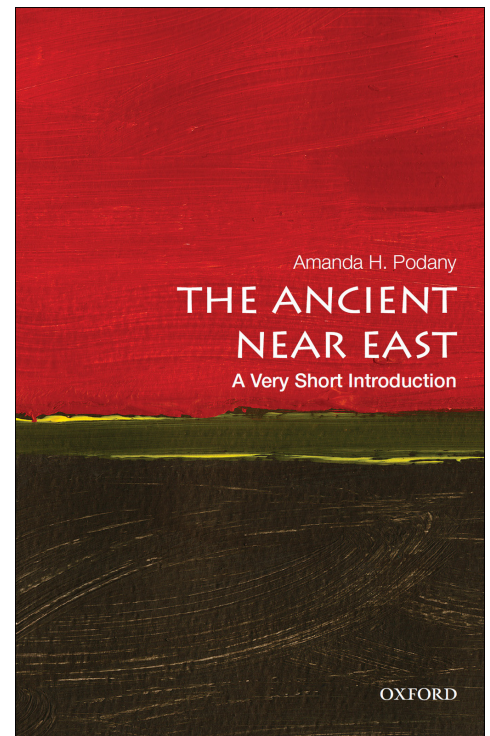
Dr. Podany, who is Professor and Chair of History at California State Polytechnic University, has published previously over topics in the Ancient Near East, most recent publication was *Brotherhood of Kings: How International Relations Shaped the Ancient Near East* (2012). In this slim volume Dr. Podany ambitiously covers roughly three thousand years of history in the Ancient Near East, starting with the appearance of cuneiform writing around 3600 B.C. and continuing forward to the fall of the Neo-Babylonian Empire to the Achaemenid Iranian Empire in 539 B.C. The near east as a region does not have hard set boundaries of where it starts and ends. The one constant is the inclusion of Mesopotamia, the remaining areas included tend to fluctuate based on the authors interests and the scope of their book. In this volume, for presumably reasons of space, a conservative delineation of the Near East is presented. Basing her definition of the Near East on the use of cuneiform writing, Podany focuses on Mesopotamia, Syria and Anatolia regions. Canaan, Egypt, Elam and Iran, some or all of whom can be included in longer surveys of the region, only appear in the text when they interact with the Mesopotamian culture or polity.

For *The Ancient Near East* Podany uses a chronological presentation, as opposed to a thematic presentation. After an introductory chapter, *Archaeology and Environment*, each of the following chapters looks a specific chronological period in Near Eastern History. An abbreviated chronology of the main periods, references, and a short but well organized selection of suggestions for further reading round out the book.

In Chapter I: *Archaeology and Environment*, after a brief introduction to the sheer chronological scope of three thousand years of Mesopotamian civilization, Podany begins looking at the evidence available to construct the history of the Ancient Near East. After noting the paucity of non-Mesopotamian written sources, she then introduces the importance and necessity of clay in southern Mesopotamian building, noting that this building disadvantage to the Mesopotamians is an advantage to historians, as it has allowed large numbers of artifacts to survive. Podany gives a brief explanation of how archaeologists investigate a 'tell' before detailing the issues that impede or make it impossible to investigate each site successfully. From there Podany moves look at which lands in the Near East used cuneiform writing (Mesopotamia, Syria, Elam and Anatolia) before going into greater depth the environmental differences between the cuneiform lands. Podany justly stresses how interconnected by trade these different regions were as each had natural resources the others might lack.

Matthew G. Marsh

Sul Ross State University
mmarsh@sulross.edu



DOI: 0.14795/j.v3i1.149
ISSN 2360 – 266X
ISSN–L 2360 – 266X

In Chapter 2: *The Beginning of Cities, 3600-2900 BCE* Podany looks at what is commonly called the Uruk period and the beginnings of cuneiform writing. Using a fragment of a proto-cuneiform tablet, found near the temple of Inanna in Uruk, as an example, Podany explores the difficulties that face historians in attempting to translate proto-cuneiform writing. The tablet fragment is also used as a launching point in a wide ranging discussion of architecture and construction of the temple, along with how the workers were compensated for their work with food rations. Podany notes how proto-cuneiform continued to evolve as temple offerings and economic concerns grew over the course of the period. The last section of this chapter looks at the Uruk culture itself, and how it was widespread not only in Mesopotamia but other areas of the Near East and the Levant. Podany rightly notes that Uruk colonies however, were not political or military colonies, but cultural colonies usually founded in uninhabited areas. As such they should not be taken as evidence of a widespread organised state.

Chapter 3: *The Early Dynastic Period, 2900-2334 BCE* looks at the rise of the Sumerian city states and the conflicts that arose between them. Podany looks at the Mesopotamian tradition of kingship, a trait whose emergence she dates to around 2900 BCE. Beginning her discussion with the document known to us as the Sumerian Kings List she rightly stresses how kingship was considered a divine gift from the gods (when kingship came down from heaven) and part of the natural order of society. After a digression on Mesopotamian cosmological beliefs, which stressed the lowly status of mankind in the world, Podany takes a look at the primary city-states of the time period, such as Lagash and Umma. The evolution of proto-cuneiform to the Early Dynastic cuneiform during the period is noted, as well as the realization by the kings (lugals) of Sumerian city-states of the possibilities inherent in writing.

With Chapter 4: *The Akkadian Empire, 2334-2193 BCE* Podany looks at the first large Near Eastern state, the Akkadian Empire. After a brief introduction of Sargon, founder of the Empire, Podany looks at the scope of his campaigns. These campaigns were very wide ranged as Sargon conquered the Sumerian city-states, subjugated northern Mesopotamia, and campaigned in Syria plus possibly in southeastern Anatolia. After touching on the regions that traded with the Akkadian Empire, Podany then looks at Sargons shrewd use of religion to provide support and legitimacy to his rule through the appointment of his daughter Enheduanna as the High Priestess of the Moon Goddess Nanna in Ur. Podany also covers the Syrian kingdoms that Sargon campaigned against, Elba and Mari, noting that while earlier historians had viewed them as peripheral states and dependent on the Sumerians for their culture they were actually important and complex states in their own right. Podany finishes the chapter by looking at some of the innovations to Sumerian culture by the Akkadian dynasts, Naram-Sins elevation of himself to godhood stands out for hubris.

The Akkadian successor in the Near East, the Ur-III Empire is looked at in Chapter 5: *The Third Dynasty of Ur, 2193-2004 BCE*. While Sargon and the Akkadian kings had created the concept of the Empire in the Near East it would be the Ur-III state that would refine and transform

the administrative aspects of the empire. In the process they would provide the template that several of the Near Eastern states would follow in the centuries and millennia to come. Podany focuses on the non-military aspects of the Ur III empire, first looking at expansion of the administrative apparatus used to serve the palaces and temples. Emphasis is placed on the efforts of Ur-Namma and his successor Shulgi in trying to create standardisations of weights and measures that could be used across their empire. Podany also looks at the development of the first written legal code by Ur-Namma, which expressed its laws conditionally rather than simply forbidding an action. Also of note is the importance of witnesses in the Ur III legal system, who had to swear an oath to the gods that their testimony was true. Podany finishes out the chapter by looking at the large and sophisticated system of taxation and redistribution of resources which developed in the Ur III period. Thanks to the 120,000 and more economic cuneiform tablets discovered dating to the Ur III period archaeologists and historians are able to reconstruct much of the workings of this system.

Chapter 6: *The Old Assyrian colonies, 1950-1740 BCE* moves from Sumer & Akkad to northern Mesopotamia to look at the Old Assyrians and the trading network they created in the early 2nd millennium. Here Podany initially looks the trade connection between Kanesh (modern Kültepe in central Turkey) and the city of Assur. This trade relationship is attested by the more than 20,000 cuneiform tablets found at Kanesh. Unlike later Assyrian periods, the trade networks between Assur and the Anatolian cities were not sponsored by the Assyrian state but by private merchants. Podany emphasizes that it was not warfare but a need for unavailable resources that spurred the contact between Assur and Kanesh. What a trade treaty between the two cities would look like is discussed along with the two major resources, fabric and tin, that traveled between Assur and Kanesh. From there Podany uses a cuneiform letter from one Assur-idi, an Assyrian merchant based in Assur, to his son Assur-nada, who was based in Kanesh as the representative of the family business, to illustrate the business concerns of the time. Podany also emphasizes that due to widespread illiteracy in Mesopotamia letters were often expected to be read aloud. This factor can help explain why many cuneiform letters seem curt or brusque to modern readers. Letters were written to communicate important information over long distances, not to “talk about the weather”.

Chapter 7: *The Old Babylonian period, 2004-1595 BCE* overlaps somewhat with Chapter 6, but puts its focus on southern Mesopotamia and the emergence of Babylon as a major power in the region. Podany opens by looking at a letter to the King of Mari which lists the number of states in Mesopotamia along with their vassals. She notes that many of the rulers of the Mesopotamian city states were Amorite in origin, descended from the Amorite tribes which had been migrating into the region since the days of the Ur III dynasty. From there Podany looks at the rise of Hammurabi of Babylon and how in a very short span of years he conquered the majority of Mesopotamia, using year names to commemorate his successes. Podany stresses that Hammurabi did more than just conquer the region but also worked to strengthen the infrastructure of his empire. She

also notes that Hammurabi's legal code is the accomplishment that he is most famous for today. From here Podany moves to look at daily life in the Old Babylonian period, noting that the vast number of cuneiform documents found from this period are private documents, unlike the Ur III era when the majority were from the temples and palaces. Podany uses excerpts from a contract documenting the purchase of land to illustrate different aspects of Babylonian life. Emphasis is placed on the importance of social status in this time period and a brief explanation of the social hierarchy. Podany also notes that the Old Babylonian Empire faced many problems similar to earlier Mesopotamian states, namely rebellion on the periphery and invasion, before falling by surprise to the armies of the King of Hatti Mursili I.

With Chapter 8: *The Late Bronze Age 1600-1150 BCE* the focus widens as Mesopotamian, Syrian and Anatolian states interacted with each other, and with New Kingdom Egypt, on a military and diplomatic level far more complex than in earlier periods. Podany looks at how the main powers in the Near East had extensive diplomatic contacts between them. This contact was through the form of cuneiform letters and also gifts, borne by ambassadors between the different courts. Podany briefly looks at the source of the majority of our information on this time period, the Amarna Letters, mentioning the stir the letters caused at the time of their discovery in 1898. From there she discusses how the peace between the Near Eastern nations was reinforced by formal peace treaties between the main powers. Noting that the formula used by nations for formal treaties would be very similar, Podany uses the treaty from 1260 B.C. between Ramesses II of Egypt and Hattusili III of Hatti as an example, breaking down and briefly analyzing the components of the treaty. She stresses that each of the main powers in the Near East in the Late Bronze Age was considered equal to the other, and that there was not an international body to force the nations to follow a peace treaty. However, Podany also stresses that each of the states and their rulers believed that violation of a formal treaty would bring the punishment of the gods down not just on the ruler but on the nation itself. Podany then briefly looks at the city Hattusa, capital of the Hittite Empire, before quickly discussing the Hittite language. She concludes by briefly looking at the chaos years that ended the Late Bronze Age, touching on some of the main theories as to its fall.

In the penultimate Chapter 9: *The Neo-Assyrian Empire, 979-612 BCE*, Podany looks at the first of the great territorial, as opposed to a hegemonic, empires to appear. Podany very briefly covers how Assyria, after losing much of its territory at the Late Bronze Age, revived and built an empire four times larger than any previously. She notes that the Assyrians returned to the brutal imperial model of Sargon of Akkad, rather than the Old Babylonian or Ur III model, preferring to be feared by their subjects and embracing a culture of warfare. Using the topic of "Military tactics and technology" Podany touches on some of the aspects of Assyrian conquest including: the use of terror tactics, deportation of entire populations, imperial propaganda, and their use of the most advanced available military technology. Podany then moves to look at the last great Assyrian King, Assurbanipal, and how unlike other kings of antiquity, he

was as much a scholar as a warrior. She notes that he claimed to have mastered omen reading, divination, mathematics and language & literature, which was the core curriculum for most Assyrian schools. Also touched upon is Assurbanipal's great library at Nineveh, discovered by Henry Layard in the mid-nineteenth century, in which he stored tens of thousands of cuneiform tablets on a variety of subjects. Podany also discusses how the Epic of Gilgamesh was one of the tablets found in Assurbanipal's library, and the impact the discovery of the flood episode had in nineteenth century Europe. She briefly covers the transmission of the Epic of Gilgamesh and the role of Sin-leqe-unninni, a Babylonian scribe probably during the Kassite period, in shaping the narrative and overarching theme of the epic. Podany concludes the chapter by very briefly looking at the reasons for the collapse of the Assyrian Empire, placing a large degree of responsibility on civil war between rival heirs to the throne.

With Chapter 10: *The Neo-Babylonian Empire, 612-539 BCE* Podany concludes the book with a view of the final Mesopotamian state to dominate the region. She notes that the Neo-Babylonians, unlike the Assyrians, did not have the same focus on the glorification of warfare. As such their more enduring legacy was their ambitious building programs. After briefly looking at Nebuchadnezzar II's role in the restoration of Babylon, and in making it one of the greatest cities of the ancient world, Podany focuses the majority of the chapter on the last ruler of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, Nabonidus. She looks at his role in the restoration of the temples of the Neo-Babylonian gods, noting that the maintenance of the temples and assuring the happiness of the gods was a primary concern of Near Eastern monarchs. The New Year's festival, the Akitu, where Bel-Marduk was beseeched to maintain the order of the universe, is then looked at. Podany indicates that the majority of the rituals associated with the Akitu were done away from the public, including a ritual abasment of the king before Marduk for his crown and authority. However, there was a public face to the festival in which the king "took the hand of Marduk" and rode through Babylon with the statue of the god. She notes that this aspect of the festival could only be performed when the king was present in Babylon, and since Nabonidus was absent in Tema. Lastly, the conquest of Babylon by the Achaemenid Persian Empire is looked at briefly.

When reading *The Ancient Near East* one has to keep in mind the fact that Podany was working within a strict page limit and the limitations of the size of the published book¹. While as a whole this is a strong work the final three chapters are, in this reviewer's opinion, the weakest of the book. Chapter 8, on the Late Bronze Age, does not clearly give the reader an understanding of who the major players were in the region. The Kassite Babylonian state, known as Kar Durniash, is dismissed with a sentence, despite the role the Kassites stabilising southern Mesopotamia and giving it a regional Babylonian identity. Coverage of the Hittites is superficial at best, with the military consequences of their expansion into Syria unremarked on. Chapter 9, on the Neo-Assyrian Empire, ultimately oversimplifies the entire period. It fails to make clear the fact that the Imperial phase can really

¹ Each volume of the *Very Short Introduction* series measures 11 x 17.3 cm. Based on other volumes in this series the page count runs to about 125 pages.

only be considered to have begun with the rise of Tiglath-Pileser III in 745 B.C. Prior to this the goals of the Assyrians in the Near East were based more upon control of trade routes and supplies, supported by a system of vassals, than outright conquest. The section of the chapter on Military Tactics and Technology is vague and unfocused, spending more time on the role of divination in the Empire rather than the actual military. Unremarked on also is the civil administration of the Assyrian state and how many aspects of their provincial administration would be adapted by the Achaemenians for their empire. Chapter 10, on the Neo-Babylonian Empire, while providing excellent coverage of the cultural aspects of the Empire practically ignores the political. The balance of power in this period between Babylonia, Egypt and the Median confederation is unremarked on. Nor are the possible political and/or military aspects of Nabonidus's period in Tema discussed.

Also the two maps included are wholly inadequate. The larger of the two covers the Near East and surrounding regions, but includes only limited geographic indicators with no indication of possible areas of political influence. The second and smaller map, of the major Mesopotamian city sites, has limited usefulness since a large number of the cities are found towards the spine of the book and hard to see without breaking the text block. There are a number of talented historical cartographers, Andras Breznay and Ian Mladjov spring to mind, who could have contributed small but clear maps to aid the reader with geographic and political locations while reading the text. The inside of the front and back cover, with their pseudo dustjacket flap, would make a more accessible placement site for maps, allowing the reader to see them in their entirety.

While, overall, the Further Reading section is outstanding there are a few somewhat surprising omissions. In the section on general works the omission of Hallo & Simpson *The Ancient Near East*, and H.W.F. Saggs *The Greatness that was Babylon* was surprising given their role as standard introductory texts for the whole period². Saggs *Babylon* in particular provides broad coverage of the socio-cultural aspects of Babylonian civilization. In the selections for Uruk, Early Dynastic and Ur-III periods Hans Nisson's *The Early History of the Ancient Near East 9000-2000 B. C.* should be added as a must read³. Perhaps the most puzzling omissions are in the selection for the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Empires. Here H.W.F. Saggs *The Might that was Assyria*, which is still the only major work in English on the Assyrian Empire, is unmentioned⁴. Also unmentioned are the major works of D. J. Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar & Babylon*, Ronald Sack, *Images of Nebuchadnezzar*, and D. S. Vanderhooft, *The Neo-Babylonian Empire and Babylon in the Later Prophets*, on Nebuchadnezzar II and the Neo-Babylonian state⁵. Works that most likely appeared after Podany had submitted her manuscript and can be added to her selection include: Pitor Charvet *The Birth of the State*, Eric Cline *1177B. C.*, and Mario Liverani *The Ancient Near East*⁶.

However, despite the above criticisms, and a

disagreement with Podany over her narrow definition of the Near East, this is still a very impressive book. Covering such a large chronological period is not easy, especially given the limitations of the *Very Short Introduction* series. With *The Ancient Near East* Podany has accomplished the nearly impossible task of providing a clear and concise introduction to three thousand plus years of history. I would highly recommend this for general readers and as one of the main texts for undergraduate classrooms.

REFERENCES

- CHARVÁT 2014
Charvat, P. *The Birth of the State: Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, India and China*. (Prague: Karolinum Press, Charles University in Prague).
- CLINE 2014
Cline, E. H. *1177 B.C. The Year Civilization Collapsed*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- HALLO/SIMPSON 1998
Hallo, W. W. and Simpson, W. K. *The Ancient Near East: A History*. 2nd Edition. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers).
- LIVERANI 2014
Liverani, M. *The Ancient Near East: History, Society and Economy*. (London: Routledge).
- NISSEN 1988
Nissen, H. *The Early History of the Ancient Near East, 9000-2000 B. C.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- SACK 2004
Sack, R. *Images of Neuchadnezzar: The Emergence of a Legend*. 2nd Edition (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press).
- SAGGS 1984
Saggs, H. W. F. *The Might that was Assyria*. (London: Sidgwick & Jackson).
- SAGGS 1988
Saggs, H. W. F. *The Greatness that was Babylon: A Survey of the Ancient Civilization of the Tigris-Euphrates Valley*. Rev. Edition (London: Sidgwick & Jackson).
- VANDERHOOFT 1999
Vanderhooft, D. S. *The Neo-Babylonian Empire and Babylon in the Latter Prophets*. (Atlanta: Scholars Press).
- WISEMAN 1985
Wiseman, D. J. *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon: The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy 1983*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

² HALLO/SIMPSON 1999; SAGGS 1989.

³ NISSON 1988.

⁴ SAGGS 1984.

⁵ SACK 2004; VANDERHOOFT 1999; WISEMAN 1985.

⁶ CHARVÁT 2014; CLINE 2014; LIVERANI 2014.