H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Karen Radner, ed.. *State Correspondence in the Ancient World: From New Kingdom Egypt to the Roman Empire.* Oxford Studies in Early Empires Series. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Illustrations, charts, graphs. 322 pp. $74.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-935477-1.

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Before entering into this review I would like to offer my sincerest thanks for having the opportunity to review a work that focuses on the ancient Near East. A discussion of the region of the ancient Near East certainly would make a wonderful addition to the framework of H-War and it is my pleasure to help begin that process. Far too often the ancient Near East and its military history is restricted to forums that are more the domain of hobbyists and enthusiasts, and its greater presence here on H-War is both appropriate and necessary. It is my hope that scholars will increasingly bring the ancient Near East into their considerations of military history and its impact on war in general. The book under review does not focus on military history but it can serve as an entrée into understanding the communication networks and practices that will aid in such a study of war in the ancient Near East and into understanding issues that are difficult to decipher.

For Near Eastern historians, the process of history can be complex due to the nature of sources since they occupy the dual roles of documents and objects. Both categories undergo similar processes of interpretation; however, once one level is complete the next layer of interpretation begins. In addition where a text is found can be as important in determining its proper interpretation as the words that are written on the document. Archives take on increased meaning as well; the location of the archive and the location of a text within that archive becomes a point of lengthy interpretation and adds to the value and relative strength of the find. Additional considerations can present themselves; deciphering propaganda, examining royal decrees and determining whether their content was carried out or how it would have been carried out, and finally assessing systems of delivery for correspondence all factor into our appraisals of material.

State Correspondence in the Ancient World, edited by Karen Radner, details the methods, means, and language of royal correspondence to near-core and periphery regions of ancient states and empires. The book concentrates on communication between the imperial centers and the dependencies led by governors, military leaders, or vassal kings. It touches on the issues of methods of delivery, structure and formalities in writing, preservation and archiving, and interpretive issues stemming from the absence of texts which either support or contradict the general content. It is an introductory study of many of the issues dealt with by first-year graduate students in the area of Near Eastern studies. The book fills a place in the historiography and teaching of this subject

since many authors simply assume that the reader has become familiar with these concepts. However, it is not always the case and much of the information is often spread out among academic journals and books. In addition, many of the journals and books in which these texts are published tend not to appeal to nonspecialist or even hobbyist readers. Therefore, that it is addressed in such a long, sustained, and accessible manner is welcome. In addition, the amount of time spent on detailed aspects of archaeological source criticism is a salient feature of the work and is well received.

Another noticeable feature of the book is that it anchors much of the discussion on the region of Mesopotamia. Four out of seven chapters utilize Mesopotamia as either a direct focus or a closely related topic to the matter under discussion. This enables the Mesopotamian historian, or any for that matter, to observe that despite the changes of regime over the course of Mesopotamian history, communication networks (means of dispersing messages), methods of writing, and format of these messages appear to have remained consistent and with very little change, yielding great utility to diplomacy and governance.

The first chapter, authored by Jana Mynarova, details the communication network of the Egyptian New Kingdom and utilizes the Amarna Letters as examples of state communication. It does not focus so much on how the communication was carried out as on what the issues discussed in the letters were and how the Egyptian state dealt with them. This topic is a cogent choice as this was a time of rapid communication and the corpus was mainly directed from city-state vassal kingdoms in Canaan to the Egyptian throne. The dynamic of periphery-core communication demonstrates the diplomatic and military relationship with the core that was often marked by strained obedience and desperate pleas for attention. The chapter also emphasizes the role and training of scribes in both the royal and vassal courts and refreshes the experienced scholar on the finer points related to their education and role. For the newer reader and scholar, this will be one of the more satisfying areas of follow-up research.

The second chapter, by Mark Weeden, deals with the Hittites and their system of communication within Anatolia and how it, as well as foreign policy, was mainly focused in the direction of Mesopotamia. The chapter is bogged down in some heavy discussion of imagery found on coins, especially on deciphering whether a mule or donkey were meant to be portrayed on the imagery. It is a debate that Hittite scholars may find of interest; however, for others the level of attention paid to this one issue may be rather dry and passable.

Chapters 3 to 5 were authored by leading Mesopotamian researchers: Karen Radner, Michael Jursa, and the well-known and prolific Amelie Khurt. All of these chapters deal with Mesopotamian states: Assyria, Neo-Babylon, and the Persians (the core of the Persian Empire was not Mesopotamia; however, the impact on the region and the areas bordering it results in Mesopotamia becoming a large portion of the chapter's focus). These chapters reveal the general pattern of these empires and how they built on the systems already used by their predecessors. The most significant changes that these authors deal with are the transition from one ***lingua franca*** to another and the adoption of Aramaic over time. Another important aspect of these chapters is their discussions of text transmission, preservation, and contextualization of works within their literary contexts. They differ from those considerations in the Hittite Empire and those of the successor states and Roman Empire.

The final two chapters, by Alice Bencivenni and Simon Corcoran, analyze systems of communication for the Seleucid and Roman Empires. These essays enable the discussion to take some interesting turns into the issues of preservation. They allow the reader to explore state communi-

cation between the ruler and the people since most of the correspondence to local leaders was inscribed on stone and placed in public venues and not shared exclusively with those in charge. The constituent lack of preservation of individual letters and manuscripts and their collation into different forms obscuring the clear-cut orders of Casers and Legates opens up avenues of approach that are different than those for the Near East.

These two chapters and their emphasis on the reality that leather and paper from that time have entirely disappeared (unless found in a desert or recopied for generations) remind the reader of the perishable nature of communication that has been increasing from that time into our own. If there is any takeaway from these two chapters it is the sense that with the digital revolution, the House of History is under severe threat due to the prevalence of digital communication and its impermanence. We have recently witnessed political leaders on both sides having the ability to delete years worth of history, decades of insight, with the single click of a button. Although some may object to this observation or point out that ancient texts were subject to forces of nature or destruction, it bears mentioning that history has always been at the mercy of certain forces, be it human or natural. However, as the book interestingly and directly deals with, many tablets that we have are a result of and were preserved by these same naturally destructive forces. In other instances, the letters are located in multiple archives and in multiple copies thus ensuring the survival of at least some texts, in contrast to those that had a single copy. The digital realm, with its extreme impermanence and selectiveness of personal agency and not natural forces, leads to the question as to what we are leaving to future professional historians and whether they will experience more difficulty in reconstructing anything about our time. Books, journals, and the great historiography of the last half-century are for the first time in true danger of being lost to the tyranny of time and the digital domain and are being lost and forgotten.

To address more structural aspects of the book, it is fair to begin with the observation that though impressive, in many ways it left me a little less than satisfied. The structure of the book and its content are highly repetitive in parts. This is a result, no doubt, of the audience that it is intended for, a nonspecialist audience. Radner clearly makes the point in the introduction that this is meant as an introductory text to offer students and nonspecialist readers a means to access these texts with greater clarity. It is not a book for specialists since they are bound to have read a number of journal articles that cover the same issues; however, that is a strength as well since most nonspecialists will not want to wade through such a deep stack of papers to find what they are looking for. Therefore, those with a specialty in world war history or American history may find this book an interesting read as a hobby piece or as a source to gather insights on technological advancements, but there is little to hook the serious and long-experienced scholar.

The work benefits from a writing style that is not stultifying or overly jargonistic and can be quickly and enjoyably read for long periods of time. However, the depth of detail varies greatly from one essay to another; while some authors dwell on issues for long stretches, others pass over the same issue fairly rapidly. There is an uneven presentation of charts, graphs, and pictures. On the whole, these neither greatly add to or distract from the reading experience and will lead to deeper research. This may have been done on purpose or is a result of style. The authors are leading specialists in their particular fields of study on Near Eastern or ancient empires. Readers who are well read in ancient studies will recognize most, if not all, of the authors and have probably encountered their previous publications for their own research.

The one major criticism of the book is the lack of ancient texts in the chapters. There is far more discussion about ancient correspondence than reproductions of ancient correspondence. Certainly some chapters contain some reproduced material, however, more reproductions would have been beneficial. For example, the initial chapter on the Amarna Letters only provides a few lines from each quoted or mentioned letter but not a whole letter. The chapter dwells more on the outcomes of the communication and not enough on the actual letters. This literary corpus is one of the most significant that we possess and not having more of the text reproduced for evaluation was an oversight. The same is true for most of the other chapters in which reproduction of texts is minimal. The chapter on the Roman Empire is one exception to this general rule, and I found far more, but still short, excerpts from the respective texts and it was surprising given that this was described as an introduction to such material. The book would have greatly benefited from one or two full letter reproductions in each chapter or appendices where a letter or two for each period could have been offered as examples. These additions would have provided readers with a fuller appreciation of the issues.

My acute ambivalence to this book cannot be denied. In some parts, it is a thought-provoking volume, while in other parts it is a quick read that will stimulate fresher minds but barely challenge established scholars. This is a result of the nature of the writing and nonacademic level as well as the intended purpose and is not a criticism of the authors themselves. Although it fulfills its purpose, it is still unsatisfying in some measure. ***State Correspondence in the Ancient World*** will find a great place among colleges and universities in introductory history classes and in graduate work; however, it will not be necessary for more experienced scholars beyond serving as a readily accessible reference work to verify certain facts, not seek them out.