

Amanda H. Podany, *Brotherhood of Kings: How International Relations Shaped the Ancient Near East*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xxiv + 398. \$34.95.

Amanda Podany's work on the particulars of 2nd millennium B.C. Syro-Mesopotamia is well-known to her Assyriology colleagues; her work as a generalist is better known to students being introduced to antiquity generally. She now connects these two domains with this eminently readable and altogether scholarly new book, stylishly and convincingly arguing for the existence of a system of formal international relations (hereafter, I.R.) extending more deeply into Bronze Age antiquity than normally supposed. Balancing factual accuracy and narrative clarity, *Brotherhood of Kings* convincingly demonstrates that these ancient diplomatic institutions were intentional, sophisticated, and durable. The book defines the problems and solutions of ancient state systems in their own terms, demystifying what seems exotic and challenging us to question what we think we know about modernity.

Podany focuses on a history of I.R. almost as old as states themselves. In Ancient Near Eastern studies, I.R. has become virtually synonymous with the "Amarna Age," but this book makes a major contribution by widening the lens to encompass the thousand years or so of earlier evidence in the same region, much of it no less complex. Diplomacy was not invented in the 14th c. B.C., but had its roots as early as 24th century B.C. Ebla, Mari, Ur, and Akkad, and flowered into fully mature forms by the Middle Bronze period. Podany examines in detail three moments in this developing story, each of them with Syria at its center: the Early Bronze city-state of Ebla; the Middle Bronze territorial state of Mari; the Late Bronze Mittani empire. The diplomatic toolkit she considers is extensive: correspondence and speech, treaties and oaths, marriages and hybrid dynasties, kinship terminologies, gift-giving (and -getting), ambassadors, messengers, advisors, language, etiquette and protocols, intelligence gathering, shared cultures and mutual needs. Previous attempts to deal with these subjects have sometimes led to disappointing results along primitivist-modernist lines, but this book strikes a tone balancing (emic) ancient evidence and (etic) modern intellectual needs. What's more, Podany's work not only considers the evidence local to the Ancient Near East, but sets the stage for comparative work to be done in the regional frame of Greco-Roman antiquity and the global context of World History.

The risks of writing a general history by a specialist are not well appreciated. An author who takes on synthetic work covering four-plus culture areas across the span of a millennium needs more than just clarity of vision and prose on her side; she must synthesize specialist literature of breadth and depth to tame a menagerie of factual, methodological, and theoretical beasts, since the book will be poked and prodded by the home disciplines for accuracy in a thousand ways. Podany emerges from this scrum a grand success, taking time to touch on details as fine as the tooth of a 15th c. Egyptian queen, a single clove from 18th century Terqa, and two ounces of silver gifted to a dignitary visiting 24th century Ebla. The powerful are caught in their most trenchant and cinematic moments: Zimri-Lim visiting Ugarit, staring moodily out to sea; Murshili I

astride the smoking ruins of Aleppo, turning his gaze ominously down the Euphrates; Shaushtatar's idyll looking out over the walls of Wa'aukkanni on his kingdom. Even the most hardbitten positivists have strolled through such galleries of historical empathy.

Some of the "wow" moments striking to lay readers are already familiar to specialists: the geographic extent of trade contacts (south Asia and Indonesia, the Persian Gulf, Anatolia, and Cyprus form the outer boundaries of this ambit); the lavish built environments of palaces (at Mari, at Nuzi); the thick-description sources permitting views of the less-lavish social experiences of soldiers and housewives. In this largest of all narratives of a very large world, Podany establishes and maintains scale. Clarity is occasionally lost as the author makes excursions on subjects which seem only marginally related: a digression on the meaning of Sargon of Akkad's name (p. 44); a lengthy retelling of Hattu'ili I's campaigns (pp. 121–22); the ancient fear of extreme weather (p. 155). In the main, though, her engaging account emerges from a fidelity to different levels of discourse—chatty storytelling and a historian's "joy in the particular" rising and falling under the thematic descant of interaction between states.

Another virtue is Podany's deft contextualization of easily-misunderstood theoretical problems about the nature of the historical sources. Her explication of prestige gifting, for instance, rightly focuses on the status-environment of recipients among their courtiers; her discussion of ambassadors is appreciative of their difficult mandate to negotiate without contact with their home states; she teases out the psychosocial effects of the abduction of divine idols and the ambivalences hiding inside kinship terminologies. Most pertinent to her theme, the realia surrounding royal marriages and treaty negotiations, for instance, are careful and detailed accounts. I was especially taken with the idea of the mutual culture shock produced by the collision of previously isolated Hittite and Babylonian societies; there is much to chew on there.

With this overall sense of satisfaction, I can turn to a few desiderata. One disappointment is that the book misses the opportunity to give definition to its many stories by reference to debates and terms from (the titular) field of I.R. I would be the last reader wanting the work to get bogged down in any overly-academic debate about realism, idealism, or regime theory. Still, there are many existing conceptual tools which could have sharpened the theoretical voice of the book. Were the provisions for merchants and messengers in interstate treaties (pp. 30–31, 36) evidence for a kind of neoliberal institutionalism? Was the Egyptian Empire early in Dynasty 18 defensive or aggressive (pp. 140–41)? An idealist perspective seems implicit in Podany's several claims that ancient states ultimately cooperated to limit or control war (pp. 59, 93, 131, 309; cf. p. 89), but a realist could point out that the characterization that Middle Bronze states "all followed the same rules" (p. 119) ignores that what they mostly shared was a propensity to *break* the same rules. The space given over to the narration of some less-relevant historical tales could have been better devoted to this crucial analytic.

Another area of indistinction has to do with discussions of ancient trade. In themselves, these are fascinating accounts, but it is not always clear what the relationship

is between trade and states, especially where preciosities and royal gifts are concerned. Podany studiously avoids equating these two forms of contact, but does not always clearly distinguish between them, either (pp. 28, 94). I.R. in some cases becomes an umbrella term for all kinds of contact (pp. 55–56) when exotic goods and international styles become markers of a “shared culture,” even though it was shared by only a few thousand palace elites scattered across a vast landscape (pp. 89, 148–49, 157). The author’s thought-provoking discussions of pride and personal prestige as indispensable mechanisms for both traders and diplomats could be used to argue that the systems were essentially politically similar rather than economically interdependent—but a more explicit statement would be welcome.

Non-specialist readers are normally interested in assessing the factual dependability of a work like this; in this it is easy to give the book very high marks. A few odds and ends stray off the beaten path—Assyrian trade colonies can be traced down to about 1710 B.C. now instead of ending in 1750 (p. 107); the cuneiform fragment found at Avaris, preserving exactly four words (one pronoun and three prepositions) and of uncertain origin, is weak proof for “diplomatic contact” between the Hyksos and Babylon (pp. 114, 140); discussing Gudea’s statues, Podany avers “there’s not much that can be done to destroy a diorite statue” (p. 98), missing the irony that all but one of these statues were (probably deliberately) beheaded in antiquity. Little slips like this are few and far between, though, and have no real bearing on the work’s usefulness.

One might wish for tighter language about the historical depth of some phenomena which become, by suggestion, more pervasive or ancient than they probably were. Legal witnessing was practiced almost compulsively “since earliest times” (p. 80); by Old Assyrian times, Anatolians had been “rich for thousands of years” (p. 105); p. 143 inadvertently implies that trade between Egypt and Punt had been an ongoing affair from the Sixth through the Eighteenth dynasties. In the main, I am happy the book is not too cluttered up with dates, but sometimes one loses one’s chronological orientation in the many switchbacks between “later” and “earlier” events. I noticed by p. 46, for instance, that no date for any event had been given since p. 23, in a discussion ranging between the Uruk and Old Babylonian periods.

A few interpretations trigger a little hesitation (or maybe a parochial policing-of-boundaries). As someone researching the Fall of Babylon in 1595 B.C., I was unsatisfied by the appearance of some old explanatory chestnuts: about salinization and riverine shifts, which have no evidentiary basis; about the Kassites as “enemies,” though the evidence is more nuanced than presented here; the idea that 17th c. kings had little knowledge of the earlier 18th c. state (pp. 120–21) is contradicted by their use and copying of older year-name lists, royal hymns, land-grant documents, and their access to one or more great stone stele bearing Hammurabi’s law code. In a few places, the book relates historical-literary sources as veridical accounts. It is questionable, for instance, to use the so-called “Agum-kakrime” story (and conflate it with other later “prophecies”) as a basis for the historical reconstruction of 16th c. B.C. Babylonia. Such stories may have preserved factual kernels, but were composed significantly after the events described,

conflict with each other, and had specific narrative historiographic “therapies” in mind. There is, in short, no dependable evidence for the theft of the Marduk statue, much less for the conditions of its putative recovery. (Another case comes with a discussion of Sargon’s inscriptions, p. 45.) Podany is mostly quite cautious about the self-interestedness of such documents, though—with the Idrimi story, Hittite annals, Egyptian “restoration” accounts—and these lapses strike me as deviations from an overall critical authority.

One final reservation is that the book’s discussion of the Mittani state bends too far backwards, in my opinion, to construct an image of a powerful empire, despite the author’s many references to a lack of documentation. Sixteen texts mention the Mittani kings; the sumptuous palaces of the “subject” cities, with their thousands of tablets sometimes, refer not once to the Mittani overlord or his state; Mittani’s virtually autonomous vassals went to war, made treaties, and collected regional taxes. If Podany characterizes the late Old Babylonian state, for instance, by its modesty—though it produced thousands of documents, undertook numerous building projects, had documented authority over officers and lands—must we accept that Mittani was such an all-powerful “empire”? The discrepancy between Mittani’s status as an international peer versus very slight evidence for control on the ground is at least worth mentioning.

Brotherhood of Kings joins a small but growing number of books which move Ancient Near Eastern scholarship out to a wider readership. The author has masterfully assembled disparate literatures, rendered them accessible, re-asserted our disciplines in the firmament of historical study, and taught us something new: about the deep antiquity of human social adaptability and flexibility, about our seemingly unflagging ability to manage and solve complex political problems of our own creation—for this, Podany deserves our applause.

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