

Maria Eugenia Aubet, *Commerce and Colonization in the Ancient Near East*. Translated by Mary Turton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2013. 414 pages. 95 illustrations. ISBN 978-0-21-51417-0. \$99.00.

In this translation from the original French manuscript, Ms. Aubet takes on what is emerging as one of the critical elements in understanding the rise of first state-level societies in Mesopotamia and their heirs across the Middle East, the twin elements of commerce and colonization. In many ways, colonization as she discusses is really economic as opposed to political or imperial colonization.

Her stated goal and what follows is rather oddly out of sync. In her short introduction she writes, “The general idea is simply to make the reader take part in this long journey, not claiming to involve him in a self-complacent exercise of erudition, but with the conviction that at the end, the reader will modify his perception of the Phoenician colonies [. . .]” (p. 3). So, Phoenician colonies are the real subject of the book. Yet, there are only about 4 to 5 pages on the classical model of colonies, and one chapter (see below) involving the Phoenicians, which does not mention the western Mediterranean Greek or Phoenician colonies. She, in effect, says that because we really know very little about them, we have to inspect other examples of ancient colonial economic systems to understand the Phoenicians.

In fact, seemingly the leitmotiv of the volume is to be the “great debate,” as she puts it, between primitivists and modernists. In American anthropological speak, this means the distinction between formalists and substantivists in economic anthropology. She makes this clear by an extensive, if not always clear discussion of Karl Polanyi and his role in the substantivist movement, where economies are an ‘instituted process’ by which he means that one cannot really divorce economic systems of production and exchange from other structures of social and political, not to mention religious, systems. This in itself was not so new, as earlier political economists like Adam Smith and Karl Marx well understood this interconnection in describing economics as the study of ‘political economies.’ The substantivist view is much broader and more culturally distinctive than the earlier ideas only of ownership of the means of production or relations of production, however.

After the discussion of Polanyi she proceeds in two chapters to define elements of colonialism and “the place of trade in ancient economies.” This completes part I of the volume. In the second part of the volume she elaborates on examples of trade and colonization oddly beginning with the 3rd millennium BC Mesopotamia and then returning to the 4th (the Uruk expansion), and then moving to Egypt and Byblos in a broad time range from the beginning of the 3rd to the middle of the 2nd millennium BC. She finishes the volume by reviewing the case of the Assyrian trade of the 2nd millennium, splitting it between two chapters, both emphasizing the trading network in Anatolia, but one focusing on the metropolis of Assur and the other on the Assyrian trading colony or *karum* at Kanesh. Why she splits the last chapters this way confuses

me, as her argument about ancient societies makes the two part of the same interconnected economic and social system.

This volume in many ways has more of the feel of a textbook than a thesis. I say this in part because after a long chapter on Polanyi, he seems largely to disappear after Part I of the book. Neither he nor his theories nor the substantivist intellectual school in which he was so important frequently are mentioned again, even in the Final Thoughts. There is no argument that carries from the beginning to the end. The analyses of cases often seems a reaction to what else is written on those specific cases, rather than in a broader theoretical context provided by the author across the board. Obviously, re-evaluating the cases in terms of Polanyi's substantivist ideas is what one expects, but rarely gets.

Since the chapters seem in some ways disconnected I will describe and to some degree critique them on their own.

Chapter 2 on Polanyi is hard to understand in terms of her stated goals. She spends a considerable number of pages on his intellectual history before she gets to what he wrote about her key issues. Nonetheless, for someone unfamiliar with Polanyi and the substantivist- formalist debate, this chapter is a good beginning. At times, whether it is the translator or the author, there are moments when it could have been clearer. On page 33 she writes, "He points out that the three uses of currency- as a means of exchange, as a standard of value and as a means of payment or "money"- are not necessarily interrelated given that they can operate independently. So you can have "currency" in societies without exchange because the presence and use of currency does not necessarily imply the existence of a market, and price fluctuation is not always indicative of a market." This is full of contradictions and, if one did not have some knowledge of the theory, would seem to me to be very confusing. First, currency is usually equated with physical representations of means of payment. Money is the term substantivists use to indicate (1) a medium of payment- I give you money, you exchange it for goods (basically her 1 and 3 are the same), (2) a measure to determine the relative value of different goods, and (3) money as a measure of standards of account. Number 3 means that gold or stock and bonds have monetary value, yet people cannot take a nugget of gold or a share of stock to buy a loaf of bread at most stores. You can have not money, but some elements of what will much later become money in systems without capitalist or feudal types of market *principles* (not necessarily physical marketplaces for barter). Profit, as such, exists only in such systems of marketing principles, primarily capitalist ones, as Polanyi argued. Her example of "marketless" trading is Polanyi's example from Old Babylonian Mesopotamia, yet while she correctly states that silver was a medium to establish the value particularly of land in relation to another good, she is incorrect that silver was a means of payment. Almost all the texts of the final transactions specify payment in grain. To make matters worse, it is far from clear that "sales" of land were really ever final, but that is another matter.

She then seems to abandon Polanyi and moves on to defining colonialism in Chapter 3 and "The Place of Trade in Ancient Economies" in Chapter 4. In her definition of a

colony, fairly enough, is the placement of foreign people in places not their own for economic “exploitation” [the translator might have found a less loaded word, maybe “opportunity”]. Aubet rightly tries to disentangle ancient colonies from the modern idea of colonial imperialism. The sharpest arguments against Algaze’s model of mid-late fourth millennium “world systems” is that the core, in this case the states of southern Mesopotamia, did not actually control or dominate much of their resource extracting areas to the north and east, even though the political systems in the south were much more elaborated hierarchical administrative systems than most of the societies we can document in the north. She proceeds to make an interesting but seemingly contradictory statement on page 48 that the anthropological concept of culture depended on the very goal of “control and regulation” that she seems to argue against. She then discusses various viewpoints and models of trade and interaction spheres, especially those of Wallerstein and Wolf and the alternative models like distance parity proposed by Stein. I wrote at the end of the chapter, “What is her position?” The reader will have trouble figuring it out. Chapter 4, “The Place of Trade in Ancient Economies” is likely the best of her chapters. She covers well the ground of defining exchange versus trade, systems and mechanisms of trade, production, circulation, and consumption, typologies of exchange and of trade, reciprocity and exchange, the role of luxury goods, and the archaeology of inter-regional trade. This completes the first major part of the volume.

She then begins part II with the third millennium BC; I suppose she sees it as a model for the previous fourth millennium BC, when we have very limited written records, rather than seeing the former as the foundation for the latter. In fact, the topics of Chapters 5 and 6 are not at all related. Those topics in Chapter 5 emphasize the question of state versus private sectors of the ancient Mesopotamian economy, markets, and the role of such players as the (Akkadian) *tamkarrum* (Sumerian *dam.gàr*), a supposedly private merchant who may, in fact, have been a palace contractor, and maybe even a tax collector. She finishes the chapter with a section called “A Futile Debate?.” Again she does not take a stand. I think she misses a point that Polanyi would understand. The evolution of economic systems is apparent in this period, as goods become commodities for the first time; as I have written elsewhere goods become commodities when a third party agent, not the primary producer or consumer, is involved in the exchange of goods, whether for personal gain or on behalf of a central administration that employs them. The following chapter flips from the structure of exchange to theories of economic colonialism in the fourth millennium BC. In particular, it involves theories of the Uruk exchange “international” (even for its day globalized) trading network. This narrative is better described in other books and articles. Why doesn’t she address the very interesting question of whether the system was centrally controlled? She talks about Wright and Johnson’s theories of centralization, but those are based on local control.

I am frankly least able to speak with any expertise on the final three chapters on Byblos and Egypt, and the second millennium BC Assyrian trading network. Those waiting to hear about the Phoenician trading colonies in the western Mediterranean, however, will be disappointed. The only colonies we hear about are Egyptian colonies

near and maybe in Byblos. She brings a fuller sense of the city of Byblos than before, including its religious institutions. She does in the last two chapters bring back a few themes about markets, trade, possible profiting and makes a good point that would have resonated with Polanyi: the structure of the trading network and the economic colonies is directly related. That is, the trade network is instituted by the economic and political structure of the city (read more broadly society) from which the colonists came and to which they were sending goods needed by members of those societies, whether from centralized institutions, or “private” citizens.

Her Final Thoughts, the last chapter, really do not synthesize her (not so clear what) argument, but repeat the core of each chapter.

I am not sure whether to recommend this book. It takes on an ever more important topic. If one is an expert in any of these periods, it may be worth reading to be exposed to other periods and places. It might be a good book for a graduate course or even an upper level undergraduate majors course, not as a stand-alone text, but as a way to expand into other required materials. In the end, it is a shame it is not better. The author clearly put much effort and thought into the volume.

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