

**Trevor Bryce, *Babylonia: A Very Short Introduction*.** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xvi, 141. ISBN 978-0-19-872647-0. \$11.95.

Oxford's "Very Short Introduction" series now has volumes on over 450 topics (p. ii), and has become a mainstay among beginners needing a dependable entrée into a wide variety of subjects. In a world saturated by Google and Wikipedia, the series offers a dependable source for learning, written by established scholars in an attractive format one can hold in one's hands. This little book by Trevor Bryce now takes its place alongside such volumes as *Ancient Assyria* (Karen Radner, 2015), *Ancient Near East* (Amanda H. Podany, 2013), *Ancient Egypt* (Ian Shaw, 2004), and others.

In a convivial writing style, Bryce covers the usual topics on the Babylonians without overburdening the reader with the excessive technicalities so common in Assyriology. As we have come to expect from the series in general, this volume helpfully introduces the reader to the highlights, without footnotes or foreign languages. After 118 pages of text with six maps and eight illustrations, the book ends with a list of other readings for more information, first in sections "General works on the Ancient Near East" and "General works on Babylonia," followed by similar lists for each chapter of the book. This is followed finally by a "Further reading" list, which is an annotated bibliography on many of the books listed in the reference list (all in English).

One will find little here on Babylonian geography or topography, and almost nothing on the first thousand years of recorded history in southern Mesopotamia. In a six-page introduction, Bryce explains the significance of third-millennium Sumerian civilization as the predecessor culture in Babylonia, but all is leading up to Hammurabi where he chooses to begin his story. One could quibble over this decision, or most especially over his choice of Hammurabi as "a convenient starting-point for our journey" (p. 5). But this is a "very short introduction" after all. And since the city of Babylon was relatively insignificant prior to the Sumu-abum dynasty, in which Hammurabi was the sixth dynast, starting here for a brief book on 'Babylonia' is reasonable.

Chapter One is essentially an overview of the socio-political realities of the Old Babylonian period (pp. 7–15). This is followed by an analysis of Babylonian society through the lens of Hammurabi's famous laws (Chapter Two; pp. 16–32). Continuity with earlier law collections is stressed, while distinct differences, such as the *lex talionis* principle, may "hark back to an earlier nomadic stage of Amorite society" (p. 20, and see p. 32), which follows recent lines of argument by Samuel Greengus and others. The chapter includes a helpful introductory discussion of Babylonian social hierarchy based on the laws, including especially an explanation of the three terms appearing frequently in Hammurabi's laws (pp. 21–24). At the top of the hierarchy was the *awilum* ("free person," for which Bryce suggests "gentlemen" is not inappropriate). This was a free and independent status, but was not an hereditary

right and therefore was not in itself an aristocratic class. Second, the *muškēnum* was a person of free but lower status. These were the “commoners” who made up the largest component of the population of Babylonia. The third member of this hierarchy were slaves (*wardum* and *amtum*, male and female slave, respectively), individuals forced into debt-slavery, or otherwise acquired through trade in foreign lands or as prisoners-of-war captured as plunder on military campaigns. The chapter concludes with thoughts on the purpose of Hammurabi’s laws as “a source of guidance and a set of guidelines” rather than a systematic and comprehensive collection of statutes, as the term “code” might imply (pp. 29–32).

Chapter Three, “Old Babylonian Cities” (pp. 33–39) reconstructs everyday life in Hammurabi’s Babylon, including home life, city planning, diet, everyday business of merchants, traders, and craftsmen, and the economy. Bryce relies mostly on material evidence from Ur and Uruk due to the lack of archaeological remains from Babylon itself from this period. The volume proceeds with chapters on “The Kassites” (Chapter Four, pp. 40–51), “Writing, Scribes, and Literature” (Chapter Five, pp. 52–63), “The Long Interlude (12<sup>th</sup> Century to 7<sup>th</sup> Century BC)” (Chapter Six, pp. 64–71), “The Neo-Babylonian Empire” (Chapter Seven, pp. 72–91), “Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon” (Chapter Eight, pp. 92–102), and “Babylonia in Later Ages” (Chapter Nine, pp. 103–118). Bryce’s summaries of the salient socio-political realities of ancient Babylonia are adequate to the task, and students will read this introduction with profit.

Of note in this little volume is the author’s twelve-page discussion of Babylonian scribal culture, including a brief summary of literary compositions (pp. 52–63). This topic has attracted a good deal of scholarly attention in the past decade, both among scholars focused on the Levant but also across the ancient Near East more generally. Bryce’s discussion of scribal culture and creative arts is value added; in particular, the role of the Old Babylonian houses of learning, or scribal “schools” (Sumerian *é.dub.ba.a*; Akkadian *bīt ṭuppi*, literally, “tablet house”). These houses appear to have begun as temple annexes, and flourished in the Old Babylonian period, eventually giving way to aristocratic families as the venue for education in the late Kassite period. Bryce, in a brief treatment, helpfully shows how these institutions of higher learning also produced not just copyists or scribal clerks, but creative artists in their own right, who gave us the great *belles lettres* of ancient Babylonia.

This is a fine addition to Oxford’s “Very Short Introduction” series. It admirably points the interested reader to additional resources and publications for more extensive treatments, and can serve practically as a first-introduction to the fascinating world of ancient Babylonia.

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