Studia Orientalia Electronica

Laura Culbertson & Gonzalo Rubio (eds). *Society and the Individual in Ancient Mesopotamia.* (Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records 33) . Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024. ISBN 978-15-01-52125-6. xii + 309 pp.

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This volume comprises a collection of contributions from a broad field of scholars, collated and edited by Laura Culbertson and Gonzalo Rubio. The book primarily aims to foreground the challenges in studying Mesopotamian sociology at macro and micro levels, focusing on "society and the individual". While the scholarly treatment of Mesopotamian society certainly still has much ground to cover, this monographic treatment of the subject provides a welcome series of studies exploring issues and questions present in understanding the Mesopotamian world and those living within it. The layout of the chapters follows a clear rationale, beginning with "individuals and institutions", starting with cities and villages before zooming out into methods of food production in pastoralism and nomadism, agriculture, and animal husbandry. This section is brought to a close with a discussion on calendars, framing the weekly, monthly, and annual contexts within which Mesopotamian life took place. The second section, "Society and the margins of Silence" narrows in scope, honing in on traditionally overlooked demographics, with chapters on women, slaves, serfs, and foreigners, and children and the elderly.

Mario Liverani's chapter concerns cities and villages, exploring urban development through its relationship with social dynamics. Liverani uses archaeology and epigraphy in a comprehensive exploration of demography and cycles of urban regeneration alongside developments in scholarly understanding of ancient cities. Importantly, Liverani's chapter seeks to further develop our understanding of cities and their development by shifting from viewing cities as Eastern or Western. Instead, Liverani advocates for a dynamic view, echoing the theoretical framework of structuration theory pioneered by Anthony Giddens (1979). By acknowledging the agency of ancient populations in emerging social relationships and structures, Liverani argues that we should instead view urban developments as a result of this process rather than its cause. Offering more than an interesting exploration of Mesopotamian urbanism, Liverani sets the stage for future studies focused on ancient cities through further synthesis of cities and their inhabitants.

Daniel Fleming explores pastoralism and nomadism, utilising studies by Anne Porter (2012) and Piotr Michalowski (2011) to provide the contextual foundation for his discussion. In agreement with Porter's conclusions, Fleming outlines the significance of pastoralism and nomadism for the economic fabric of Mesopotamia, highlighting the importance of sheep and their wool in textile production across the ancient Near East. However, owing to the distance between pastoralists and the main areas of concentrated settlement and central administration, the presence of mobile communities is often obscured. Additionally, mobile communities are further hidden in cuneiform

Volume 13 (2025), pp. 107–110
DOI 10.23993/store.159865

ISSN: 2323-5209

Finnish Oriental Society

sources, owing to the primary focus of much of the textual corpus on palaces, temples, kings, and gods. These themes are reflected throughout the study of ancient Mesopotamia, where a substantial amount of archaeological work has been directed towards palaces and temples (Stone 2013: 165), with excavated pastoralist sites providing only fragmentary insights.

Despite the difficulty in conclusively identifying the nature of mobile pastoralism, Fleming explores these groups through royal identification with tribal identities alongside case-by-case discussions on terminology associated with nomadic groups through *ʻapiru, sutû, ḫana*, and the Amorites. Through these discussions, Fleming demonstrates how kin-based social structures fostered ongoing relationships between nomadic and sedentary populations. By drawing into the spotlight themes surrounding nomadism and pastoralism, Fleming's discussion illustrates the need for dedicated studies into "periphery" groups, using the evidence we do have (despite its limitations) to understand the complex social landscape of the ancient Near East.

Next, Hervé Reculeau combines approaches from multiple disciplines to discuss agricultural developments and the relationship between climate and society. Reculeau explores the geographical contexts for agricultural development in Upper and Lower Mesopotamia, drawing particular attention to the early emergence of southern temple-dominated economies. Moreover, utilising archaeobotanical evidence, Reculeau provides a retrospective of the development of specialised farming practices. Concurrent with the main theme of agriculture and the environmental contexts of Mesopotamian life, Reculeau raises questions surrounding climate change in a conversation as relevant to us now as it was to the inhabitants of the ancient Near East.

The rest of the chapter specifically addresses the interplay between societal development and climate change, focusing on how different societies coped with climate variabilities. While Reculeau explores various climate shifts, he argues against using climate determinism as a model for societal change, owing to the broad periods and geographical ranges of climate change in ancient Mesopotamia. Through an insightful conversation on recently published speleothem records from Iraq and Iran, Reculeau competently explores the consistent investment in irrigation during the Neo-Assyrian period through megapluvial and megadrought phases. Furthermore, since Neo-Assyrian imperial expansions were at their height during drier periods, he convincingly demonstrates that climate changes do not dictate societal change. However, further engagement with other data, such as recent studies on Anatolian climate changes concurrent with the collapse of the Hittite Empire (Manning et al. 2023), would provide additional insights into the dynamic relationship between climate change and societal change. In spite of minor limitations, Reculeau provides fascinating insights into the complex interplay between climate, agriculture, and society, synthesising scientific data and historical evidence.

While animals were regularly used in private and public economies to produce food and sacrifices, Franco D'Agostino and Gabriella Spada interrogate other attestations of domesticated animals in their chapter on animal husbandry. Notably, dogs appear in myth as companions to important deities, and Old Babylonian texts describe pigs feeding on industrial and domestic waste. These examples underline the central presence of animals within literary contexts, alongside their role as important sources of production and disposal in urban contexts. Additionally, discussions of terminology highlight linguistic development through the evolution of cuneiform signs distinguishing animals based on functionality, age, and sex. Overall, D'Agostino and Spada emphasise the importance of animals within mythological, urban, and economic spheres, effectively demonstrating how animal husbandry was integral to the organisation of Mesopotamian society.

Claus Ambos examines calendars, noting that work on this contribution finished in 2011. Ambos' chapter remains an effective synthesis of time measurement and social organisation. The discussion is grounded in esoteric, mythological, and literary texts, exploring continuous royal legitimation through bi-annual festivals alongside societal observations of taboos and calendar-ordained periods for construction work in the *īqqur ipuš*. This range of sources demonstrates the temporal contexts within which society and the individual operated across Mesopotamia's class spectrum, with kings tied to the same relationship between social practices and time as the general population. This approach combines broad themes regarding calendars and social structuring, providing an excellent bridging point as the monograph turns its focus to populations on the "margins of silence".

The monograph's second and shorter section shifts the focus from institutions to individuals, particularly on demographics, whose age, gender, and economic standing influence social vulnerability. First, Sophie Démare-Lafont discusses women, highlighting the predominantly masculine contexts in which Mesopotamian women appear and how contemporary views of women and historical determinism encouraged simplified narratives of feminine status. Moreover, an important point raised in this discussion is that women cannot be treated as a homogenous demographic. While Démare-Lafont outlines the Mesopotamian ideal for a daughter to become a wife and then a mother, she also highlights the alternatives, with parents being able to dedicate their daughters to religious service, and various avenues for reduction to slavery. Within this broad context of the female experience in ancient Mesopotamia, Démare-Lafont uses literary evidence to explore expressions of agency for Mesopotamian women in religious, industrial, legal, and economic contexts. However, sociological factors illustrate overarching patriarchal control of women concerning marriage and sexuality, foregrounding the juxtaposing positions of agency and patriarchal control which influenced the experience of women.

Throughout the rest of the chapter, Démare-Lafont uses a top-down approach to explore the varied lives of women, beginning with the queen before covering women in religious life, domestic life, and as slaves or concubines. Additionally, using the mythologies of Enlil, Sud, and Ninlil, Démare-Lafont ties urban topography to the female experience, contrasting the risk of assault on the street against the promised safety of domestic life. This cultural exclusion of particularly married women from public spaces such as taverns and the streets is also reflected in legal contexts. Démare-Lafont discusses Assyrian legal texts and the *Laws of Hammurabi* to outline the strict moral standards to which women were held. While she notes that men were also subject to similar treatment, the punishments for conjugal immorality were vastly different: divorce for men and drowning for women. Consequently, the sociological domination of women across the social spectrum can be seen to manifest in a myriad of ways, including the withdrawal of bodily autonomy from women alongside their cultural exclusion, justified in myth and enforced in the laws. Particular attention is also paid to the importance of motherhood, allowing heirs to inherit their father's social role while improving the mother's social standing. By combining epigraphy with evolving approaches in gender studies, Démare-Lafont overcomes aspects of the obstructive nature of the evidence in a thorough survey of the Mesopotamian female experience.

Laura Culbertson covers slaves, serfs, and foreigners. She explores epigraphic evidence, underlining the difficulties of using Sumerian terminology to reconstruct free or unfree statuses in Mesopotamian society. Therefore, Culbertson uses the term "slave" to describe complex systems of bondage, submission, and obligation. However, this approach becomes problematic concerning

corvée labour, where the whole population was conscripted under the sole mastership of the king (Steinkeller 2013: 350). Culbertson briefly explores this, but little consideration is given to the status of corvée workers whose servile relationship with the king foregrounds the complex interplay between social organisation and mandatory labour, which cannot be adequately described as serfdom or slavery. These issues demonstrate the importance of Culbertson's contribution, highlighting the complexities surrounding the use of modern terminology to describe ancient institutions and social structures, which must be treated on a case-by-case basis.

The book closes with John Nielsen's analysis of children and the elderly, highlighting the importance of social reproduction to Mesopotamian social structures through law codes and mythological episodes. For children, care began during pregnancy with prayers and incantations. Even when care systems failed, legal documents outlined adoption practices where foundlings became full heirs to their new families' social roles. Similarly, the elderly relied on care networks but despite the respect afforded to elders, they did not possess a future in which others could invest. Consequently, for those without familial ties or property, the ability to acquire regular care outside of temple institutions heightened the precarious position of elderly people. Overall, Nielsen's chapter provides an insightful conclusion to this volume, re-emphasising the social vulnerability experienced within peripheral demographics based on gender, socio-economic class, and age.

The contributions to this volume cover an extensive range of topics related to urban living and societal structure, with welcome attention given to traditionally overlooked groups. Each chapter is clear, well laid out, and accompanied by a bibliographic essay, providing clear references to previous scholarship and helpful suggestions for further reading. Moreover, by focusing on the challenges present in studying society and the individual, the chapters give a sense not only of where we are now concerning understanding the societal organisation of Mesopotamia but also where these avenues of research may lead. By providing various suggestions for avenues of future inquiry and highlighting new developments across disciplines pertinent to the exploration of the ancient Near East, the contributions effectively cohere to expertly encapsulate the present state of research with an optimistic look towards the future of Near Eastern studies. Overall, we must be grateful for the diligent work of the authors and editors, who have provided a brilliant series of discussions containing approaches and content integral to further research into Mesopotamian society.

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