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New York: Oxford University Press, 2022

Reviewed by Leland Conley Barrows

Professor Amanda Podany’s massive survey of ancient Near Eastern history reflects her commitment to interpreting and presenting the information revealed about the ancient history of this region by the cuneiform script etched on clay tablets and other mediums, the oldest examples dating back to 3000 BCE. She has endeavored to shed light on the details of the lives of ordinary people and day-to-day events by inserting microhistories of beer brewers, laundrymen, gardeners, slaves, as well as diviners, scribes, and priests into accounts of the rise and fall of kingdoms, empires, and their rulers. She declares that her book “…has been held together by cuneiform records.” (p. 536)

According to Podany, cuneiform, the oldest form of writing, was first developed in the Sumerian town of Uruk, in southern Mesopotamia, which she considers having been the world’s first urban settlement. Cuneiform tablets served originally to record commercial transactions. Over a 3000-year period cuneiform writing was adapted to a broad spectrum of languages and purposes. It was etched onto clay tablets that when sunbaked or fired acquired a hard permanence that other mediums developed later — papyrus, parchment, and leather — did not have. Very early on, cuneiform inscriptions were chiseled onto stone plaques and statuary.

Writings on various subjects, contracts, receipts, property leases, court records, inventories, hymns, and royal correspondence that have been discovered thanks to the numbers of archaeological expeditions that have been undertaken in the Middle East since the late nineteenth century, all have greatly broadened contemporary knowledge of the region, well beyond what had been traditionally gleaned from Biblical, Greek, and Roman sources.

Understanding of cuneiform was lost during the very early years of the Common Era. The late seventeenth century German explorer, Engelbert Kampfer, named this script that he could not read “cuneiform” owing to the wedge shape of its signs that writers, thousands of years earlier, had pressed into soft clay with a stylus or had chiseled into rock. In the early nineteenth century, Georg Friedrich Grotesfend and Henry Rawlinson began to decipher the trilingual Bisitum Inscription, expressed in old Persian, Elamite, and Akkadian, chiseled onto the faces of a cliff in Western Persia, to celebrate the victories of the Persian king, Darius I (522-416 BCE). They accomplished for the understanding of cuneiform what Jean-François Champollion had accomplished in 1822 for the understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphics.
Professor Podany has structured her book so as to blend a number of micro-histories of people and events into the narratives of the rise and fall of a succession of ancient Middle Eastern city states, kingdoms and empires as well as accounts of the actions of the big men and women who were associated with them.

The first words of the title of the book, “Weavers, Scribes, and Kings” are tropes for the varieties of status and occupational categories represented by the individuals who are brought to life throughout the text.

The “weavers” represent working people, the ordinary people, from many diverse backgrounds and occupations, even slaves. The “scribes” represent those persons who could read and write, a relatively small number of elites in largely non-literate societies, men and women who wrote and read for those who needed written records of their transactions but could not generate or read them themselves. Within this group of literati, translators formed a crucial subgroup whose importance grew as evolving Mesopotamian polities increased diplomatic and trading relations not only among themselves but also with societies and polities well beyond the Mesopotamian nucleus — ancient Egypt, for instance.

Finally, the “kings” in the title (including a few queens), many if not most of whom were literate, provide the dynastic and chronological framework of the text that supports a coherent narrative regarding the better-known actors and events of the region.

The second part of the title, “A New History of the Ancient Near East,” reflects Professor Podany’s efforts to present and to utilize the results of the latest excavations that have yielded caches of cuneiform tablets. They are what have enabled her to pen microhistories of the day-to-day activities of ordinary and some lesser-known elite people, bringing them and the societies of which they were a part back to life.

She clearly understands that newly discovered caches of tablets and long-lost inscriptions can overturn previous understandings of the history of the region and of the evolution of its polities and societies. The Bibliography lists 559 references, some of them published very recently. The 53 figures scattered throughout the text, most of them photographs of writings and scenes etched on cuneiform tablets and chiseled on sculptures, portray different periods and people from varying walks of life.

Professor Podany has brought back to life, after some thousands of years, the daily lives of people who would otherwise be forgotten and the more mundane events in the lives of elites. She wants her readers to understand that these people, having lived so long ago, had hopes, fears, ambitions, successes, and failures like us today. And she cautions her readers that “Ancient Near Eastern history is more of a weathered mosaic than a grand narrative.” (p. 3)
Professor Podany has grouped her 541 pages of text into seven principal sections — parts — as she labels them:

1. The Uruk Period (3500-2900 BCE);
2. The Early Dynastic Period (2900-2300 BCE);
3. The Akkadian and Ur III Periods (2300-2000 BCE);
4. The Early Second Millennium (2000-1750 BCE);
5. The Old Babylonian Period (1792-1550 BCE);
6. The Late Bronze Age (1550-1000 BCE); and
7. The First Millennium (1000-323 BCE).

Parts 1 and 2 concern themselves with the development of the Sumerian city-states in the southern part of Mesopotamia, beginning with Uruk, the city-state that “…created the mold for all Mesopotamian cities to come.” (p. 16) By focusing on the construction of the Stone Cone Temple, which began approximately in 3500 BCE, Professor Podany presents the skills of a still non-literate society able to bring construction materials from a relatively distant place, build temple walls using a form of proto-concrete, and waterproof the floors with bitumen, also from far-away.

Archaeological excavations have suggested that Uruk had a head start in the development of centralized rule, initially by priest-kings, art forms, and most particularly, theology, which would characterize Mesopotamia as a whole. She declares that for Mesopotamians “An un-questioning belief in the divine was the only way to account for pretty much every occurrence in one’s world.” (p. 58)

Writing on clay tablets evolved slowly. First came a system of clay bullae (bubbles, spikes) with tokens to keep track of the dispatching and delivery of construction materials, and then came proto- and developed cuneiform. At this point, Professor Podany offers the reader a short account about “Kushim: Controller of the Barley Warehouse.” (pp. 58-49) He is one of the first individuals in history whose name is known today, thanks to clay tablets dated about 3000 BCE. One can infer from these tablets that Sumerians had already become avid beer drinkers and had developed an arithmetical system based on 60.

The 600-year period following 2900 BCE witnessed the full maturity of the Sumerian city-state system and the corresponding development of kingship.

The period gave rise to numbers of clay tablets and other inscriptions, many of which were brought to light by the excavations of the royal tombs of Ur by the archaeologist, Leonard Wooley, in the 1920s.
To illustrate rivalries and cooperation among the Sumerian city-states, Podany describes the establishment of a “brotherhood,” probably a peace pact, between King Enmetena of Lagash and King Lugal-kinesh-dudu of Uruk (c. 2400 BCE). The pattern of peace-making and peace-upholding diplomacy exhibited by the two kings would be replicated many times in the region for almost two millennia.

The 700-year period, 2300-2000 BCE, witnessed the rise and fall of the Akkadian domination of Mesopotamia and a portion of the Fertile Crescent. The two big names associated with this period are those of Sargon (c. 2316-2277) and his grandson, Naram-Sin (2264-2218), the first Mesopotamian ruler to claim divinity for himself. Professor Podany introduces one of Sargon’s daughters who became a major priestess in Ur dedicated to Nanna, the moon god. She had numerous religious and diplomatic duties.

Soon after Naram-Sin’s death, an invasion by Gutians from Western Persia led to rebellions that enabled the various Sumerian city states to regain their autonomy until the rise of Ur-Namma (2112-2095 BCE), an Urukan who took power in Ur, founded the Third Dynasty of Ur, and inaugurated what has been called the Sumerian Renaissance.

Some 350 years before Hammurabi’s time, Ur-Namma ordered the drafting of a set of laws that, as Professor Podany reminds the reader, were not new inventions but compilations of laws that had existed for centuries. To illustrate how the justice system operated at the time, backed as it was by the making of formal oaths in a society permeated by overwhelming belief in the presence and the power of the gods, Podany describes a court case involving a problem of debt between two women, Geme-Suen and the wife of Ur-lugal. (pp. 181-185)

The following 250 years was a transitional period between the decline of the domination of Sumer by Ur; it came after the death of Shulgi, its last strong ruler. Before moving ahead to the rise of Babylon and Assyria, however, Professor Podany describes the evolution of a trade route that linked Larsa with Babylon, Ashur, the town from which the Assyrian Empires arose, and Kanesh in central Anatolia. Kanesh sought tin and textiles; Ashur sought silver and gold. To illustrate the functioning of the trading system, she describes the activities of an Assyrian trading family led by Ashur-idi, the father, and Ashur-nada the son.

Moving on to the rise of the first Assyrian Empire, Professor Podany describes the career of its founder, Shamshi-Adad, a warrior but also a ruler who could use peaceful means to increase his power and influence. He placed his son, Yasmah-Adad, on the throne of Mari, at that time a subject kingdom, and married him to Beltum, a princess of Qatna, a kingdom extending west from Palmyra in Syria over which he wished to have increased influence.
She details the complicated marriage preparations and ceremony and then describes the work of two female court musicians, Bazatum and Rishya. She also includes a detailed description of the Mari palace that after being destroyed became, nearly four thousand years later, a major site for the recovery of cuneiform tablets.

Professor Podany has devoted much of Part V of her book to King Hammurabi of Babylon, a conqueror but also a reformer who is particularly remembered for his law code, one that like the code of Ur Namma was mostly a compilation of existing laws. Micro-histories detail the tasks of two royal officials, both of whom were literate and reported directly to Hammurabi. One of them, Sin-idinnam, was the appointed governor-general of Larsa. The other, Shamash-hazir, had the very complicated and arduous task of settling claims regarding both privately held and royal lands worked by tenants and by soldiers compensated by the allotment of farmland.

Professor Podany also describes the role and activities of certain unmarried women, *naditums*, from wealthy families who, after taking vows of service to the god, Shamash, lived in designated communities known as *gagnums*. In addition to their religious duties, they became expert businesswomen whose activities contributed greatly to the economies of the towns where such communities were located.

Turning to House F in Nippur, an old Sumerian city then under Babylonian rule, Podany describes the operations of scribal schools that taught the art of writing cuneiform both in the current language, Akkadian, and in Sumerian, a language that although not spoken at this time remained the major literary language. The writings that the apprentice scribes studied included an early version of the Epic of Gilgamesh.

The concluding chapter in Part 5 surveys the slow decline of Babylon following the death of Hammurabi, the strengthening of Hana and its capital, Terqa, in what is now Syria, and the rise of the Hittite Kingdom of Hatti on the Anatolian Plateau in what is now Turkey.

Regarding Hana and Terqa, they being of particular interest to Professor Podany, she has analyzed twelve tablets pertaining to a chief barber, Gimil-Ninkarrak who lived in Terqa, to detail the work of barbers in Mesopotamian society. They trimmed the hair and, in some cases, shaved the heads and faces of elite men. Given that barbers worked with sharp copper blades, they were trusted by and held in high esteem by rulers.

The 550-year period encompassing the Late Bronze Age witnessed the rise of a new power, Mittani; the increasing power of Hatti; Egypt’s expansionist efforts in the Levant; the resurgence of Babylonia under its Kassite dynasty; and, somewhat later, the resurgence of Assyria.
After several devastating wars at the start of the period, the rulers of Egypt, Mittani, Hatti, and Babylonia elaborated a set of peace agreements. These reflected the diplomatic alliances, brotherhoods, dating back to the early history of Sumer, and gave the region a relative degree of peace for around 200 years.

Correspondence among the participants was conducted exclusively with cuneiform on clay tablets mostly in Akkadian, the diplomatic language. The Amarna Tablets uncovered in Akhenaten’s capital in Egypt and tablets found in other locations reveal a great deal about this brotherhood. It was based on shared interests, exchanges of envoys and expensive gifts, and on royal marriages.

One of these marriages was contracted between a daughter of King Burna-Buriash of Babylon and the Egyptian pharaoh, Akhenaten, better known for his marriage with Nefertiti. The Brotherhood survived the collapse of Mittani brought about by the aggressiveness of King Suppiluliuma of Hatti and permitted a restored Assyria under its king, Ashur-Uballit I, then to be recognized as a great king and full member of the Brotherhood.

The development of this diplomatic system and indeed the multilingualism required for kingdoms having different languages to collaborate closely necessitated the development of a corps of translators and interpreters. To illustrate the tasks of translators, Professor Podany has described the work of an Egyptian translator and scribe, Hane, who was fluent both in his own language and its scripts and in Akkadian. For purposes of communication, Egyptian, at that time, was sometimes written with the cuneiform script.

The end of this period was marked by a breakdown of authority in the larger kingdoms for distinct reasons — political, social, and environmental. However, the ruling dynasty of Assyria survived, and in the interregnum, a few small but historically significant kingdoms, Israel among them, arose.

The final part of this book, covering 677 years, is centered on the rise and fall of the three major empires of the period: the Assyrian Empire, the neo-Babylonian Empire, and the Persian Empire. It concludes with the death of the founder of a fourth empire, that of Alexander the Great, in 323 BCE.

The period is well-documented not only by cuneiform records but also by surviving documents in alphabetic scripts derived from Phoenician, particularly writings in Aramaic that became the lingua franca in the Near East after 1000 BCE. The Phoenician alphabet was also the ancestor of the Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, and Latin alphabets.
Around this time, the Israelites began to record their chronicles that would become the Hebrew Bible. But Professor Podany reminds the reader that since these languages were written on perishable materials, most of their day-by-day writings have been lost.

As with the previous periods, Professor Podany weaves accounts of people from various occupational and status categories into her narrative. For instance, she focuses on the artists and sculptors, most of them nameless, who produced the massive and intricate stone and gypsum friezes that adorned the walls of the palaces of the Assyrian kings starting with Ashurnasirpal II (883-859).

Concentrating on the portrayals of the victims of the Assyrian conquests and deportations, she finds that the unnamed sculptors humanized these people. Her descriptions of the friezes offer a contrast to the Assyrian reputation for brutality as does what she has to say about the bookishness of both King Ashurbanipal and his wife. Ashurbanipal was proud of the library housed in his palace at Nineveh. It was destroyed in 612 BCE but when excavated in the mid-nineteenth century CE, it yielded a very large number of clay tablets including what is believed to be the latest and most complete version of the Epic of Gilgamesh.

After the Medes and the Babylonians led by King Nabopolassar of Babylon destroyed the Assyrian Empire, his son, Nebuchadnezzar II (604-562) presided over what would be a golden age in Babylon.

Although he greatly embellished the city, he probably did not order the construction of the Hanging Gardens, a project traditionally attributed to him, or the writing instructing their building has never been found. Professor Podany suggests that Sennacherib (705-681), a previous king of Assyria may have ordered the construction of something similar in Nineveh, the capital that he established. And a Babylonian ration list suggests that King Jehoiakim of Judah was well cared for in captivity in Babylon.

The destruction of Assyria (612-609) and the rise of Babylon is partly evoked through the account, possibly an autobiography or a biography, of the life of Adad-guppi, a priestess from Harran, an Assyrian sacred city, who dedicated her life to the goddess Sin (the Moon God). Born in 649 BCE, she lived for 102 years and was taken to Babylon with her son, Nabu-na’id, when Harran fell to the Medes.

Through a series of fortuitous circumstances arising from the instability in Babylon that followed the death of Nebuchadnezzar, Nabu-na’id, named Nabonidus by the Greeks, became the ruler of Babylon. He would be dethroned by Cyrus of Persia in 539 BCE.

For this period too, Professor Podany introduces micro-historical accounts about ordinary people typical of the era.
After explaining that persons of means in Babylon and elsewhere in Mesopotamia had their laundry cleaned professionally, she introduces Ina-teshi-etir, a professional laundryman (p. 500). She details the many professional activities of Bel-uballit, a prosperous oil presser who was also a beer brewer and a temple official. And she describes the life and the tasks of Ishunnatu, a female slave who became a successful innkeeper while remaining enslaved.

Professor Podany brings her survey to a close by focusing once again on Uruk, now under Persian overrule, where the Sumerian scribal tradition still survived. She introduces Rimut-Anu, a scribe, exorcist (ashipu), and re-copier of old texts written in the Emesal dialect of Sumerian, a language that had been dead for many centuries. He and others like him dedicated themselves to keeping cuneiform, clay tablets, the old religion, and the old written languages alive.

In writing the Preface to this book, Professor Podany noted that people today know much more about certain “other ancient cultures that shared the same general region of the world — Egypt, Israel, Greece, and Rome” (p. 4) than they do about the cultures and histories of the peoples, states, and cultures that she has covered.

Her hope is that her efforts will serve to reduce the disparity. She has certainly demonstrated what archaeological discoveries and the careful collection and decipherment of the writings and inscriptions appearing on the 500,000 or so clay tablets and statuary that have so-far been unearthed can tell us about ancient Near Eastern civilizations.

But Professor Podany has clearly shied away from offering more than a few comparisons of biblical accounts with what is revealed by cuneiform writings. One would have appreciated, for instance, some comment about a legend that arose about Sargon of Akkad, many years after his death, that his mother, a priestess, had set him afloat in a Mesopotamian river in a reed basket and that he was rescued and raised by a “drawer of water” (p. 145). Is there a link between this legend and the Biblical account of the rescue of Moses from a basket placed in the bushes beside the Nile?