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Taylor Halverson

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Book Reviews

Benjamin R. Foster and Karen Polinger Foster. *Civilizations of Ancient Iraq*. Princeton University Press, 2009.

It is a pleasure to review *Civilizations of Ancient Iraq* by Benjamin and Karen Foster. Ben Foster was my Akkadian professor when I attended graduate school at Yale. I vividly remember his ability to convey the broad sweep of ancient Mesopotamian cultures in an accessible, meaningful, and engaging manner. Together with his wife, he has demonstrated that skill in this book as well.

Civilizations of Ancient Iraq provides “a brief historical and cultural survey of Iraq from earliest times to the Muslim conquest in 637” (page xi). This survey helps answer the questions, “Why study the civilizations of ancient Iraq? What is the value of studying the civilizations of ancient Iraq to the study of civilization in general?”

The book’s Prologue offers an overview answer. “Iraq is one of the birthplaces of human civilization. This land saw the first towns and cities, the first states and empires. Here writing was invented, and with it the world’s oldest poetry and prose and the beginnings of mathematics, astronomy, and law. Here too are found pioneering achievements in pyrotechnology, as well as important innovations in art and architecture. From Iraq comes rich documentation for nearly every aspect of human endeavor and activity millennia ago, from the administration of production, surplus, and the environment to religious belief and practice, even haute cuisine recipes and passionate love songs” (page xi).

The basic features of the book are these: a Prologue is followed by ten chapters and an Epilogue. There is a well-documented note section for each chapter (found at the end of the book), a thorough and up-to-date bibliography, a helpful index, two maps (more maps could have been provided, but this reviewer made ample educational use of Google Earth to significantly supplement that deficiency), and 23 black and white images of ancient artifacts such as cuneiform tablets, harps, stele, reliefs, vases, statuettes, etc.

The narrative is delightful with strategically selected contextualizing quotations from primary sources. These quotes artfully and expertly enliven the narrative, drive home a point, illustrate key ideas, but most importantly, draw out the ancient voices of lost cultures and peoples so that the reader feels as though he or she were silently eavesdropping on ancient conversations. *Civilizations of Ancient Iraq* presents a trajectory of the most important turning points in the cultures and civilizations of ancient Iraq. This review will highlight some of the key ideas from each chapter.

Chapter 1 discusses what constitutes the geographical region that we interchangeably call Iraq or Mesopotamia (in Greek, Mesopotamia means “between the rivers”, referring to the Euphrates and Tigris rivers that run through the region). This chapter also traces the beginning of civilization from the domestication of plants and animals to rise of small villages and towns (ca. 12,000-8000 before the present). The authors then describe the migration of farmers and herders from the foothills into the alluvial plains. They conclude this chapter with an overview of the Ubaid period of civilization that pre-dated written records (ca. 6500-3800 BCE).

Chapter 2 explores the rise of Mesopotamian civilization, focusing specifically on the city of Uruk (ca. 4th millennium BCE). During this time we see the development of formal religion, the invention of writing, and social stratification. We do not know exactly why, but Uruk become a model for other cities as we see physical culture from Uruk diffused throughout the region. In fact, this diffusion of the Urukian model of culture and civilization persisted among Mesopotamian city-states into the 1st century CE.

Chapter 3 focuses on the earliest Mesopotamian city-states of Sumerian civilization: Jemdet-Nasr, Ur, and Nippur (ca. 3rd millennium BCE). Sumerian literature and religion began to flourish and royalty and kingship played an increasingly dominant role in culture and society.

In Chapter 4, we learn that Akkadian speaking peoples took control over Sumerian areas and shifted imperial control to Agade (late 3rd millennium BCE), a city which archaeologists have still never found. The key rulers were Sargon, who created what was probably the first true empire the world has known, and his grandson, Naram-Sin, who was known for opulent and grandiose living. Naram-Sin was the first Mesopotamian king to claim divinity, perhaps because of his military conquests, successes in crisis management, and clever abilities with imperial administration.

Chapter 5 reviews one of the most influential and famous of ancient Mesopotamian rulers, Hammurabi. Hammurabi’s time (18th century BCE) is well-known for literature including his eponymous law code, which has striking similarities to case-law found in the Hebrew Bible, and the transformation of Sumerian poems about the legendary ruler Gilgamesh into an Akkadian literary masterpiece known now as “The Epic of Gilgamesh.” Hammurabi established the Babylonian Empire that despite its heady fame was actually short-lived.

Chapter 6 covers the Kassite period of Babylonian history (ca. 1530-1150 BCE). Originally from the Zagros Mountains to the east of the Mesopotamian alluvial plain, the Kassites overtook Babylonian areas and culture after Babylon was destroyed by Hittites. They expanded the military class and introduced horse-drawn chariots to the region.

During this period, there were several co-existing empires with which the Kassites carried on extensive trade and diplomatic correspondence, addressing each other on equal terms (using the term “brother”). These foreign empires were Egypt, Mitanni (the Hurrians in Syria), Hatti and Arzawa (in central and western Turkey), Alashiya (modern day Cyprus), and Assyria (in northern Iraq). The Kassites promoted technology, medicine, and science, especially the art of divination.

Chapter 7 focuses on the rise of Assyria from its earliest days (ca. late 3rd millennium BCE) down to the Neo-Assyrian imperial age of (8th-7th centuries BCE) when they were eventually annihilated by foreign conquerors. Much of what we know about the Old Assyrian period (ca. 2300-1800 BCE) is from tablets discovered at Assyrian trading colonies established in Turkey (e.g., Kanesh).

The Early Middle Assyrian period (ca. 1350-1200 BCE) saw the rise of militarism and imperialism. But this came to a screeching halt when near 1200 BCE there was a general collapse of society throughout the Ancient Near East that also affected Assyria. Years later, the Neo-Assyrian Empire emerged with the rise of Adad-Nirari II (ca. 911 BCE). Forging an expansionistic policy with fierce militaristic determinism, Neo-Assyria was known throughout the broader Near East for its fear-inspiring efficient military machine. The Neo-Assyrian policy of internationalization and assyrianizing the empire resulted in the displacement of possibly a million people. This policy influenced subsequent Judeo-Christian history and tradition as represented in the story of the 10 Northern Tribes being brought into Assyrian captivity and thus subsequently lost to the annals of history. In addition to a militaristic society, the Neo-Assyrians kept extensive libraries and records. In fact, the largest library to survive from the ancient world was the library of Assurbanipal at Nineveh.

Chapter 8 returns to Babylon in its Neo-Babylonian years (ca. 612 – 539 BCE), which many consider to be its glory days; it was a dynamic, prosperous time. After the fall of the Assyrian Empire to Median and Babylonian armies, Nebuchadnezzar II “transformed Babylon into the greatest city of the age, enjoying a peace and prosperity she had not known for centuries” (page 130). Streets, palaces, and temples were refurbished and the period was known for education, literature, and science. “Educated Babylonians of the time were well aware of the great antiquity of their civilization.

The study of ancient history flourished in professional circles, producing a new style of chronographic literature” (pages 134-135). Religious patronage also continued.

“The great temples in Babylonia were centers of religious, economic, and intellectual life. The temple of Ishtar at Uruk, for example, had a staff of hundreds, including scores of craftsmen, and controlled at least 17,000 hectares of agricultural land and extensive date orchards, many of which it leased out to citizens for a share of the crop” (page 140).

Economically we see the rise of chattel slavery, especially during the reign of Nabonidus. Eventually, the Neo-Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians. The Persian rulers borrowed liberally from Babylon. In fact, “When Darius commemorated his rise to power in a long narrative carved on a sheer cliff face at Behistun, Iran, he used three languages, Elamite, Persian, and Babylonian, all written using cuneiform characters.

This trilingual inscription helped make possible the decipherment of cuneiform writing in the nineteenth century” (page 146).

Chapter 9 turns our attention to the culture and history of Mesopotamia after the conquests of Alexander the Great and the wars of succession. The Seleucids finally won power in the Mesopotamian region and a form of Greek culture eventually came to predominate. But because Greek scholars were not so interested in Babylonian culture (except for mathematics, astronomy, and divination), the Babylonian culture and traditions waned. Additionally, the Seleucids built their capital about 30 miles away from Babylon, which also contributed to the erosion of Babylonian primacy.

Eventually the Seleucid kingdom fell to Parthians, who moved the capital to Ctesiphon. Rome and the Parthians were engaged in conflict over many years. This was devastating to the region, and led to the further loss of ancient Mesopotamian culture due to economic collapse and the lack of patronage of the old ways of doing things. The end of Mesopotamian civilization can be dated to the 1st century CE, i.e., during this period of ongoing conflict between the Romans and the Parthians.

The last datable astronomical tables from ancient Mesopotamia date to 75 CE. Foster and Foster conclude “We may take these texts as the effective terminus of Mesopotamian civilization, after well over three thousand years. The ancient cities were mostly in ruins, with the occasional Parthian fortification atop the debris.

This is not to say that Mesopotamian civilization left no legacy. We see its survival in many contexts down to the present day—from literature and metaphor to geometry and astronomy, from cultic and magical practices to art and iconography” (page 167).

Chapter 10 concludes the historical review of ancient civilization of Iraq. When the Parthian state fell, the Persian Sassanid Empire inherited the area and ruled for over 400 years from ca. 224 to 637 CE, when the Islamic conquerors toppled the Sassanid state. The Sassanids were known for religious tolerance. Their empire encompassed a rich diversity of religions including: Manichaeism, Christianity, Mithraism, Gnosticism, Greek and Roman religions, traditional Mesopotamian religions, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism. The Sassanian Empire had the structure in place to be a

successful empire, but long-term conflict with the Byzantine Empire meant that both empires exhausted themselves, devastated the Mesopotamian region, and deeply diminished its productivity.

Thus was the region left relatively wide open for the Arabs who had for the first time in their history united around a common cause—Islam. Within a few years the Muslim invaders had conquered huge swaths of the Middle East and Mediterranean basin. The Islamic conquests bring to a close the survey of ancient civilizations of Iraq.

The Epilogue describes the centuries of historical and academic interest in ancient Iraq. The Fosters describe the stages of rediscovery of ancient Mesopotamian civilizations, the decipherment of cuneiform and the many languages that it represented, the development of philology and archaeology, the development of institutions, especially museums, to retain the cultural memory of ancient Mesopotamia, and the more recent and very sad destruction of so much knowledge about ancient Mesopotamia because of ongoing wars and conflict in the region, especially since 1990.

Civilizations of Ancient Iraq can be a bit daunting to a novice in the field due to the hundreds of names, dates, and locations mentioned throughout the book.

I found it indispensable to use Google Earth and Wikipedia to visually and geographically supplement what I was reading. When locations were mentioned, I would look up their GPS coordinates on Wikipedia (coordinates are usually found in the upper right of the page) and would then paste those coordinates into Google Earth. Sometimes Wikipedia coordinates were incorrect (such was the case with the city of Ur in southern Iraq). But for the most part, I was able to find the ancient locations I was seeking.

So simply by mapping all of the major locations mentioned in the book, and saving them in my own personal Google Earth folders, I was able to quickly see an interactive, contextualizing visual display of the reality of where Mesopotamian history occurred, especially when the “Panoramio pictures” features on Google Earth is enabled. This exercise of using Google Earth to learn about and “see” the ancient past is, I propose, the next best thing to actually visiting the ancient locations discussed in the book (certainly it is much cheaper and safer than visiting Iraq today).

In summary, I highly recommend *Civilizations of Ancient Iraq* to anyone seeking a concise, up-to-date, informative survey of the history and culture of ancient Mesopotamia.

Taylor Halverson