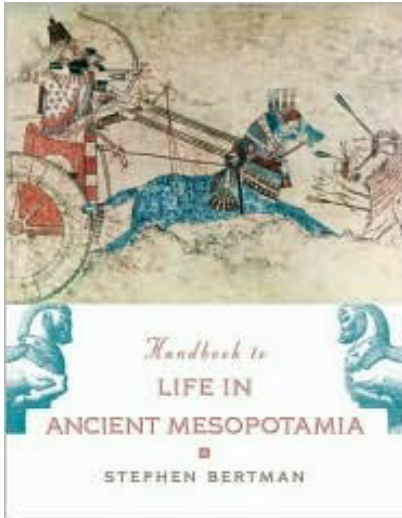


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Bertman, Stephen

Handbook to Life in Ancient Mesopotamia

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. xii + 396.
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The volume under review is a one volume, encyclopedia-like survey of the culture, history, archaeology, and study of ancient Mesopotamia. The volume is divided into different chapters, each dealing with a separate general topic, and within these chapters the various subtopics are discussed.

The thirteen chapters include: (1) "Geography of Mesopotamia," which includes a general introduction to the geography and environment and a gazetteer of major sites; (2) "Archaeology and History," which includes a discussion of the history of exploration, the methods of archaeology, the major historical sources, a survey of Mesopotamian history, and a listing of key rulers; (3) "Government and Society," which discusses the structure and stratification of society, along with aspects of kingship, taxation, justice and law, and the biographies of major political leaders; (4) "Religion and Myth," in which aspects of ritual, religion, and cult are discussed, along with a survey of the major deities; (5) "Language, Writing, and Literature," a survey of the languages of Mesopotamia and their decipherment and various aspects pertaining to writing and literature; (6) "Architecture and Engineering," which surveys diverse aspects of architecture and building and includes discussions on various types of structures, from public (temples, palaces, etc.) to private, along with bridges, canals, roads, and the like; (7) "Sculpture and Other Arts," a survey of the major classes of art in various media and forms (e.g., sculpture, pottery, painting, glass, metal, jewelry); (8) "Economy," a survey of the economy of ancient Mesopotamia,

including aspects of ancient subsistence (e.g., farming, fishing, animal husbandry), various professions, and prices; (9) "Transportation and Trade," which surveys major aspects relating to land and water transport and trade, weights, and measures; (10) "Military Affairs," which surveys general aspects relating to warfare, weapons, and other military-related issues, including a survey of important evidence of specific wars and battles; (11) "Everyday Life," which includes a survey of numerous aspects of the topic, including various life cycles (birth, death, marriage, etc.), and aspects such as clothing, cosmetics, food and drink, music, toys, sport, education, and health; (12) "Mesopotamia and Sacred Scripture," which surveys the influences of Mesopotamian culture and literature on the holy scriptures of the West: the Hebrew Bible and the Apocrypha, the New Testament, and the Koran; (13) "The Legacy of Mesopotamia," which surveys the long-term influence of Mesopotamia and its culture as seen through to modern times.

The author provides choice readings on the relevant topics following each chapter and a chronological table of the appropriate periods and major museums with collections of Mesopotamian antiquities at the end of the book.

The volume can be used as a general introduction to the culture, history, and archaeology of ancient Mesopotamia for either the typical lay reader or for an introductory college-level course on the ancient Near East. However, one should note that with respect to a number of the topics the discussions and bibliography are not completely up-to-date and that in general the illustrations are of very poor quality.

If one is looking for a very brief overview of Mesopotamian civilization, I would prefer E. Ascalone, *Mesopotamia: Assyrians, Sumerians, Babylonians* (trans. R. Giammanco Frongia; Dictionaries of Civilization; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007). If one is looking for a better illustrated and in many cases more detailed atlas-like work on ancient Mesopotamia, then without a doubt M. Roaf, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East* (New York: Facts on File, 1990), is to be preferred. If one wishes to refer to a more general and systematic survey of the history of Mesopotamia, then books such as G. Roux, *Ancient Iraq* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992) should be preferred. Likewise, for systematic surveys of Mesopotamian archaeology, books such as S. Lloyd, *The Archaeology of Mesopotamia: From the Old Stone Age to the Persian Conquest* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984) are still to be preferred.

Despite the drawbacks mentioned above, as expected in a one-volume, semipopular survey of a culture that lasted over a long period of time, this volume does serve its purpose: a general introduction to a fascinating topic for the general public.