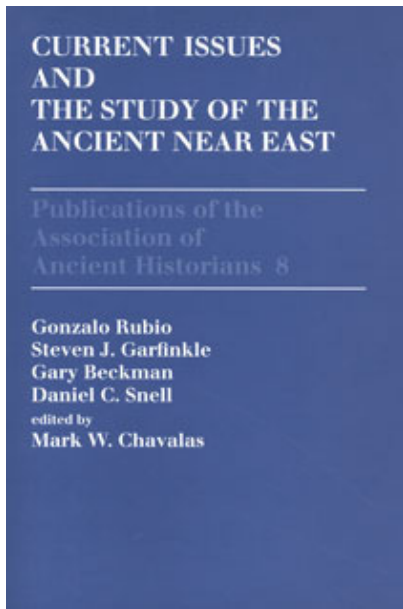


RBL 06/2009



Rubio, Gonzalo, Steven Garfinkle, Gary Beckman, and Daniel Snell
Edited by Mark Chavalas

Current Issues and the Study of the Ancient Near East

Publications of the Association of Ancient Historians 8

Claremont, Calif.: Regina Books, 2007. Pp. 163. Paper.
\$19.95. ISBN 1930053460.

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The volume under review is part of a series that is published by the Association of Ancient Historians, aiming to summarize central themes and issues in various field of ancient history. As such, in this volume there are four synthetic studies that attempt to present up-to-date summaries and/or current central themes, in central topics relating to the ancient Near East. Three of the four studies (by Beckman, Garfinkle, and Snell) were presented at a meeting of the Association of Ancient Historians in Columbia, Missouri, in 2005, while the fourth, by Rubio, was written specifically for this volume.

The first contribution, by G. Rubio, "From Sumer to Babylonia: Topics in the history of southern Mesopotamia" (5–51), surveys several central issues relating to the cultural history of southern Mesopotamia. This chapter is divided into several topics: (1) "Language and Ethnicity in Early Mesopotamia," where he discusses and summarizes opinions on the linguistic strata of early Mesopotamia and, in particular, the question of pre-Sumerian, and post-Sumerian languages; (2) "Land Tenure and Economic Structure," where he discusses the history and current state of understanding of the concept of land tenure in Mesopotamia and its implications for understanding the general economic structure and economic institutions that existed; he stresses current views that, alongside "institutional economies," "noninstitutional household" economies played an important

role in ancient Mesopotamia; (3) “Early International Contacts,” in which he discusses mainly the location of Dilmun and Magan and Meluhha; (4) “Literature and History,” where he cautions against applying a “historicistic” approach when analyzing nonhistorical and ahistorical literary genres; (5) “From the Sargonic Period to Ur III: Back to the Sumerians?” where he reviews studies on the supposed dichotomy between Akkadian and Sumerian ethnicities and concludes that this is but a modern scholarly construct; (6) “The Mesopotamian Law Collections: Were They Really Legal Codes?” in which he argues that these codes did not serve as true legal codes but rather as academic tractates for training scribes; and (7) “Babylonia during the First Millennium B.C.E.,” in which he presents an up-to-date summary of the history of Babylonia in this period.

The second contribution, by S. J. Garfinkle, “The Assyrians: A New Look at an Ancient Power” (53–96), is an excellent overview of the history and research of the Assyrians, from the earliest periods until the end of the Assyrian Empire. The author attempts to see the Assyrians and their cultural achievements from a more positive and constructive perspective, so as not to be overly influenced by the very negative view of the Assyrians as seen in the biblical and, subsequently, most Western literature. Although most of the essay deals with the history, it ends with a view of future directions of research. This essay can serve as first-rate introduction to the history of Assyria.

In the third contribution, by G. Beckman, “From Hattusa to Carchemish: The Latest on Hittite History” (97–112), the author presents, more than anything else, an overview and history of Hittitology and pinpoints five major areas of research and/or problems in current Hittitology. This chapter can thus serve not as an introductory text to Hittite culture and history but rather as a brief introduction to the study of the Hittites and their language.

The fourth and final chapter, by D. C. Snell, “Syria-Palestine in Recent Research” (113–49), is a much broader-ranging study than the other chapters in this volume, touching upon, though all too briefly, a wide range of topics. In fact, the topics broached are so wide that one wonders whether too much was included under this roof of this general summary. The essay starts with a brief summary of the history of Syria in the third and second millennia B.C.E. This is then followed by a summary of the finds from a selected group of sites from Syria and Israel (Ebla, Šehna/Šubat-Enlil, Mari, Hazor, Emar, Ugarit, Megiddo, and Dur-Katlimmu), which in the view of the reviewer is an unusual and, to a large extent, unrepresentative choice of sites (what about, e.g., Qatna, Kabri, Pella, Ashkelon?), and a brief note on the utility of surface survey (which once again, the choice of this topic and the examples brought [mainly the surveys of the West Bank in relationship to the early Israelite settlement in Canaan] is not clear). The final section of this essay, entitled “The Bible and History,” is an attempt to summarize current views and

debates on the relationship between the biblical texts and history. As part of this, Snell attempts to summarize main approaches to the analysis of the biblical text, such as literary/source criticism, form criticism, and so on, as well as recent “historical approaches” (with a special emphasis on the work of Liverani). While the topics discussed in this chapter are quite diverse and one might even find it difficult to see the connections between the various parts, the author does manage to present a few of the more interesting and at times pressing issues that are currently being dealt with by historians of the region of Syria-Palestine in the third, second, and first millennia B.C.E.

All told, this volume contains four very interesting essays that deal some of the central topics relating to the study of the history of the ancient Near East. Although some of the chapters (in particular Garfinkle and to a certain extent Rubio) can serve as almost introductory texts to the specific topics that they deal with (the Assyrians; southern Mesopotamia), the other two chapters are much more focused on specific issues (history of Hittite studies and current research; various aspects relating to Syria-Palestine). As such, while this volume can serve as nice sampling of various current research on the history of the ancient Near East, it cannot serve as a general introductory volume to ancient Near Eastern history (which I do not believe was the intention of the editor). On other hand, in my opinion it can serve as nice tool for historians and archaeologists of various cultures in the Near East to receive a selection of topics and thoughts about current research from the some of the leading scholars in each of the respective fields represented. The editor (M. Chavalas) is to be thanked for this collection.