

## Buchbesprechungen

EPH'AL, ISRAEL: *The City Besieged. Siege and Its Manifestations in the Ancient Near East* (Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 36). Leiden: Brill, 2009. xviii, 211 S., 11 b/w illustrations. 16,5 × 24,5 cm. ISBN 978-90-04-17410-8. Preis: € 83,-/US\$ 118,-

In 1983, Israel Eph'al published the programmatic article "On warfare and military control in the Ancient Near Eastern Empires: a research outline" (in: H. Tadmor/M. Weinfeld [eds.], *History, Historiography and Interpretation* [Jerusalem 1983] 88–106), arguing that the advances in cuneiform studies made it possible to study warfare and strategies of military control of the first millennium BC comprehensively. While such a book still remains to be written Eph'al has gone on to publish a number of articles on Near Eastern warfare. Several have focused on siege warfare, beginning with "The Assyrian siege ramp at Lachish: military and lexical aspects" (Tel Aviv 11 [1984] 60–70), and the present book is a study of siege warfare in the Ancient Near East up to 331 BC (p. 4). No starting date is given explicitly, but apart from sporadic use of evidence from 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium sources (Ebla) the book is mostly concerned with the Old Babylonian period, the Late Bronze Age and the first millennium BC. This chronological scope vastly exceeds Eph'al's 1983 proposal for a comprehensive study of warfare in the age of empires. The decision for such a diachronic approach is explained with this statement: "With respect to the principles of war, the human spirit and the behavior of individuals and groups, chronology is of no particular significance." (p. 4). This may be so, but substantial parts of the book deal specifically with economic questions, and it is questionable whether those can be so easily separated from their historical context.

The volume is the English translation of a book originally published in 1996 in Hebrew. According to the preface, this new edition has been updated and expanded in regard to its bibliography and to new sources. However, a glance at the bibliography (pp. 173–190) shows that these additions are not numerous and mostly limited to materials for chapter 4 (see below). References to text editions have not been updated in a systematic way: some key publications are curiously absent (e.g. A. Fuchs, *Die Inschriften Sargons II. aus Khorsabad* [1994]; W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Oracle Questions* [2007]; H. W. F. Saggs, *The Nimrud Letters, 1952* [2001]) and Eph'al instead quotes outdated or preliminary works. This reduces the value of the book as a reference tool. On the whole, the book reflects the state of the discipline in the mid-1990s and should be used accordingly.

The book opens with a short "Introduction" (chapter 1, pp. 1–6) which briefly describes the components of a siege up to breakthrough. It should be pointed out that neither here nor elsewhere is Eph'al interested in the events after breakthrough or its more usual alternative, surrender. The author then gives a very patchy overview of previous studies, limiting himself to three works from 1938, 1955 and 1963.<sup>1</sup> He goes on to describe his ap-

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<sup>1</sup> While it may have been correct in 1996 to state that "to date, there has only been limited discussion of the phenomenon of siege warfare in the ancient Near East" (p. 3) the field

proach: “It is not the purpose of this book to describe any particular siege; rather, our goal is to identify the characteristics of siege warfare as a phenomenon, as revealed in extant sources from the ancient Near East” (p. 5). Chapter 2 is a survey of these “Sources” (pp. 7–34), divided into “literary sources” (pp. 7–17), “non-literary documents” (pp. 17–23; but surely the mathematical texts must be considered in the first category!), “artistic representations” (pp. 24–25; given the rich data available from Assyrian reliefs, this is extremely sketchy) and “archaeological evidence” (pp. 26–34; Tyre, Lachish, Old Paphos on Cyprus, Nineveh, Ashdod). The analysis begins in chapter 3 on “Military aspects” (pp. 35–113). This is the longest chapter of the book and split into two sections, “Blockade” (pp. 34–68) and “Breakthrough” (pp. 68–113). The first section deals with negotiations, famine, thirst and epidemics, all from the point of view of the besieged; all these issues of course equally affect the besiegers. The second section discusses four instruments of siege: ladders, tunnels, battering rams and siege towers, before briefly discussing the role of stratagems (pp. 102–103; “Trojan Horse”), the impact of the introduction of artillery in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC (pp. 103–106) and – finally – the key issue why the besieged would not simply surrender (pp. 106–113). This last part highlights the problems of Eph’al’s diachronic approach. Without a discussion of the specific circumstances his list of cities withstanding sieges that lasted for months and occasionally years (pp. 110–112) remains an unsatisfying catalogue. Chapter 4 on “Legal and economic aspects” (pp. 114–151) deals exclusively with the so-called Siege Documents from Babylonia during the wars that marked the end of Assyrian control over the region in the later 7<sup>th</sup> century and comparable texts from Late Bronze Age Emar. These documents were drawn up during periods of war (not necessarily specifically while a city was under siege) and prices and specific clauses reflect the economic and social pressures on the population. This chapter – the only part of the book in which Eph’al has systematically included works published after 1996 – reads like a separate and rather specialised article on this particular set of legal documents. It is most definitely not the analysis of the economics of siege warfare that the chapter title would suggest. Its narrow focus separates it from the rest of the book and does not help put the other chapters into perspective. The evidence discussed here would have become rather more relevant had it been integrated into chapter 5, as it is a ragbag of short notes on “Social aspects” (pp. 152–172). Although this is not immediately clear from the presentation which is split into the rather arbitrary sections “Between man and god” (pp. 152–161) and “Public life” (pp. 162–172), many of the same problems in evidence in the Siege Documents are revisited but on the basis of a different set of sources, mostly literary texts. The discussions on (the fiction of) “Child sacrifice” (pp. 153–159) and “The liberation of slaves” (pp. 169–172) need to be seen in the context of making the best possible provisions for the

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of Ancient Near Eastern military history is currently booming. Recent studies on siege warfare include P. Abrahams/L. Battini (eds.), *Les armées du Proche-Orient ancien, III<sup>e</sup>–I<sup>er</sup> mill. av. J.-C.* (Oxford 2008); F. De Backer, *Neo-Assyrian siege redoubts tactics: some issues*, *Historiae* 7 (2010) 1–25; A. A. Burke, “Walled Up to Heaven”: the Evolution of Middle Bronze Age Fortification Strategies in the Levant (Winona Lake 2008); A. Fuchs, *Über den Wert von Befestigungsanlagen*, *ZA* 98 (2008) 45–99; S. C. Melville/D. J. Melville, *Observations on the diffusion of military technology: siege warfare in the Near East and Greece*, in: M. Ross (ed.), *From the Banks of the Euphrates. Studies in Honor of Alice Louise Slotsky* (Winona Lake 2008) 145–167; D. Nadali, *Sieges and similes of sieges in the royal annals: the conquest of Damascus by Tiglath-Pileser III*, *Kaskal* 6 (2009) 137–150.

members of one's household in an emergency situation, the underlying purpose of all Siege Documents. The short sections on "Maintaining morale and handling hostile elements" (pp. 162–167) and "Treatment of the wounded" (pp. 167–169) would have made better sense as part of chapter 3. On the whole, the book is far less coherent than a first glimpse into the table of contents suggests and the final two chapters would have especially benefited from rigorous restructuring and editing. To the detriment of the book, it ends without any conclusions which, given the extensive time period covered and the complex nature of siege warfare, would have been essential. The bibliography is followed by useful indices of subjects and names (pp. 191–197) and of sources (pp. 198–211).

According to the preface, the book is informed and influenced by Eph'al's sense of "being constantly battled and confined", "under constant siege" as a citizen of the modern state of Israel. The author's personal bias goes some way in explaining why his discussions of the social, legal and economic aspects of siege warfare concentrate on the besieged, with almost no regard for the undeniable hardships of the besiegers – despite the fact that mounting a siege is a hugely expensive undertaking and that the besieging army has to face the challenge of maintaining manpower, morale and supplies while in enemy country. This is curious given Eph'al's military background<sup>2</sup> and even more perplexing given that he states himself: "The extant sources generally demonstrate the suffering of the besieged; however, it is important to recall that the situation of the besiegers was not much better in most cases" (p. 106). Sources such as the Assyrian and Babylonian oracle queries, the letters from Mari and the Assyrian state correspondence could have provided rich information in this regard. Yet with the exception of a short section on the conditions of the besieging army (pp. 106–110), Eph'al's interest in the besiegers is limited to the survey of their techniques and technologies in chapter 3. That Eph'al would favour one side so much at the expense of the other results in a seriously distorted picture of siege warfare that pitches human beings who suffer extreme hardship against faceless engineers and strategists.

The "City Besieged" in the (Hebrew and English) title of the book is of course Jerusalem (Isaiah 1:8) and although this is never explicitly stated, the Biblical accounts of the Assyrian and Babylonian sieges of Jerusalem underpin much of Eph'al's book. Four pages of Bible references listed in the index of sources highlight how much this particular text is at the centre of the study. This slim volume is perhaps best appreciated as an extended commentary on the Biblical accounts rather than the comprehensive study of Ancient Near Eastern siege warfare up to the time of Alexander the Great promised by its subtitle and preface.

JOHN MARRIOTT and KAREN RADNER – University College London

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<sup>2</sup> Note Dan'el Kahn's preface to the recent Festschrift in Eph'al's honour (M. Cogan/D. Kahn [eds.], *Treasures on Camels Humps* [Jerusalem 2008]) which offers a survey of Eph'al's army service. He participated as an officer in the Israeli army in the Sinai campaign (1956), the Six-Day War (1967) and the Yom Kippur War (1973) and after discharge from active service volunteered as a Lieutenant Colonel until age 58.