

July 2017 (121.3)

AJA Open Access 

Book Review

Bronze Age Bureaucracy: Writing and the Practice of Government in Assyria

By Nicholas Postgate. Pp. xi + 484, figs. 41, tables 22. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2013. \$99. ISBN 978-1-107-04375-6 (cloth).

Reviewed by [Karen Radner](#)

The aim of this book, according to its author, is “to explore how governments in the Late Bronze Age, and especially the Assyrian state, made use of written instruments, and what effect this may have had on how they governed” (3). To accomplish this goal, Postgate analyzes the social and administrative contexts of the abundant primary sources, about half of which were published only in the last two decades. Postgate is one of the most influential specialists to work on ancient Assyria since its rediscovery in the mid 19th century. He is perhaps best known for his extensive work on the Neo-Assyrian empire of the early first millennium B.C.E. but has devoted considerable attention and thought to the Middle Assyrian state of the Late Bronze Age (14th–11th centuries B.C.E.), on which he first published in the early 1970s. The present volume is very much the work of a mature scholar with decades of experience whose profound knowledge of the primary cuneiform and archaeological sources informs his analysis at every turn.

The book is the first monograph attempting to recreate a coherent picture of the Middle Assyrian state by putting together information from various archives found in the capital Aššur and its provinces. Almost all evidence available for studying Middle Assyrian governance was unearthed in well-recorded excavations conducted in northern Iraq and northeastern Syria. Most of these are indicated in the map in figure 2.1 (31). Two further sites should be added; they are not discussed in the book but are important for indicating the easternmost and southernmost extent of Middle Assyrian state control: Tell Bazmusian (36° 9' 41" N, 44° 55' 27" E; see J. Læssøe, “The Bazmusian Tablets,” *Sumer* 15 [1959] 15–18) and Khirbet ed-Diniyeh (34° 27' 40" N, 41° 35' 10" E; see P. Clancier, “Les deux tablettes médio-assyriennes,” in C. Kepinski-Lecomte, ed., *Haradum III: Haradu forteresse du moyen Euphrate iraquien (XIIe–VIIIe av. J.-C.)* [Paris 2012] 241–46). Both lie beyond the hypothetical provincial boundaries of Postgate’s map. Although some materials were found in secondary contexts and can be described as “dumped archives,” many documents were encountered in their original storage situation, often deposited as groups in pottery jars or (lost) reed containers (83–4). Of course, much has vanished as some records were written on perishable materials (410).

The brief introduction offered in chapter 1 mainly serves to explain the book’s title, “Bronze Age Bureaucracy” (1–5). Postgate discusses his use and understanding of the term “bureaucracy” and clarifies differences from Max Weber’s more specific definition that juxtaposes the bureaucratic and the patrimonial state (2). The topic could have been addressed with more depth and deliberation; the passage reads as a token acknowledgment of one of the manuscript reviewers’ justified criticism. But Postgate is clearly attached to the term “bureaucracy,” which he has applied to the Middle Assyrian state for the past three decades. His 1986 article “Middle Assyrian Tablets: The Instruments of Bureaucracy” (*Altorientalische Forschungen* 13, 10–39) can be considered the kernel from which the present volume has grown, while his 2001 article “System and Style in Three Near Eastern Bureaucracies” (in S. Voutsaki and J. Killen, eds., *Economy and Politics in the Mycenaean Palace States: Proceedings of a Conference Held on 1–3 July 1999 in the Faculty of Classics, Cambridge* [Cambridge] 181–94) provided the template for the book’s comparative approach. Throughout the volume, Postgate routinely situates the Middle Assyrian evidence in the context of contemporary and sometimes earlier systems elsewhere in the Middle East, and chapters 7 and 8 focus on the bureaucratic methods of four contemporaries: the kingdoms of Nuzi (centered on modern Kerkuk), Alalakh (centered on Tell Atchana in the Orontes estuary), and Ugarit (centered on the Mediterranean port near Latakia), and the Late Bronze Age Aegean. As Postgate explains in the introduction, “these are all Bronze Age societies,” which can be seen in “contrast with the very different Iron Age world” (1).

Concise and supported by primary evidence at every step, chapter 2 is an excellent introduction to the workings of the Middle Assyrian kingdom. Analyzing the organization of the “Land of Aššur,” as the Assyrians referred to their kingdom, Postgate discusses the institution of the royal palace in the capital city Aššur and in the provinces (6–11), the people (11–29), and land tenure and use (29–46). As they are not discussed elsewhere, he singles out for special attention the short-lived new capital of Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta (39–44) and the fortified farmstead at Sabi Abyad in the western periphery of the kingdom (44–5).

Chapter 3 deals with writing in Assyria. Postgate first introduces the scribes and their key skill sets—logging time and mastering metrology—before turning to the documentation that they created (giving special attention to the Assyrian terminology [64–73]) and the important role that seals and sealing played in all administrative and legal contexts (73–7). The section on documentation (56–80) includes discussion of a particularly versatile type of document, the “debt-note,” which was adapted to record a broad range of obligations between two parties (77–9). The chapter finishes with a concise discussion of archives and archival practices (81–5).

This serves well to introduce the following two chapters, which present five archives from Aššur (86–259) and five archives from the provinces. Three of these are situated in northern Iraq: Tell el-Rimah (ancient Karana or Qatara [260–67]), Tell Billa (Šibaniba [268–77]), and Tell Ali (Atmannu [294–97]); two are located in northeastern Syria: Tell Chuera (Harbu [278–93]) and Tell Sheikh Hamad (Durkatlimmu [298–326]; its personnel lists are now published: S. Salah, *Die mittelassyrischen Personen- und Rationenlisten aus Tall Šēḫ Hamad/Dūr-Katlimmu* [Wiesbaden 2014]). Not only are the northeast Syrian archives linked, in addition two newly discovered groups of administrative tablets from Waššukanni (modern Tell Fakhariyah in the Khabur triangle) mention some of the same personnel, furthering our understanding of the networks of governance in the provinces (D. Bonatz, “Tell Fekheriye in the Late Bronze Age: Archaeological Investigations into the Structures of Political Governance in the Upper Mesopotamian Piedmont,” in D. Bonatz, ed., *The Archaeology of Political Spaces: The Upper Mesopotamian Piedmont in the Second Millennium BCE*. Topoi, Berlin Studies of the Ancient World 12 [Berlin 2014] 61–84).

Postgate has selected his archives with care, as he explains (83–4), in order to illustrate a range of government activities and aspects: the internal administration of the royal palace and the state’s main sanctuary, the temple of the god Aššur at the city of the same name; the organization and political agency of elite households; the duties of provincial governors; and the running of state-led agriculture, stock-breeding, and textile manufacture operations. Each archive is introduced by a detailed but succinct synopsis in order “to explain how it contributes to the overall picture and so enable the reader to bypass the full account without losing the thread” (4)—a sensible approach that Postgate adopted at the suggestion of one of the manuscript’s reviewers. Chapter 6 brings the results of the analysis of the individual archives together and offers a summary of Assyrian government practices (327–42).

Postgate then turns to contemporaneous state administrations and their writing practices. Chapters 7 and 8 are devoted to the neighboring kingdom of Arrapha and the city of Nuzi (343–81, offering also a much needed sketch of the political, social, and economic context) and to the western contemporaries in Alalakh (382–95), Ugarit (395–409), and in the Mycenaean world (409–13). On the last, he judges that similarities between archives in mainland palaces suggest that written documentation was not indigenous to each palace but was a feature of a single system (411). In these two chapters Postgate provides a survey of the topics previously discussed for Assyria, as far as possible, which then informs the comparison of “records of government” (ch. 9) that points out these systems’ similarities to and differences from Assyrian practice (414–24). The study concludes with Postgate’s observations on the role of writing in Assyrian governance (424–48).

Chronological charts, a bibliography, indices of Akkadian words and place and personal names, a selective subject index, and a list of textual citations complete the volume. This is a very well-produced book with a wealth of carefully selected and extremely useful illustrations. There are some typesetting errors, largely caused by the failed conversion of diacritics (such as the Ṭ in the place name Ṭabete [51 n. 23, 71 n. 104]), but these are mostly confined to footnotes, captions, and indices and do not hinder the reader’s enjoyment of the handsome volume.

Postgate’s goal was to write for a wider audience than is typically interested in cuneiform studies (4), and he has achieved this objective with the introductory chapters 2 and 3, the synopses to the archive discussions in chapters 4 and 5 and their summary assessment in chapter 6, as well as the comparative chapters 7–9.

These parts of the book should find an eager audience in Aegean, Anatolian, and Middle Eastern archaeologists working on the Late Bronze Age. In the classroom, chapter 2 on the Middle Assyrian state and chapter 7 on the kingdom of Arrapha will serve well as readings for survey and specialist courses on Middle Eastern history. But the present volume also succeeds as a serious research publication addressing fellow Assyriologists, brimming with new editions of original cuneiform documents and novel interpretations. The author and the publisher are to be congratulated on creating a volume that offers essential reading for anyone with an interest in government practice in premodern complex states and literate societies.

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American Journal of Archaeology Vol. 121, No. 3 (July 2017)

Published online at www.ajaonline.org/book-review/3487

DOI: 10.3764/ajaonline1213.Radner