

*The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant c.8000-332 BCE*, edited by Margreet L. Steiner & Ann E. Killebrew, 2014. Oxford: Oxford University Press; ISBN 978-0-19-921297-2., hardback. xxiv+885 pp. 160 figs, 18 tables.

Reviewed by Philip Boyes, Cambridge University Library

There has never been a unified or holistic approach to study of the ancient Levant. Within Syria-Palestine (and indeed the East Mediterranean and Near East more broadly) a wealth of academic traditions, disciplinary boundaries, ideologies and agendas have combined with potent modern political divisions to create a scholarship which can often feel fragmented. One of the stated aims of this weighty handbook is to bridge such divisions and be ‘a comprehensive volume on the archaeology of the whole Levant spanning the time from the Neolithic to the Persian period’ (p.2). This ambitious scope is further broadened by the decision to include Cyprus within the volume’s definition of the Levant, reflecting the island’s close cultural, economic and often political links with the mainland. This bold move goes some way towards softening one of the most potent boundaries in the region’s scholarship – that between Syro-Palestinian and Mediterranean/Classical archaeology – and in that respect it is a welcome one.

Also commendable is this book’s sensible attitude towards biblical archaeology: in their introduction the editors explicitly reject the idea of writing the book as a handbook to biblical archaeology, opting for a broader, more inclusive approach firmly grounded in the archaeological material rather than textual and religious tradition. This is sensible not only because – as the editors note – handbooks to biblical archaeology are hardly thin on the ground already, but also because of the distorting and obscuring effects such traditionalist, text-led approaches can have. By emphasising that we should approach the history of the Levant first and foremost through careful examination of the material evidence, not through the lens of narrative, para-narrative tradition and faith, this volume is hardly radical, but does place itself on the right side in Levantine archaeology’s on-going shift towards a more secure and healthy footing than it has occupied in the past.

Laudable as these aims are, the book is not always entirely successful in achieving them. It is split into three parts: first, a relatively brief four chapters laying out the geography, chronology, background and definitions. Four more then explore ‘The Levant as the crossroads between empires’. The remaining forty-seven chapters are devoted to the archaeological material, divided into seven broad time periods, each of which has an introductory overview chapter followed by a number of chapters exploring various sub-regions. Generally, these are separated by modern political borders rather than ancient cultural differences – something the naming conventions used rather obscure. It is inevitable in a book of this kind, with dozens of contributors, that a wide range of different approaches and interests will be evident. Some chapters are principally descriptive, others more analytical; some focus on particular kinds of data or areas of study – such as settlement

distribution, economy or politics – while others offer a more wide-ranging survey across a greater range of materials. Different attitudes are displayed towards texts, social change, theoretical developments, and so on. All this is to be expected and is far from a problem, but it does somewhat perpetuate the feeling of fragmentation and incommensurability. This becomes most noticeable where chapters use wildly different chronological terminologies or geographical definitions, or where some areas are overlooked altogether. The introduction to the section on the Chalcolithic, for example, is up-front about the fact that Sinai and the Syrian interior are simply not discussed for this period. Although such outright omissions are rare, overall there was a sense that the southern Levant is perhaps better served by this volume than the north. There is of course a disparity in the amount and quality of archaeological data available – there has been a lot more investigation of Iron II Palestine than in, say, Iron I Phoenicia – but given how brief and necessarily superficial chapters in a volume of this sort must be, the amount of evidence available alone does not entirely justify the imbalance in attention between different areas. Indeed, the Cyprus chapters are among the shortest and most cursory, and never quite feel fully integrated into the rest of the discussion, despite the fact that archaeological investigation of the island has been extensive and relatively high quality.

It is here that the question of tradition and ideology becomes significant. There are modern political reasons why the southern Levant is studied so much more extensively than other regions, but the massive importance that has been – and continues to be – attached to it as the ‘Holy Land’ can also hardly be ignored. Regardless of whether one agrees with the methods, assumptions and agendas of ‘biblical archaeology’, its influence on the past and present of research in the region is overwhelming. The absence of detailed discussion of thematic issues such as this represents this handbook’s greatest omission. It is invidious to criticise a book for what it is not, especially one such as this. But given that it would be impossible to do full justice to the archaeological material in the limited space available, one cannot escape the feeling that it might have been more helpful to offer surveys of some important thematic concerns which would help the reader understand the state of research, its key debates and concerns, and provide a framework within which the material widely available elsewhere could be interpreted. This would also have aided the book’s goal of integrating the diverse sub-fields of Levantine archaeology in a single holistic overview. To an extent this is what the chapters of Part II and the introductions to each chronological phase in Part III are intended for, but these are far too limited in scope to really do much to contextualise the vast amount of description offered up in the rest of the volume.

Unlike many handbooks of this kind, then, this one often seems not to have beginners particularly in mind. With its multiple terminologies, the not-quite-overlapping interests of its contributors, and lack of wider thematic context or history of research, sections can be rather forbidding to the non-specialist (and with a scope this large, surely even the most polymathic Levantine scholar will find themselves a non-specialist at some point). But if many chapters felt like summaries intended for scholars already well-acquainted with the areas being described, several others are standard handbook introductory fare, making it ultimately rather unclear what the book’s intended audience is.

It is perhaps a foregone conclusion that a more than eight-hundred-page handbook with 56 contributors and covering nearly eight millennia ends up being something of a mixed bag. This is by no means a bad book. In many ways it is entirely typical of its genre, presenting its information mostly clearly and concisely. It will doubtless be a useful reference book for the material its contributors choose to cover. But in setting itself goals as ambitiously lofty as it does, it makes it all the more evident when it falls some way short, never quite escaping the fragmentation and balkanisation of Levantine archaeology as a whole. It will doubtless find a place on the shelves of departmental libraries and individual practitioners, but it is not quite the definitive and all-encompassing guide to Levantine archaeology it sets out to be.