REVIEWS


Commenting on legal and administrative texts from Achaemenid reigns, A. Leo Oppenheim said that because so many of them were unpublished “a systematic utilization of this material, for which statistic evidence . . . is as crucial as individual contents, is severely limited” and that unpublished texts “will most likely remain so in the foreseeable future [because] such tablets are individually rather uninteresting, at times quite difficult to understand because of our lack of knowledge of their specific background, and more often than not unrewarding as to results. Their very number deters any but the most tenacious scholars willing to invest much work in an undertaking which decidedly does not promise sensational insights.” There is a trace of irony in these words, since Oppenheim wrote them at about the time he was preparing for publication T.G. Pinches’s copies of 2,700 tablets and fragments from the administrative archives of Neo-Babylonian Ebabbar, the temple of the sungod at Sippar, a task completed by I.L. Finkel and realized with the publication of CT 55-57 in 1982.

Many of the texts in CT 55-57 are part of the sample that Michael Jursa approaches with the tenacity that Oppenheim called for. His efforts have elicited much knowledge about the texts’ specific background and obtained results that exceed Oppenheim’s expectations. Oppenheim’s comments hint at a supposition that persists in Assyriology, that no reliable conclusions can be drawn without complete publication of a corpus, even when the corpus is itself incomplete. Jursa’s work relies on another supposition, that incomplete information is not intractable, especially where the body of information is large enough to support approximations and where one can make reasonable assumptions about the characteristics of the sample, and so Jursa’s response to the unpublished balance of the Sippar collections in the British Museum is more cheerful than Oppenheim’s was, evidently seeing opportunities rather than obstacles. He characterizes this book too modestly, as a first step taken in the hopes that its results and its organization of information will make future work on unpublished texts easier (p. 193). The book’s prosopographic lists will surely be tools for work on other unpublished Sippar texts—not only from the temple archive but also from private archives that record the lives and property of the families who controlled the temple—but in addition, the hypotheses and methods Jursa brings to his topic will be models for other work on administrative archives, and some of his interpretations will elicit reconsideration of other sources on Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid societies.

The body of information on which Jursa draws includes about 900 published texts and fragments dealing with agriculture, taken from about 5,000 published items from the Ebabbar archives. It also includes about 400 unpublished texts and fragments, taken from an unpublished balance of tens of thousands of items (p. 2). The main body of the book includes full or partial editions of 67 of the previously unpublished texts and of numerous published texts; an appendix (pp. 239-49) gives hand copies of 42 of the previously unpublished texts, collations of passages in ten others and partial copies and collations of three published texts.

The stated aim of the work (p. 1) is a comprehensive view of agriculture on land belonging to Ebabbar between 626 and 484 B.C. The emphasis is on organization: who raised what crops; how they were organized and supervised; what payments were assessed; how returns
were accounted for. The tools and techniques of Neo-Babylonian farming are secondary concerns, but labor needs are crucial to assessing the scale of the enterprise and the social and economic organization of farming. As Jursa characterizes them, chapters 2-7 take a prosopographic approach to the organization of the farmers who cultivated cereal fields, the gardeners who tended palm groves and fruit orchards, the middle-grade administrators entitled gugallu, the prebend-holders entitled rab banâ quien worked palm groves to produce dates for temple offerings, the sharecroppers called errêšu, and the large-scale contractors called rab šâti or ša muḫḫi šâti. Chapters 8-9 are primarily typological, devoted to groups of texts distinguished by form and function, namely, leases (and related texts) and lists. Chapter 10 is technical, dealing with information on irrigation. Chapter 11 is synthetic and historical, summarizing general conclusions and hypotheses, and discussing some of them in comparison with interpretations of information from Neo-Babylonian Uruk, Old Babylonian Sippar, and from Ur III records of the control of agricultural labor. The prosopographic chapters conclude with alphabetical lists of individuals in the several categories of agricultural workers and overseers with information on the dates, places, and contexts in which each one occurs; these form a classified directory of the agricultural personnel of Neo-Babylonian Ebabbar. They are complemented by a local directory in a long topographic-prosopographic appendix listing the personnel connected with each of the villages named in the texts (chapter 12, pp. 198-237).

The chapters are not limited by these characterizations. The prosopographic chapters also include treatments of such technical matters as the phases of cereal production and the requirements of sesame, cress, and flax production. The typological chapter on leases includes a summary of the comparatively abundant evidence of fruit-growing in the Sippar texts (pp. 129ff.). The technical chapter on irrigation provides information on provincial government. Most chapters include treatments of lexical problems, some providing additions and corrections to the dictionaries. 3)

In the known part of the Ebabbar archive, administrative texts are much more numerous than legal texts, and many of them are in small formats meant to have short-term uses. In the known parts of the contemporary archives of Eanna, the temple of Ištar at Uruk, legal texts and large-format, permanent administrative ledgers are far more numerous (pp. 2, 38, 150). These differences are due in part to the fact that many of the Eanna texts were recovered by clandestine excavators who saw legal texts and ledgers as attractive and commercially valuable, as Jursa suggests (p. 2), but it is also likely that the differences are due in part to ancient practices of storing stale records. Both archives were indeed stale, for both Eanna and Ebabbar continued their operations long after the latest known texts of these archives were written and stored. 4)

The differences between the Sippar texts and the Uruk texts have methodological consequences for modern study. The legal texts—contracts—are constructed around obligations and expectations, so they present images of organization and procedure in hypothetical terms. The administrative texts are memoranda of the movements of resources and products, so they offer a picture of actual behaviors and outcomes. Systematic comparison between expectations and outcomes makes it possible to draw inferences, or at least to speculate in some detail, about the dynamics of the ancient social and economic situations (e.g., pp. 19, 138, 158). 5)

The administrative texts tell about the organization of workers in ways that legal texts cannot. Workers on grain fields and in palm groves are classified as adult (išbu, presumably meaning a member of the ascendant generation, hence senior within the family, not necessarily elderly) or as fullgrown (iḫbaru, five years and older), or as children from sucklings to four-year olds. They worked as family groups, and families were permanently settled in the several regions where the temple controlled land, but they were not bound to particular fields and orchards. From the point of view of the administration, the work force of a region was an aggregate resource to be reallocated as year-to-year needs required, and workers