Review Articles

Recent Studies of the Role of Writing in Mesopotamian Civilization*


The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture is one of the most original and interesting examples of a new genre of collective works offering surveys or case studies of what is known about ancient Mesopotamia.1 Consisting of thirty-five chapters, each with suggestions for further reading and a bibliography, divided in seven parts, each with its own introductory essay, the Oxford Handbook is the most sophisticated and demanding entrant in this crowded field, a rich and fascinating reading experience. The volume is, moreover, abundantly illustrated with images, in many cases seldom seen in general publications or published here for the first time, especially of tablets. The contributors are at all stages in the cursus honorum, from graduate students to veteran scholars. The unifying principle is cuneiform

writing and its consequences, rather than a broad survey of history and civilization in which writing would find a part. The aim of the editors is to link these studies with other agendas in modern scholarship, which they do with a light but sure touch.

One way to evaluate this achievement is to consider what it would have looked like had it been published forty-five years ago, when A. Leo Oppenheim, whose phrase ‘stream of tradition’ runs like a leitmotif through this book, was lamenting the stagnation of Assyriology. Most of the contributions could not have been written at all or in anything like their present form, while the remaining would read quite differently. At the outset, then, this book is a tribute to the extraordinary development and diversification of Assyriology in the last half century, despite the marginality of the discipline on the modern university scene. It offers as well ample promise of like or greater progress in the future. Nor is this owing solely to the flood of new sources available, overwhelming as that is and without parallel elsewhere in the ancient world; the reader of these pages will sense the dynamism and energy of researchers freed from the time-robbing rote of building their own dictionaries and data bases to which their predecessors devoted so much energy. Their easier access to a wealth of information and ideas than was possible a half century ago broadens their horizons and choice of projects, and this shows itself in their openness to innovative techniques and approaches.

The chronological horizon of this book tends to be the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods, as well as the late eighth through the late sixth centuries. This eliminates some richly documented phases, for example the Early Dynastic and Akkadian periods, and such active areas of the discipline as the Old Assyrian merchant colonies in Anatolia or late Bronze Age diplomacy, both of which show writing in action in ways not dealt with here. In addition, the Hellenistic period draws two studies (Geert de Breucker and Philippe Clancier) and the Middle Babylonian period two (Yoram Cohen and Sivan Kedar, Mark Weeden). The editors are, of course, well aware of this distribution and consider it primarily a function of the source material (xxxi), but it could also be a question of where some of the most sophisticated work in Assyriology is now being carried on. Forty-five years ago, Neo-Babylonian studies were largely scattered treatments of interesting texts, handbooks of letters and documents in translation,