
In a list of the charismatic kings of Mesopotamia, such as Akkadian Sargon and Naram-Sin or Kassite Kurigalzu II, Hammurabi’s (r. 1792-1750 BC) inclusion as a powerful agent of change is certain. Even without his famous ‘Law Code’, his unification—or creation—of Babylonia is identified as a pivotal moment in Mesopotamian history. Despite its title, Charpin’s book discusses far more than Hammurabi himself, using this famous king as a means of approaching and analysing the political history and socio-economic world of Old Babylonian southern Mesopotamia. This book is an updated English translation originally published in French in 2003; the update includes particularly the addition of English resources to the bibliography. The lament that many excavated texts remain unpublished is still as true in 2013 as it was in 2003, although progress has been made and the Mari text publication programme, in particular, is ongoing.

This book has few competitors; Marc Van de Mieroop’s *King Hammurabi* (2005) provides a close and personalised biography of Hammurabi, while Charpin’s focus is wider, incorporating the social context, informal and state economy and political rivalries and alliances.

The archaeological record of Mesopotamia is regrettably thin for the Old Babylonian Period: the Babylon of the early 2nd millennium BC remains essentially un-excavatable due to the overburden of subsequent occupations and a high water-table. This archaeological gap at the nation’s core has pushed perhaps unwarranted emphasis onto Mari, where the palace and archives are often used as proxies for these aspects of Mesopotamia as a whole, ignoring Mari’s unique geographic location and unsurpassed connectivity. While Mari remains a key data source in Charpin’s work, he is careful to allow sub-regional differences to be clearly seen.

The book is very logically structured into three parts, each with a short thematic introduction and three or four chapters; a conclusion rounds out and brings together the discussion. A ‘Glossary’ at the front offers brief information about historical individuals and groups, deities, sites, and material culture; there are also lists of the dynasty’s kings and their dates and of key events during Hammurabi’s reign. The three parts cover military history (‘The Conqueror’), international relations (‘Politics’), and

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internal administration (‘The Administrator’). There is inevitably some overlap between these categories; for instance, ilku service was an internal administrative and economic practice, but it also integrated with military issues, since army service was often thus compensated. However, these overlaps are addressed clearly and without repetition.

‘The Conqueror’ relates the major political and military events of Hammurabi’s reign. Although comparable basic narratives are available elsewhere (including in some of Charpin’s own earlier works), this is an exceptionally readable and well-structured account. Charpin begins this section with a clear description of his sources, in terms of text genres and their geographical spread, although it is somewhat left to the reader to make a judgement about the different values of these texts for historical reconstruction.

‘Politics’ adds an assessment of the relationship of Hammurabi on the one hand to the gods and on the other to the members of his dynasty, priests, and the rest of the royal court. The balancing act necessary for a dynamic personality to steer through the demands or expectations of these different groups is particularly well-drawn.

‘The Administrator’ provides details on the Babylonian social context and on the intangible compensations provided by the king to the people, naturally beginning with legislation. The palace economy, foreign trade, and nomad-settled interaction are also incorporated here.

Hammurabi’s ‘Law Code’ has cast a long spell over our thinking about this king and the Old Babylonian Period. One of the book’s most salient points is that the ‘Law Code’ is primarily a commemorative text, rather than an administrative one. It is also useful to be reminded that the ‘laws’ are better categorised as suggestions and reactions to social situations than as a blanket ‘code’ of law. Other positive aspects of the book include clear explanations of the early scribal curriculum and year naming system, plus a careful and nuanced discussion of the tripartite, yet flexible, categorisation of (male) members of Mesopotamian society. These are relatively small elements within the discussion of Old Babylonian society, but each is a crucial variable that informs a bottom-up understanding of the wider aspects of the region.

Another real strength of the book is the inclusion of many quotes, often from Mari letters but also other texts, which present real-time reports, thinking, and justification for military actions. Many of these quotes are from diplomatic letters and one would not be surprised to find their language deliberately obscure, but they are at times surprisingly honest and