


REVIEW

Power and Identity at the Margins of the Ancient Near East. 2023. Sara Mohr and Shane M. Thompson, editors. University Press of Colorado, Denver. xiv + 205 pp. \$63.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-64642-357-6. \$50.00 (e-book), ISBN 978-1-64642-358-3.

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This volume represents the proceedings of a conference entitled “At the Margins: Interconnections of Power and Identity in the Ancient Near East,” which Sara Mohr and Shane M. Thompson convened at Brown University in 2019. The margins in question are those regions “at the edges of powerful entities” (p. 4), which, in this case, means the states and empires of the ancient Near East. Borderlands, imperial peripheries, marginal locales—all such terms apply to regions and populations discussed by the contributors. The ancient Near East, of course, means different things to different scholars, and it is scarcely surprising that many areas are not covered in a volume consisting of only eight case studies. Nevertheless, there is a distinct bias toward the western periphery of the ancient Near East here: Egypt’s Canaanite periphery; the northern and southern Levant; the margins of the Hittite world in central Anatolia; and the Middle Euphrates region, wedged between Assyria and the north Arabian desert. Egypt looms large, but anyone interested in Mesopotamia, Assyria proper, eastern Anatolia, the Iranian Plateau, Urartu, or the Persian Gulf will be disappointed by the skewed coverage of the region. Undoubtedly, there are reasons for this, but the result prompts one to ask whether a less sweeping title would have been more accurate for both the conference and the published proceedings.

In discussing relationships between states and empires, and their peripheries, archaeologists working in this part of the world routinely turn to literary, epigraphic, and archaeological sources. For Avraham Faust, examining Egypt’s Canaanite frontier, material evidence is a clear manifestation of group identity and is deployed in trying to address the question of where borders and boundaries may have lain in the Bronze and Iron Ages. In his view, the heavy hand of Egypt had a decisive influence on the development of group identity in this particular periphery. Alexander Ahrens explored some of the same issues, albeit further north and beginning much earlier in time. Old Kingdom Egypt’s influence on local elites is a focus of his chapter, as is the later growth of diplomatic and commercial ties between Egypt and the north Levantine periphery, particularly at Byblos in coastal Lebanon. Inter-marriage figures as a strategy for alliance building between Egyptian and local dynasts, and all of this is reflected in the presence of Egyptian material at sites in this zone. Still, the study of Egyptianization and Egyptianizing tendencies is decidedly not the same as studying these “margins” on their own terms, as promised by the editors in the introduction to this book.

Mahri Leonard-Fleckman takes the reader on a deep dive into the Assyrian but especially the Biblical sources that relate to the site of Timnah in Judah. One of her primary concerns is with the construction of “political mapmaking” on the part of the scribes who wrote 2 Chronicles and the Assyrian annals. At different points in time, Timnah was Canaanite, Philistine, Judahite, and Israelite, but the disjuncture between a materialist, archaeological perspective on this region and a Biblical/exegetical one cannot be ignored.

Alvise Matessi is greatly concerned with those areas conquered by and integrated into the Hittite kingdom. He examines Hittite strategies for controlling and promoting integration in central Anatolia during the mid-second millennium BC. On a more religious level, Valeria Turriziani analyzes

the function of religion and symbolism in knitting together Egypt and its southern and western peripheries. Peter Dubovský, on the other hand, examines how the briefly independent rulers of Suḥu—on the Middle Euphrates in Iraq—expressed their identity through language, especially titles. Daniel Fleming, in a chapter dealing with Late Bronze Age Emar in Syria, looks particularly at legal institutions. Finally, Ellen Morris examines life in the “shatter zones” of the Egyptian Empire. Drawing analogies with modern warlords in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Morris suggests that life in the mountains and marshes, termed “shatter zones,” afforded benefits to those tough enough to compete when dealing with the Egyptian state and its officials.

Despite the occasional modern analogy, there is scarcely any attempt in these chapters to draw on any ethnographic situations that might be familiar to more anthropologically oriented scholars. For this reason, the detailed, well-written, but hyper-specific eastern Mediterranean–Levantine–Egyptian content of most of the studies in this volume are unlikely to find much resonance with Americanist scholars. Nevertheless, the book is well edited and will undoubtedly be welcomed by specialists in the fields that the articles assembled in it discuss. Nonspecialist readers should, however, be aware that there is far more to be said and that there are many more cases of groups living in the shadows of the great states and empires of the ancient Near East than are represented in this interesting collection.