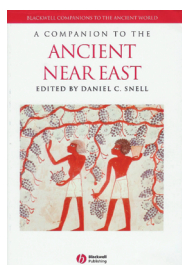


# A Companion to the Ancient Near East



Edited by Daniel C. Snell. Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005. Xix + 504 pages, 15 figs, 5 maps. Paper \$124.95, ISBN 0-631-23293-1.

**A** *Companion to the Ancient Near East*, Blackwell's third addition to its Companions to the Ancient World series, has the peculiarity of not being, in actuality, a companion to another book. This volume is meant to stand on its own as a comprehensive overview of Near Eastern civilization, providing a survey of both the history of the ancient Near East and the sources for studying the period.

The book consists of thirty-two chapters of about fifteen pages each written by thirty different authors, including the editor, Daniel C. Snell, who contributed several chapters. The volume is organized thematically into five parts, namely, "The Shape of the Ancient Near East," "Discourses and Methods," "Economy and Society," "Culture," and "Heritage of the Ancient Near East." The *Companion* also includes a fifty-eight-page collective bibliography in addition to the short bibliographic recommendations for further reading found at the end of each chapter. There are only fifteen figures and five maps in the entire volume: twelve of the illustrations are included in Marian Feldman's chapter on Mesopotamian art; three plans can be found in Sally Dunham's treatment of ancient Near Eastern architecture; two very general maps of the Near East are placed in the "Introduction;" and three more specific maps are included in Carlos Cordova's chapter on ancient Near Eastern environment.

The very short introduction by the editor serves the purpose of succinctly defining the spatial and temporal scope of the volume. Geographically, the book embraces a notion of the Near East clearly centered on Mesopotamia and some of its adjacent regions, including Syria-Palestine, Iran, and Anatolia. Egypt is acknowledged as a special case; while not necessarily included in the discipline of Near Eastern studies, it is tied culturally, historically, and in the public mind with the rest of the ancient Near East. This warranted its inclusion in the book wherever possible, but with the caveat that the majority of the authors in the book are experts in Mesopotamia, not Egypt. With such a broad scope, it is hardly surprising that the volume does not offer a comprehensive coverage of all these regions. Whereas Mesopotamia is extensively discussed, most other areas receive only cursory treatments. Egypt is the focus of two chapters (15 and 17) and is prominently treated in another (ch. 12), but only

mentioned sporadically in the rest. Syria-Palestine gets a chapter (ch. 30) and some passing mentions in others. Anatolia proper is mainly treated in Gary Beckman's chapter on Hittite religion (ch. 25). Iran before the Achaemenid Empire is almost completely ignored and then only mentioned in passing (most notably in chs. 3 and 6). Chronologically, the *Companion* covers the time span from the Neolithic to the campaigns of Alexander the Great. Curiously, no effort was made to use a single, unified chronology throughout the book, and the different authors follow their own preferences. While most opted to use the Middle Chronology, there are exceptions, and the lack of agreement on a chronological framework detracts from the unity of the volume. Indeed, lack of unity is perhaps the book's most serious shortcoming.

The editor introduces the book by saying, in reference to the chapters, that "these essays stand alone and need no introduction," (p. xviii) and this is indeed the case. Each chapter is self-contained; and there does not seem to be a unifying thread to bring all of these essays dealing with such diverse subjects together into the comprehensive overview of the ancient Near East that the book promises. In general, the selection of themes for the individual chapters seems rather arbitrary and, as a consequence, the division of the book into sections is random at best. Part III, "Economy and Society," for example, includes chapters on the environment, nomadism, cities and countryside, money and trade, law, social tensions, gender roles, and warfare, while Part IV, "Culture," deals with the transmission of knowledge, literature, architecture, art, medicine, cosmology, the institution of kingship, and religion. One is left wondering what possible criteria could have prompted such a separation. Are gender roles, social tensions or the law, for example, not encompassed by the category "culture," or topics such as kingship and religion by the category "society"? It is hard to avoid the suspicion that either "culture" is being used here in a careless manner, as a catch-all category, or that its usage reflects an underlying conception of culture that owes more to nineteenth-century elitist notions of refined accomplishment and "high" culture than to modern anthropological theory.

Adding to the problem, some of the titles for the sections are poorly chosen. Most readers, for example, will be disappointed by Part II, "Discourses and Methods." This section consists of three chapters: "Archaeology and the Ancient Near East: Methods and Limits" by Marie-Henriette Gates, "The Languages of the Ancient Near East" by Gonzalo Rubio, and "The Historian's Task" by Daniel Snell. Whereas the chapters by Gates and Snell provide an interesting insight into the nature of some of the current debates in the discipline, they are not the overview of theoretical and methodological approaches that one would expect from a section with this title. Furthermore, Rubio's chapter on languages is just a descriptive account of the basic elements of ancient Near Eastern languages and hardly mentions any of the methodologies employed in their study; as a result it feels oddly out of place in a section devoted to "Discourses on Methods."

In spite of these problems, however, there is much to like about this book. Most chapters offer compelling and authoritative synopses of the subjects under consideration. The first section of the book, "The Shape of the Ancient Near East," for example, consists of four chapters in which Mario Liverani, Augusta McMahon, Mark Chavalas, and Paul-Alain Beaulieu address the question of unity and diversity in the ancient Near East. They offer a historical outline that ably summarizes the major events in the region between 10,000 and 300 B.C.E. Some chapters offer outstanding outlines of very general topics. Essays like Marian Feldman's on Mesopotamian art or Sally Dunham's on architecture are a good example. In them, the authors eschew the impossible task of providing a comprehensive treatment of such vast subjects in the few pages available to them and concentrate instead on providing the reader with the general principles underlying Near Eastern art and architecture, and on properly illustrating these principles with meaningful examples. The resulting essays are compelling, well-written, and easy to follow.

Another high point of the book is the inclusion of a section dealing with "Heritage of the Ancient Near East." This section, Part V, brings together some of the most interesting chapters in the book. Here we find essays on "The Invention of the Individual," "Ethnicity," "Public versus Private in the Ancient Near East," "Democracy and Freedom," "Monotheism and Ancient Israelite Religion," and "The Decipherment of the Ancient Near East." These chapters attempt to demonstrate the relevance of many of the cultural developments of the ancient Near East to the modern Western world. The authors make bold statements on very controversial subjects, and while many will disagree with their approaches, assumptions, and conclusions, the fact that an attempt was made should be commended.

The excellent quality of most of the essays that make up the *Companion*, however, is not enough to deliver the comprehensive overview that the cover promises. The lack of thematic and chronological unity and the haphazard organization of the book are largely to blame for this. The reader interested in a general synopsis of the ancient Near East would profit more from better-organized, more complete overviews such as Jack Sasson's *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* or Michael Roaf's *Cultural Atlas*, to name but two.

The major strength of *A Companion to the Ancient Near East* lies in the fact that the individual chapters are written by leading scholars in the field. These essays offer well-documented, stimulating introductions to a wide range of subjects in Near Eastern studies. The authors make arcane subjects accessible to the general reader and provide scholars in related fields compelling, refreshingly outspoken synopses of very complex issues.

**Gabriel H. Pizzorno**  
University of Pennsylvania

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