

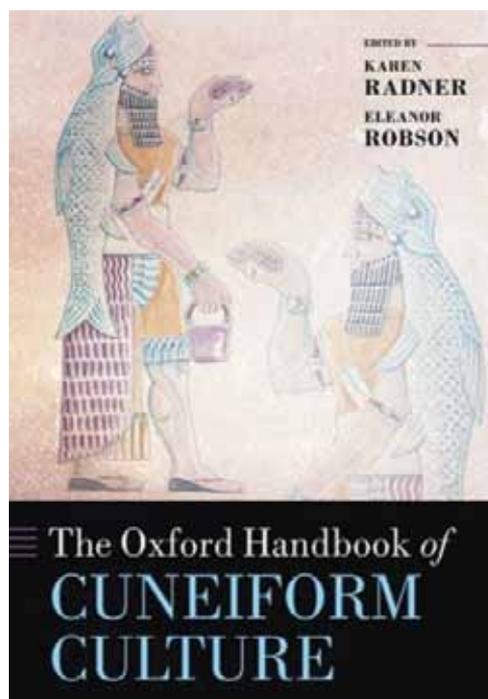
Radner, K. and Robson, E (eds.) 2011.
The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture.
Oxford University Press, £110.

Reviewed by Alice Hunt*

The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture, the twelfth volume in the Oxford Handbooks in Classics and Ancient History series, is intended to be a reference for scholars and students of History and Assyriology. Given the natural overlap between material culture and cuneiform studies this volume is also of great interest to archaeologists.

The volume is organised around seven concepts, 'Materiality and literacies', 'Individuals and communities', 'Experts and novices', 'Decisions', 'Interpretations', 'Making knowledge', and 'Shaping tradition' (p. xxx), which the editors hope will "restore context and coherence to the study of cuneiform culture by approaching it holistically" (p. xxviii). Given that this is an archaeological journal and that I am a Mesopotamian archaeologist first and cuneiformist second, the remainder of this review highlights those contributions in each section of particular relevance for archaeologists of cuneiform societies.

In 'Materiality and literacies', Englund, chapter 2 'Accounting in Proto-Cuneiform', describes the advent of cuneiform as a writing system, particularly as a system of accounting (p. 34-35) and method of social control (p. 33, 44-49). A well developed calendric and accounting system facilitated division of labour (p. 46-47), grain rationing (p. 38-44) and provided an administrative backbone during the late Uruk period (c. 34-30th centuries B.C.E.) coinciding with



the emergence of urbanisation in Mesopotamia. Chambon evaluates the social and economic implications of a metrological 'norm' (p. 53-57) in chapter 3, 'Numeracy and Metrology', arguing that metrology can only be understood in the "context of actual practice" (p. 65). Cuneiform societies use different local capacity systems (p. 53), and metrological standards are not always reflected perfectly in administrative documents (p. 57) or vessel capacities (p. 63-64) necessitating co-operation between archaeologists and Assyriologists to reconstruct economic practice (p. 65). Veldhuis, chapter 4 'Levels

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of Literacy,' challenges the assumption that only the wealthy elite were literate, pointing out that the structural differences between cuneiform language systems and alphabetic language systems allow for variation in type and level of literacy (p. 70). Ugaritic, an alphabetic cuneiform language, is not addressed. Focusing on functional, technical and scholarly literacy, Veldhuis suggests that, although literacy was associated with power and prestige throughout cuneiform's three millennia history, it was nevertheless accessible to private citizens (p. 72). In fact, he argues that the development of monumental and royal writing styles in the Old Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian periods was a response to widespread literacy and an attempt to distinguish high-status writing (p. 73).

'Individuals and Communities' challenges preconceptions of 'personhood', 'freedom' and 'personal liberty' in cuneiform societies (p. 113). Foster, chapter 6 'The Person in Mesopotamian Thought', reveals the well developed sense of 'person' as a legal, moral and social being (p. 119-130) and 'self' as the manifestation of a person's awareness of his identity (p. 131-133) in these societies. In 'Freedom in Ancient Near Eastern Societies', chapter 10, von Dassow argues that current models of Near Eastern societal structure have a faulty foundation in Hellenistic propaganda (p. 205-207) and need to be reevaluated using cuneiform sources. Von Dassow provides a new interpretive paradigm, first, by defining freedom (p. 211-214) and nuancing levels of freedom within cuneiform societies and, second, by demonstrating the critical role personal and political freedom played in the structure of these societies (p. 217-220). Although it is not his primary purpose, Jursa challenges another important model in chapter 9, 'Cuneiform Writing in Neo-Babylonian Temple Communities': the *oikos* economic model of temple redistribution (p. 186). Jursa persuasively argues that temple economies were not self-sufficient, as is commonly believed, but dependent upon external resources (goods and labour) mak-

ing them open economic systems (p. 186-7).

Part III, 'Experts and Novices', focuses on the cognitive and social transition from individual student to communal expert (p. 223). Chapters 11-13 demonstrate the social, familial and economic pressure on students, apprentices and practitioners of divination and the politics of getting and keeping a job. Royal education, its ideology and practice, is described in chapter 15 and the role of music and the musician in cuneiform societies is addressed in chapter 14.

In 'Decisions', Démare-Lafont (chapter 16 'Judicial Decision-Making: Judges and Arbitrators') indicates that the Mesopotamian legislative system was conciliatory rather than, as it is commonly described, punitive (p. 335-336), and contained a pre-trial phase specifically to encourage reconciliation between parties (p. 347-348). She argues that judgement was the right of all citizens and existed at the level of household (p. 337), community (p. 340-341), and royal authority (p. 338-340), but that punishment was the purview of the legal court alone (p. 337). Radner provides fresh insight into imperial administration in cuneiform societies in chapter 17, 'Royal Decision-Making: Kings, Magnates, and Scholars', calling into question current models of imperial organisation and power distribution. Magnates - according to Radner - were not provincial governors but delegates of the king, who exercised great power and authority, advised allied rulers, and formed the "backbone" of the empire (p. 359-361). They were bureaucrats whose relationship with the king was impersonal and factual, free from emotion and personal gain (p. 364-365). Chapter 18, 'Assyria at War: Strategy and Conduct', dispels the traditional depiction of warmongering societies possessed of exceptional armies and advanced weaponry. Instead, Fuchs points out that, in reality, cuneiform societies possessed equal numbers and the same technologies as their contemporaries (p. 380), and argues that communication networks and military intelligence (p. 392),

adaptive strategy (p. 388-389), and operational acumen (p. 389-391) were the secret to the military success of cuneiform culture.

Part V, 'Interpretations', addresses the ways in which cuneiform societies manufactured, maintained and interpreted data about the natural world and their place in it (p. 443-444). Baker's contribution, chapter 25 'From Street Altar to Palace: Reading the Built Environment of Urban Babylonia', addresses archaeological and Assyriological interpretation of architectural data (p.534) and proposes an interpretive model which reveals the "semiotics of the built environment" (p. 535). First, Baker demonstrates how the concept of 'neighbourhood' is revealed through textual (p. 536-537) and archaeological (p. 541-544) data. Next, she explores the status and social standing of homeowners by evaluating architectural features such as size (p. 539-541), shared walls (p. 541), and location relative to public space (p. 537, 542-543). Lastly, Baker challenges traditional conceptions of 'palace as house' by illustrating architectural differences between private homes and buildings with a public function (p. 538-541).

'Making Knowledge,' part VI, explores academic and intellectual innovation in cuneiform societies by examining the adoption and adaptation of the cuneiform script (chapter 28) and literary genres (chapter 26-27) to meet the demands of a changing culture, and exploring how cultural values shape scientific observation and innovation (chapter 29). Part VII, 'Shaping Tradition,' examines the cultural value and exploitation of 'tradition' as a mechanism for opposing cultural change (chapter 35), maintaining and legitimising power (chapters 31 and 34), and ensuring public safety (chapter 32).

The intimate relationship between what people write about their actions and the objects that they use is a theme which permeates this volume from chapter 1, where Taylor explores the materiality of cuneiform tablets, to chapter 35 and Clancier's careful archaeological contextualisation of the Babylonian archives from Hellenistic Uruk. This

recognition that text and artefact, history and archaeology together provide a richer understanding of the past than either discipline alone is one of the great strengths of the volume. That said, Radner and Robson should have included, or at least consulted with, an archaeologist - particularly for those chapters dealing most directly with material culture. Taylor's contribution, 'Tablets as Artefacts, Scribes as Artisans', is factually incorrect in several places with regard to the principals of clay science (p.6) and, not only does he fail to define his terms, he uses several of them, paste and clay for example, in unorthodox ways which could confuse or mislead the reader. Chambon's chapter, 'Numeracy and Metrology,' could also have benefitted from an archaeologist's edit; his archaeological bibliography is out of date, rendering his conclusion that "it would certainly not have been possible in antiquity to make vessels and weights with any degree of precision or constancy" (p. 55) inaccurate. Chambon himself co-authored an archaeological paper on metrology and vessel capacity which contradicts this statement (Chambon and Kreppner 2008).

The premise of the volume is that language shapes thought and thought shapes culture (p. xxvii). Cuneiform itself, as a script and the technology required to write it, are, according to the editors, the cultural foundation upon which the societies who use it are constructed (p. xxvii). According to this premise, uniformity of script leads to uniformity of thought which in turn leads to uniformity of culture, which is why the editors used the word 'culture' rather than 'cultures' in the title, and why they are unconcerned with geographic or temporal lacunae in the contributions contained therein (p. xxx, xxxi). While this is a fresh approach, and possibly correct, it needs to be argued and explained more completely and effectively. 'Culture' as a concept should have been defined, for example. In addition, cuneiform is used to write three different categories of language: logographic, such as Sumerian where each

sign represents an entire word or concept; syllabic, where each sign represents a syllable or series of syllables, Akkadian for example; and alphabetic, where each sign indicates a single, fixed letter, as in Ugaritic. The editors need to prove, or at least argue, that the thought processes which construct ideas using logograms are sufficiently similar to those which use syllabograms or alphabetic signs.

Sumerian, Akkadian, Hurrian, Hittite and Ugaritic, the cuneiform languages, also have structural differences which could impact the way thought, and thus culture, is shaped. Logographic language is undeclined while syllabic and alphabetic languages are able to denote the relationship between words and concepts using case endings. This means that the concepts and meanings expressed by the author in syllabic and alphabetic languages are not as vulnerable to interpretation by the reader as in logographic Sumerian. Simi-

larly, polyvalent languages (including both logographic and syllabic systems where a single sign has multiple meanings or syllables) require their readers or writers to use a different set of thought processes to those demanded by a monovalent language such as an alphabet. The editors are asking the reader to take too much on faith.

Nevertheless, despite its poorly argued premise, *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture* provides the archaeological community with fresh perspectives and interpretive frameworks for understanding cuneiform societies and their material culture.

References

- Chambon, G** and **Kreppner, F J** 2008 Hohlmaßsysteme und deren Standardisierung in Assyrien und Volumina von Gefäßkeramik aus Dūr-Katlimmu. In: Kühne, H (Ed.), *Dūr-Katlimmu 2008*. Wiesbaden, pp. 11-32.