

Review of:

Bolger, D. and Maguire, L. C. (eds.) 2010.

The Development of Pre-State Communities in the Ancient Near East. Studies in Honour of Edgar Peltenburg.

Themes from the Ancient Near East BANEA

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This collection of papers is a fitting tribute to Edgar Peltenburg, with the majority of contributions being rich in archaeological data while offering much more than purely descriptive analysis. The range of material is expansive chronology and geography and yet there is a commonality of approach which makes this a cohesive volume, where the papers are all part of a 'new socially-oriented research agenda' (p. 4). The value of this collection is enhanced when read in total, encouraging the reader to compare the approaches, material and conclusions of the many authors, and approached as such the whole is definitely greater than the sum of its parts. Many of the individual articles can be appreciated on their own terms and will be of interest to the 'specialist.'

The contributors were asked for papers 'on the development of small-scale communities' (p. vii) and there is a welcome focus on the particular, with the majority of contributions based on specific data rather than making universal arguments. However two papers do provide extremely useful 'overviews' or introductions to theoretical issues, suggesting how difficult the issue of complexity is to address and cautioning against the unquestioning use of established terminology. The paper by Marc Verhoeven sets the scene for the rest of the collection, addressing the issue of social complexity and its development. He outlines the many problems with the concept (and other related terms such as 'civilisation') and the dangers of teleological and evolutionary thinking.

As has been argued elsewhere by Liverani (2006: 10), 'the use of the notion of complexity has become so widespread in the last twenty years,' that it has lost its value as an explanatory term. Liverani goes on to note that ego may play a part in this, as 'no scholar likes the task of studying a simple phenomenon, leaving it to others to undertake the much more challenging study of a complex one' – an observation worth keeping in mind when the various authors in this volume argue for the social complexity of their particular case studies. This topic has many aspects and dimensions, and 'some kind of complexity has always been existent' (*ibid.*) – a conclusion supported by the wide temporal and spatial range presented here.

It is a bit disappointing that Verhoeven's contribution, although a useful and salutary reminder of how hard it is to move away from terminology which constrains and preconditions our views, does not really address the ways in which this can be achieved, as in the end it too is forced to use the very same terminology. Maybe it is unavoidable.

Another paper which grapples with these issues is by Anne Porter, which more specifically argues that in trying to define the nature of polities we can get caught up in problems of terminology and increase the risk of viewing it in evolutionary terms. Her attempt to overcome this is through a set of 'terminologies' based on different ways of looking at political organisation, namely polity morphology, social configuration political ethos and political practice. The attraction of this approach lies less in the categories chosen (although they do seem to include all the aspects one might want to cover) and more in the idea that there is such variability, even within individual polities, that a wide range of definition is needed. Porter uses this approach to assess the nature of the 'state' of Ebla and comes to the conclusion that it defies easy categorisation, and rather that it is the 'multiple sets of social and political networks in which people operate that come together to constitute the nature of any given polity' (p. 75).

The editors have organised the papers according to five main themes related to the 'particular issues they address' rather than by chronology or geographic setting. The first part, 'Social organisation and complexity in pre-state communities,' includes examples from the northern and southern Levant (albeit millennia apart in time) and Cyprus. Part two, 'Early urban communities and the emergence of the state,' has cases from Cyprus and Mesopotamia. Several of the papers address wider themes, such as Frangipane with her analysis of the relationship between social and environmental factors which have resulted in different 'types' of communities in the north and south of Mesopotamia and Western Anatolia, and Wilkinson's study of the social aspects of the tell in the landscape and over time.

In Part three, 'Technology, economy and society,' the relationships between these elements are examined. This section ranges in time and space from Neolithic lime plaster in the Levant (Thomas) to Late Bronze Age ceramic production in Cyprus (Steel). Part four is titled 'Agency, identity and gender,' and includes contributions with very different approaches, although in all cases they are concerned with the functions of communities. For example, Campbell's careful analysis of the decoration of Chalcolithic Mesopotamian pottery allows him to draw conclusions as to the role they may have played in the development of social interaction, while Maguire argues that variations in pottery can be seen as reflecting social change). Finally in Part five, 'Insularity, ethnicity and cultural interaction,' are issues that are illustrated with reference to Anatolia, Cyprus and Iran. A couple of papers (McCartney, Clarke) take new looks at the Neolithisation of Cyprus, and raise questions about traditional assumptions regarding the island's isolation. Both draw on a range of evidence to argue that the situation was most likely much more complex, that Cyprus was not isolated, and that the Neolithic there should be viewed within the 'historical' context of the Near East.

A number of common themes run through this volume beyond those of the title and the sections mentioned above, reflecting the seriousness and humility of the contributors. It is this 'attitude' that makes this book a 'good read' and it is surely a fitting tribute to the corpus of Edgar Peltenburg's work. Firstly, the majority of contributions are based on archaeological evidence, reflecting the interest of the authors in current excavation and research. This ranges from new excavations to field surveys and reassessments of excavation records and materials. The strongest contributions are those that anchor their interpretations most closely to the data.

Secondly, because the emphasis is on interpretation rather than descriptive creations of typologies, even those papers which are based on very specific cases or data have a wider resonance. Thirdly, the analysis of the nature of social organisation is much more useful in reaching an understanding of the development of pre-state societies than chronology and thinking in evolutionary stages. Of course, developments need to be seen within a temporal context but what this volume does very well is to not get bogged down by the different regional and local chronologies which can make such a collection very hard going for readers not well-versed in the areas concerned. Fourthly, the contributions share a pragmatic approach, using the theories and interpretations that work in each particular case without suggesting that these can or should be applied universally. There is a welcome absence of dogma alongside a recognition that there is much that is *not* known and *cannot be* known. However the willingness of most of the authors to propose interpretations and views (backed by data) makes this volume one which is essentially optimistic and exciting, both in itself and in suggestions for future work.

And lastly, combining such a range of sites, periods and approaches highlights a theme that runs through most of the papers, which is that the archaeological record is one of great variety. Several of the authors draw attention to the variability within their own scope of analysis, and unsurprisingly this is magnified when looking across the whole collection, something that cautions against trying to reach one single answer or conclusion to the questions addressed. The editors highlight 'diversity' as one of the issues central to current approaches of the study of pre-state societies and certainly this is amply illustrated here. Diane Bolger, in her examination of the topic of gender in Cyprus, argues for moving 'beyond universalist assumptions to a nuanced understanding' (p. 156), and similar sentiments are echoed by many of the other authors.

There is an implication that the approach recommended and adopted in this volume is somehow 'new,' with traditional approaches being used as straw men, when in reality a number of archaeologists have already been working to 'explore alternative perspectives which are more oriented to recognizing difference, contingency and agent-centred dynamics in the emergence of complex societies, (Whitelaw 2004: 234). This is however a small niggle regarding what is a very readable and rewarding volume.

References

- Liverani, M. 2006. *Uruk: the first city*. London: Equinox.
- Whitelaw, T. 2004. Alternative Pathways to Complexity in the Southern Aegean. In: Barrett, J. C. and Halstead, P. (eds.) *The emergence of civilisation revisited*. Oxford: Oxbow, 232-256.