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# Rosetta

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**Review: Karen Radner, Editor, *State Correspondence in the Ancient World – From New Kingdom Egypt to the Roman Empire*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xvi & 306. £48. ISBN 978-0-19-935477-1**

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In the introduction to *State Correspondence in the Ancient World*, editor Karen Radner outlines clearly what the objective of the volume is, namely to examine the role communication plays in ensuring the stability and cohesion of states. Radner, however, goes further than simply introducing the topic of the volume or her fellow contributors but also discusses the over-arching themes present in the volume and explains the connections that tie the varying chapters together. It becomes clear that the intention was to create a volume that is more unified and thematically connected than many other edited volumes and the introduction is extremely useful to the reader as it clearly and systematically outlines and explains the main issues and the approaches taken within the volume. Furthermore, it explains that the volume is designed to appeal to both non-specialists – this aim is achieved by its accessibility and clarity – and to specialists due to the insight and new material provided. Radner also explains that there are seven contributions, two case studies that look at correspondence in Egypt and Hatti respectively and then five that look at communication strategies of the dominant Iron Age powers in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. The papers are presented chronologically which further aids the clarity of the volume.

The Amarna period and its associated corpus of letters has been much discussed, particularly the content of the letters and what they can tell us about international diplomacy. Reading Jana Mynářová's paper therefore, the first in the volume, is interesting in the main due to the approach it takes. Firstly Mynářová focusses not on

the international letters which make up only 10% of the corpus but on the 'state letters', those that are addressed to Pharaoh or his officials from one of the Egyptian client kings in the Levant and record the mechanics of the Egyptian administrative system. Furthermore, apart from the occasional brief quote, Mynářová does not really discuss the content of the letters instead focussing on what the letters themselves tell us. Discussion is included of letters as physical objects considering their general format and patterns of composition and making suggestions as to what this can tell us about state correspondence. Of particular interest is a suggestion made at the end of the paper where Mynářová states: "the physical object of the letter, a tablet sent by the king of Egypt himself, was considered by the Levantine rulers as an exceptional and much desired object, regardless of its content: its possession alone was a powerful signal of the privileged status of the recipient" (pg. 31). This appears to suggest that the content of a letter was secondary as far as vassal or client was concerned, the very fact that they were sent a letter suggests they are considered worthy of attention. Perhaps it didn't matter what the conversation was about as long as they got to take part.

Mark Wheedon provides the second case study in his paper which considers state correspondence in the Hittite world. It does not focus on a specific king or a specific period and thus is a little general but this also works in his favour as it enables him to provide a comprehensive and thorough treatment of the issue of Hittite correspondence. Furthermore, this approach enables him to offer a mini history of the Hittites by providing information about location, major events, kings and empire structure. The reviewer believes this to be particularly useful to non-specialists or those relatively new to the topic. As with all the papers in this volume Wheedon's paper is clearly structured with sections and sub-sections that enable the reader to follow the development of themes and arguments. An appendix is also provided, containing a breakdown of the state correspondence used as a corpus for this paper. In many ways Wheedon's paper can be considered more of a general overview than some of the other contributions in the volume, which each investigate a specific aspect or issue of correspondence. That being said, it enables Wheedon to create for the reader a detailed and thorough picture of the mechanisms of correspondence

within the Hittite Empire and furthers its appeal to non-specialist readers which is important given the fact that appealing to both specialists and non-specialists is a key aim of the volume.

In chapter 3, Karen Radner examines the communication strategies of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. She introduces the state correspondence of the empire and immediately explains that these letters are, chronologically speaking, unevenly distributed (pg. 64). Radner's main focus in this paper is on the communication network itself and this is a useful and helpful approach for the reader. Discussing both the network and the content of a vast corpus in one paper could run the risk of confusing and overwhelming the reader - especially the non-specialist reader. Instead Radner examines the manner in which the network functioned, considering who wrote the letters, the messengers, road system and relay. The "imperial relay post" is an especially fascinating aspect of this paper as this is a system that survived and was used across the Near East for centuries and was noted by Herodotus and Xenophon. Radner explains in her paper how this efficient and effective system was an innovation of Neo-Assyrians, given the legacy of this innovation it enables the reader to understand how communication systems functioned in a wider context.

There are a further four papers in this volume which investigate the issue of state correspondence in the Babylonian and Persian Empires as well as in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. Michael Jursa's paper 'An Imperial Communication Network: The State Correspondence of the Babylonian Empire as Reflected in Contemporary Administrative Letters' attempts to reconstruct the way in which the Babylonian kings conducted their state correspondence using administrative documents as none of the state letters have been recovered as of yet. Amélie Kuhrt's paper 'State Communication in the Persian Empire' primarily investigates the role state correspondence had in managing and maintaining the Empire's complex and sizeable territory. Alice Bencivenni's paper 'The King's Words: Hellenistic Royal Letters in Inscriptions' examines the royal letters of the Hellenistic world and by

doing so examines the nature of kingship in different Graeco-Macedonian kingdoms that were created in the aftermath of Alexander the Great's conquests and subsequent death. Finally Simon Corcoran considers in his paper 'State Correspondence in the Roman Empire: Imperial Communication from Augustus to Justinian' the nature of correspondence in the Roman Empire, covering a vast range of topics including language choices and sealing and considering the extent to which practices established during the later Republican period were continued throughout the Imperial period.

It is clear that the aim of this volume was to be wide reaching in scope but closely focussed content. By using a wide range of case studies and contexts the issue of state correspondence and its importance is carefully and methodically considered. Throughout the volume one gets the impression that instead of seven entirely separate papers that may be loosely associated with each other under an umbrella term we instead get seven intrinsically connected papers; seven pieces of the same puzzle so to speak. In each paper the author refers when necessary to papers that have come before or that will be following, reminding the reader of the key questions and issues which the contributors themselves were required to consider. Questions such as what were the roles of envoys and messengers? What were the roles of scribes and secretaries? How was information protected and safeguarded whilst in transit and what languages were used? Through extremely careful and competent editing this volume is not only interesting but extremely useable to both specialist and non-specialist readers.