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**Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*. Oxford. Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xxi & 805. £110. ISBN 978-0-19-955730-1.**

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*The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, is aimed as a reference for scholars and students working in Assyriology, however this volume could also be of great interest to students and academics of related areas such as archaeology. The papers are structured around seven themes, 'Materiality and literacies' (p. 1), 'Individuals and communities' (p. 113), 'Experts and novices' (p. 225), 'Decisions' (p. 331), 'Interpretations' (p. 443), 'Making knowledge' (p. 553), and 'Shaping tradition' (p. 659). As my interests lie primarily in the role of scholars in the Neo-Assyrian Empire, in this review I concentrate on papers which focus on this and related topics, therefore giving particular attention to sections three to five. In order to provide an insight into the scope of material covered within this volume however I will now briefly summarize what is included within the other sections. Section one entitled 'Materiality and Literacies' considers the extent to which the Ancient Near East was literate and numerate whilst also examining the materiality of the favoured writing medium, clay. Section two, 'Individuals and Communities' has one key aim which is to challenge the assumption that individuality and liberty, two of the key aspects of modern Western society were lacking in the Ancient Near East. In section six, 'Making Knowledge', the contributors focus upon creativity and innovation within literate culture. Finally section seven, 'Shaping Tradition', examines how literate and elite communities altered their relationships with the past when new political, social and intellectual contexts demanded change.

Part three, 'Experts and Novices', contains papers which focus primarily on the transmission of knowledge, with each looking at a different aspect of ancient education and academia. Silvie Zamazalova (page 313), concentrates on the education of Neo-Assyrian princes, using Aššurbanipal as a case study to illustrate

how education was a process by which a prince was prepared for kingship. Aššurbanipal is the chosen case study due to the abundant source material provided by his reign and the fact that he is one of the only rulers to lay claims to literacy and refer specifically to his childhood education. Referring to the work of Alasdair Livingstone and using the scholarly letters translated by Simo Parpola, Zamazalova presents her arguments and theories with regard to how proficient she believes Aššurbanipal's literacy to have been. While she appears to accept that Aššurbanipal was in fact literate she argues about the extent of his abilities and does not always appear convinced by the evidence for his literacy. For example, Livingstone presented evidence from several colophons, which stated 'I am Aššurbanipal, king of Assyria, king of the world' and argued that no scholar would have dared to proclaim himself as Aššurbanipal for fear of punishment. Zamazalova accepts that Livingstone's evidence is persuasive but not conclusive of Aššurbanipal's literacy and scholarly interests arguing that it should be remembered that scribes commonly wrote on behalf of kings and recorded their words. While this is true I do not believe that Zamazalova has fully grasped all elements of Livingstone's point. Firstly, it should be noted that Livingstone does not at any point claim that all tablets with Aššurbanipal colophons were the work of the king: "*there are of course very many literary tablets that purport in their colophons to be the work of Aššurbanipal that quite clearly were not but quite apart from the uniquely long and poetic colophon, would an ordinary scribe dare proclaim 'I am Aššurbanipal, king of the world, king of Assyria' as part of a tablet colophon's content?*" [Livingstone, 2007] Furthermore it is also the nature of the texts that the colophons appear on and aspects of the writing itself that also suggests that Aššurbanipal was the author. The texts are extremely similar in ductus and are chemical or technical recipes which link to the content of the L<sup>4</sup> document where it is claimed that Aššurbanipal has acquired specialised knowledge. Livingstone discusses all of this in detail in his work and it is all of this evidence combined which makes his argument so compelling. Given that Zamazalova discusses the L<sup>4</sup> document earlier in her paper it is surprising that she does not take the time to consider how it may link into and support insights gained from other evidence. In addition to discussing the veracity of Aššurbanipal's literacy Zamazalova also takes some time to discuss Aššurbanipal's teachers although her treatment of them is brief. She highlights the importance of scholars such as Balasî

who in a letter to Esarhaddon thanks the king for appointing him as tutor to Aššurbanipal but by simply describing scholars as having “prestige and influence” she fails to point out the complexity of scholarly roles (p.320). While she is correct in saying that Balasî was both a scholar and teacher who had access to and influence over Aššurbanipal not all scholars enjoyed such a position and not all had influence or prestige.

The section entitled ‘Decisions’ includes papers that encompass a range of topics related to decision-making processes. One of the most interesting papers is written by one of the co-editors of this book, Karen Radner. Entitled ‘Royal Decision-Making: Kings, Magnates, and Scholars’ (p. 358), her paper examines the topic of joint decision-making within the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The king made his decisions based on the advice he received from two vastly different set of counsellors; the magnates who were the highest state officials and the scholarly experts. Radner is very specific in her focus, analysing only a limited aspect of the magnates’ and scholars’ roles; that which are related to helping the king make a decision. Likewise when touching upon the relationship between the king and his advisors her insight is interesting but tantalisingly brief; she does not delve very deeply into the variety or complexity of such relationships. She is at times hampered by her specificity. The roles, duties and lives of the magnates and scholars are complicated and vast topics which include many aspects that could impact upon Radner’s theories. Many of these aspects are either not discussed in depth or simply not mentioned in her paper. For example, she makes no mention of the tension that sometimes erupted between the magnates and the scholars, nor the fact that on occasion it was the king himself who was called upon to mediate. Furthermore, while Radner does discuss the very different nature of the relationships – caused by the ‘patronage’ of scholars and the formal appointment of the magnates – she does not discuss how the different nature of the relationships could affect the influence the scholars and magnates had over their king. Despite the limitations of her approach, by focusing on such a specific aspect of the Neo-Assyrian Empire Radner is able to provide the reader with a fresh insight into imperial administration, calling into question previous models of organisation. She offers a new model, one that argues that having two very distinct and powerful groups of advisors ensures a balance; the influence of

multiple advisors causes them to neutralise each other and help to ensure the stability of the state.

In part five, 'Interpretation', the papers take a look at how the ancients interpreted their world; how they understood what happened around them. It is mentioned, in several papers not only in this section but also in the volume as a whole that the kings would often choose to be centrally involved in scholarly activities either as a patron or a participant. In his paper, 'Keeping Company with Men of Learning: The King as a Scholar' (p. 508), Eckart Frahm demonstrates exactly how this was the case. His paper discusses what he refers to as the 'learned kings', meaning those kings who took a personal interest in scribal matters and had direct influence over the production of texts. Frahm is careful to highlight the differences between 'learnedness' and 'wisdom' in cuneiform culture and the Mesopotamian rulers he focuses on are those who were "*not only wise, but had a demonstrable interest in the scribal culture of their age*" (p. 509). At times Frahm is faced with the problem of a lack of evidence, particularly for the earliest period when contemporary evidence for royal sponsorship of scribal arts is rare but he is quick to remind readers not to interpret a lack of evidence as evidence of absence. Armed with one of the most extensive bibliographies of all the papers presented in this volume, Frahm works his way methodically through the periods. Beginning with Šulgi of Ur he not only illustrates the king's passion for the scribal arts but also how many kings of later dynasties sought to emulate him. He continues his analysis through the millennia, highlighting and discussing not only individual kings' behaviour but also more unusual phenomena. Two particularly interesting examples are the Kassite kings, who despite being foreign, willingly endorsed Mesopotamian culture and the fascinating policy of 'booknapping' an example of which occurred during the first millennium when a large number of learned Babylonians were abducted by Neo-Assyrian king Esarhaddon (pp. 512-513). Frahm is more topic-focussed than period-focussed; while other academics in this volume have used one specific period as a backdrop to analyse a particular topic or question, Frahm aims to provide a detailed overview. By approaching the material in such a methodical manner and ensuring that no period is ignored, he is successful in presenting a comprehensive and interesting overview.

Editors Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson are to be congratulated for bringing these scholars together. As a rule the scholarship on display is of an exemplary standard. Thankfully the quality of scholarship is matched by the quality of work put in by the editors to ensure the usability of this volume. There is the expected list of figures, which is substantial in size and variety, as well as an excellent and usable index. Furthermore each section has a short and concise introduction which acts as a guide to the theme and when necessary cross-references to other sections or papers. The main volume introduction is worth mentioning for its excellence when explaining what is meant by the designation 'cuneiform culture' as well as for the brilliant general information it provides, including two clear and detailed maps and a thorough timeline. For volumes such as this handbook, the ways in which the editors present the papers and the care taken to ensure that the book is usable and accessible is almost as important as the scholarship contained within the papers. The quality of both scholarship and editing means that this book is extremely useful for scholars and post-graduate students.