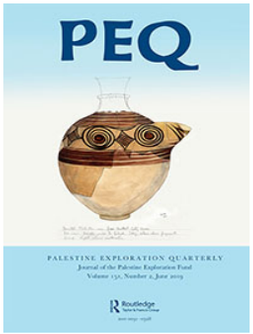

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The southern Levant under Assyrian domination

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BOOK REVIEWS

The southern Levant under Assyrian domination, edited by S. Z. Aster and A. Faust, University Park, PA, Eisenbrauns, 2018, xii+259 pp, with 27 b&w illustrations, $64.95 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-57506-797-1

The handsomely produced volume with ten chapters, each with its own bibliography, publishes papers read at a two-day workshop held at the Ben-Zvi Institute in Jerusalem in November 2015 that brought together scholars based in Israel to discuss the Neo-Assyrian period in the Southern Levant, as the introduction by Avraham Faust and Shawn Zelig Aster (chapter 1, 1–19) details. But what exactly is the 'Southern Levant'? In a somewhat cavalier treatment of the book's central geographical concept, the introduction does not offer a definition, and although this is not explicitly stated the editors seem to consider the term interchangeable with 'Land of Israel', a designation that they use throughout the introduction (pp. 2, 4–8, 10, 14); the map on p. 2 shows the key sites in Israel and Judah and uses the River Jordan as the eastern demarcation. But what about the Philistine kingdoms of Ashdod, Ashkelon, Ekron and Gaza and the Transjordanian kingdoms of Ammon, Edom and Moab, mentioned in passing on p. 4? Ann E. Killebrew and Margreet Steiner included these places in their definition of the 'Southern Levant' in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant, c. 8000–332 BCE* (Oxford: OUP, 2013) and accordingly, Ayelet Gilboa deals with 'The Southern Levant (Cisjordan) During the Iron Age I Period' (pp. 624–48) while Larry G. Herr writes on 'The Southern Levant (Transjordan) During the Iron Age I Period' (pp. 649–59). Curiously, these works are not quoted at all. As will be clear from the following, the authors seem to have had no clear guidance on the precise geographical framework and were at liberty to be as generous or as restrictive as they pleased in their interpretation. The editors, in any case, posit that specifically the 'Land of Israel' holds much potential as a case study of Assyrian imperial control (p. 13) and see the volume as 'a comprehensive and wide-ranging investigation of this important region during the formative Neo-Assyrian era' (p. 3). Faust and Aster stress the availability and potential of rich and varied sources (pp. 2, 5–8), and the following chapters successfully reflect this point, drawing on a wide range of textual and material evidence.

Avraham Faust's Chapter 2, 'The Assyrian Century in the Southern Levant: an Overview of the Reality on the Ground' (pp. 20–55), argues that the Assyrian conquests devastated settlements in the north of the Southern Levant and that 'the region became a sparsely settled backwater' (p. 48). In contrast, the south (both Cisjordan and Transjordan) 'went from a relatively marginal area to an important economic center' (p. 48). While the devastation in the north was a direct result of Assyrian involvement, the prosperity in the south was not but developed partly because the former centres were destroyed and partly because the region was incorporated into the 'prospering world of Mediterranean trade' (p. 48). Somewhat surprisingly, Faust's explicit goal is to argue against the 'recent, fairly broad consensus' (p. 21) that the time of the Assyrian domination over the region is a 'period of stability and peace, which led to economic development that also resulted in settlement expansion' (p. 22). The literature that he quotes for the so-called *Pax Assyriaca* dates to 1987–2001, with only a 2007 textbook written by a scholar not specialising in the topic dating to slightly more recent times. The existence of 'dissenting views', belonging for example to specialists such as A. Kirk Grayson, David Schloen and Laurence Stager, is fleetingly acknowledged, only to conclude 'but the Assyrian peace paradigm is very dominant' (p. 24). Is it really, though? It seems to these reviewers that there is a

healthy debate surrounding the issue (cf. also various chapters in S. Hasegawa, Christoph Levin and K. Radner, eds., *The Last Days of the Kingdom of Israel*, Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2018).

Peter Zilberg's Chapter 3, 'The Assyrian Provinces of the Southern Levant: Sources, Administration, and Control' (pp. 57–88), presents a total of 63 Neo-Assyrian cuneiform texts (letters, administrative documents, bullae, legal contracts, inscriptions, lexical lists, oracle queries) 'that mention the area of northern Israel (Samaria and Megiddo provinces), the coastal plain (Philistine and Phoenician cities), and the area of Judah' (pp. 57–58) before discussing Assyrian imperial administration at Samaria and Megiddo and the control over these provinces. The chronological tables (pp. 60, 62–65) and regional tables for Samaria and Megiddo (p. 79) and Philistia (p. 80) are useful resources although the specialist reader struggles to comprehend why certain texts pertaining to the Southern Levant were included and others excluded. For instance, royal inscriptions were apparently only included if they come from the region (nos 20–23, 38–39) while oracle queries and administrative texts feature even if they originate in the Assyrian heartland. As such, a great number of royal inscriptions are not included, despite their clear usefulness for the topic of this chapter, and various archival documents are omitted too, including arguably important sources such as a letter from the state correspondence of Tiglath-pileser III concerning Ashdod (M. Luukko, *The Correspondence of Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II from Calah/Nimrud*, State Archives of Assyria 19, Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2012, no. 28) and a legal text found at Assur concerning a Samarian (most recent discussion: K. Radner in Hasegawa *et al.*, *loc. cit.*, 119). Despite the editors' statement that this chapter offers 'probably the most complete survey of the Assyrian sources pertaining to the southern Levant published to date' (p. 11), the dossier assembled is certainly not an exhaustive list of all Neo-Assyrian sources relating to the area and its peoples.

Shawn Zelig Aster's Chapter 4, 'Treaty and Prophecy: A Survey of Biblical Reactions to Neo-Assyrian Political Thought' (pp. 89–118), makes the case that the Assyrian domination of the southern Levant left its mark on various Biblical text genres and assesses the responses to Assyrian imperialism in three of these: 'treaty, psalms, and prophecy' (p. 97). Well framed by anthropological approaches, the chapter succeeds in drawing out the complex and diverse reactions to Assyrian rule and ideology as recorded in Biblical texts. The focus lies firmly on the books of the prophets (Hosea, Isaiah, Micah).

Amitai Baruchi-Unna's Chapter 5, '"Your Servant and Son I Am": Aspects of the Assyrian Imperial Experience of Judah' (pp. 119–38), employs a combination of Assyrian and Biblical sources in an attempt to reconstruct the experience of Judah as a client state. Especially in the later part of the chapter (pp. 128–34), Baruchi-Unna frequently uses Assyrian sources that do not relate to Judah, speculating that the Judean case may have been similar, but he makes no attempt to engage with (or even reference) the recent literature on the empire's interaction with its clients.

David Kertai's Chapter 6, 'The Assyrian Influence on the Architecture of Hospitality in the Southern Levant' (pp. 139–56), stresses that the current conception of the different architectural traditions of the first half of the first millennium BCE is too morphological in nature and proposes to focus instead on architectural principles rather than architectural forms. The aim of his chapter is to survey the 'architecture of hospitability' of the southern Levant, those architectural forms dedicated to the reception of guests, against the backdrop of 'the three main architectural traditions of the first half of the first millennium BCE' (p. 139), namely Assyria (in imperial times, a 'composite tradition', p. 156), Babylonia and the Syro-Anatolian states. Kertai finds that the various structures commonly interpreted as administrative buildings of the time of Assyrian domination (e.g. Building 1052/1369 at Megiddo;

Building 3002 at Hazor; the Lachish Residency) do not exhibit any marked architectural influences of the Assyrian tradition. With his innovative and carefully argued study, Kertai makes a potentially crucial contribution to the analysis of Levantine Iron Age architecture, showing that some buildings traditionally assigned to the Neo-Assyrian period may well date to later times. His observations are used in Faust's argumentation in Chapter 2 (pp. 40–41).

Alexander Fantalkin's Chapter 7, 'Neo-Assyrian Involvement in the Southern Coastal Plain of Israel: Old Concepts and New Interpretations' (pp. 162–85), usefully surveys archaeological evidence from Ashkelon, Yavneh-Yam, Ruqeish, Blakhiya, Tell Abu Salima and Ashdod-Yam, exploring the degree and nature of these sites' connection to the Assyrian Empire. In particular, he criticises Laurence Stager's model of 'port power' to characterise Ashkelon (pp. 168–69, 177) and argues that Ashkelon's importance in Assyrian times has been overstated (to the detriment of other coastal sites: pp. 169, 178), stressing that key contexts date only to the time after Assyrian rule over the region had come to an end.

Lily Singer-Avitz's Chapter 8, 'On Phoenicia's Trade Relations with Philistia and Judah under the Assyrian Hegemony: the Ceramic Evidence' (pp. 186–215), is based on a thorough and thoughtful analysis of Phoenician ceramic imports found at sites across modern Israel (see map on p. 193). She offers a useful description of the different pottery types (pp. 189–92) and analyses their spatial and temporal distribution. Singer-Avitz argues that trade from the Phoenician coast ceased between 734/2 and 720/16 (p. 204–205) and was then resumed (p. 206), attributing these events to changes in Assyrian imperial policy towards the Phoenician ports. She sees the letters of Tiglath-pileser III's imperial administrator Qurdi-Aššur-lamur as evidence for imperial meddling (pp. 187, 204) and links the resumption of trade to Sargon II of Assyria (pp. 187, 205, 207).

Yigal Bloch's Chapter 9, 'The Beirut Decree and Mesopotamian Imperial Policy toward the Levant' (pp. 216–35), adds arguments to the view, first championed by Joseph Naveh on the basis of palaeography, that an Aramaic inscription that had appeared on the Beirut antiquities market in 1953 does not date to the final decades of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (as usually assumed) but to the Neo-Babylonian period, arguing that the decree was intended to prevent individuals deported from the Levant to Babylonia to return to their original homes. As Bloch shows, all arguments previously used to date the text to the Neo-Assyrian period also apply to the Neo-Babylonian period, while the protasis *ʾyš zy* in the Beirut Decree parallels *amēlu ša* in the Neo-Babylonian laws. To further strengthen his argument for the new dating, Bloch could also have emphasised that there is absolutely no tradition for compiling law codes in the Neo-Assyrian Empire. While it is unclear from where the Beirut Decree originates, Bloch makes a good case that its contents are of interest for the entire Levantine region.

Wayne Horowitz's Chapter 10, 'The Last Days of Cuneiform in Canaan: Speculations on the Coins from Samaria' (pp. 236–45), offers a bold and intriguing interpretation of certain 4th-century BCE coins from Samaria whose design includes individual cuneiform signs (*drachma*: Samaria 5, two *oboli*: Samaria 6–7). In a deliberately 'speculative' (p. 237) discussion, he suggests that the coins provide evidence for the survival of Mesopotamian communities, deported to Samaria in the 8th century BCE, into the late Persian period. He argues that 'the cuneiform signs on the coins were iconic reminders of the national identity of the descendants of Mesopotamian settlers in Samaria, and their historical connection to the cuneiform world' (p. 244), rather than an indication that they had retained a working knowledge of cuneiform.

The volume concludes with useful indices of authors (pp. 247–52), Biblical and cuneiform texts (pp. 253–55) and geographical names (pp. 257–59). For these reviewers, the standout chapters in a volume of generally high scholarly merit are those of Kertai, Bloch and Horowitz,

each offering new, even radical readings of primary sources on the basis of methodologically rigorous and yet innovative approaches. They and the other contributors shed intriguing light on the issues at the very heart of this volume: the intersection between imperial agency and local responses.

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Biblical Lachish: A tale of construction, destruction, excavation and restoration, by D. Ussishkin, Translation: M. F. Vamosh; Jerusalem, The Israel Exploration Society, Biblical Archaeology Society, 2014, 446 pp., £107.05 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-9-65221-095-1

Professor Ussishkin has written a book for a wide general readership with an interest in the archaeology, biblical context and ancient history of the Middle East. It should also prove to be a useful resource for students or others working in the field, who seek a more detailed knowledge of Lachish. It appeared first in Hebrew and the present English translation is clear and well written. The first quarter of the book provides an historical review of the three main excavations at the site up to the year 1994, namely the Wellcome-Marston Expedition led by James L. Starkey from 1932 to 1938, and those of Yohanan Aharoni in the years 1966 and 1968 (Aharoni 1975) and David Ussishkin himself between 1973 and 1994 (Ussishkin 2004). The rest of the book is arranged in chronological order and covers the history of Lachish from the emergence of the Canaanite city states in Middle Bronze I to the end of the Persian occupation and the conquest of the region by Alexander the Great in 332 BCE. For completeness, Ussishkin has also included a few brief notes about the earlier occupation of the site during the Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Early Bronze periods.

Lachish is a huge site, located about half way between Jerusalem and Gaza, or, in another context, on the old road between Ashkelon and Hebron. The archaeological excavations at Lachish are well described, with a clear account of the three excavations undertaken by leaders in their field over a period of sixty years. What emerges of course is that archaeological techniques, the methods of dating objects and the standards of recording excavations have evolved greatly during that time. Ussishkin provides many interesting insights and examples of how early conclusions may be confirmed, revised, or, from time to time, completely re-thought. He does so without criticising his predecessors and gives full credit for key discoveries when they are due. The book is very well illustrated throughout, and while some of the images may be familiar to those with an interest in the field, the author has uncovered a wealth of illustrative material in the form of photographs, line drawings and maps that are likely to be new to the majority of readers.

There can be few sites in the region that have benefitted more than Lachish in terms of the quality of the original reports describing excavations at the tell (see bibliography). As a consequence, it is possible now to reflect with some confidence on the priorities and objectives of those who undertook the earlier excavations, particularly the British excavation in the