



Wheat, E & Johnson, E. D. 2009 'Review: Benjamin R. Foster and Karen Polinger Foster, *Civilizations of Ancient Iraq*. Princeton University Press, 2009. Pp. xi & 297, figs 22. \$26.95. ISBN 978-0-691-13722-3' *Rosetta* 7: 126-130.
<http://rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue7/civilisations-iraq/>

Benjamin R. Foster and Karen Polinger Foster, *Civilizations of Ancient Iraq*. Princeton University Press, 2009. Pp. xi & 297, figs 22. \$26.95. ISBN 978-0-691-13722-3

Reviewed by Elizabeth Wheat and Erika D Johnson
University of Birmingham

In the preface to their new book on the ancient Near East, Benjamin R. Foster and Karen Pollinger Foster state that they aim to offer 'a brief historical and cultural survey of Iraq from the earliest times to the Muslim conquest in 637' (p. xi). The ambitious task of exploring the epic history of Mesopotamia in a two hundred page book is always in danger of resulting in a rather nebulous account of often disparate Near Eastern societies, primarily bound together by their geographical proximity. The authors manage their task effortlessly, however, creating a concise and coherent narrative that goes beyond the standard historical survey of the ancient Near East, by including some very welcome additional information on the current state of heritage in Iraq.

The first chapter deals with the 'land between the two rivers', and the unique ecological niche occupied by Mesopotamia which made it the perfect location for the so called 'birthplace of civilisation'. The inclusion of two maps with the locations of all the major Near Eastern sites here is very useful, one of which shows ancient Mesopotamia in relation to its contemporary civilisations across Egypt and the Mediterranean. In chapter two, 'The Birthplace of Civilisation', the authors discuss how and why the earliest cities emerged. There are numerous theories on this subject, many of which are controversial, and the writers linger on this topic only briefly before turning to a description of the highly pluralistic religions of Mesopotamia. This provides the authors with the opportunity to introduce the reader to some of the many literary masterpieces of the ancient world, inspired by the often rather colourful gods of Western Asia, recorded by the Sumerians after the development of writing.

Chapter three deals with the development of early city-states, and therefore begins to follow a more political theme using economic and bureaucratic evidence. Around

2400 B.C.E, war broke out between the two Sumerian cities of Lagash and Umma over a strip of arable land between them. Their most famous battle is recorded on the *Stele of the Vultures*, now in the Louvre, which provides one of the earliest visual accounts of an ancient conflict. As powerful and influential as Sumerian city-states such as Uruk, Lagash and Umma were, however, they could not resist the rise of the land of Akkad and its dynamic leader Sargon.

Chapter four describes Sargon's many astonishing victories, and his creation of effectively the first empire in the Near East through a programme of rebuilding and establishing the Semitic Akkadians as governors throughout the new provinces. Part of Sargon's success may also have been his willingness to immerse himself in Sumerian culture: he installed his daughter Enheduanna as high priestess of the moon god Nanna-Sin at Ur, where she composed the first literary works in the world which we can attribute to any specific author. After the equally prosperous age of Sargon's grandson Naram-Sin, however, the power of Akkad began to decline and the old Sumerian city-states were once again able to step into the resulting political vacuum and found the Third Dynasty of Ur.

Chapter five discusses King Hammurabi, most famous for his law code which now stands in the Louvre, and the authors are able to treat this important document in just enough detail given the length of the book. Babylon came to political prominence for the first time under Hammurabi's policy of centralized rule, and it is at this point in history that we can begin to talk about the 'Babylonians', as the old Sumerian city-states became increasingly absorbed into the new Babylonia.

The authors use the decline of Hammurabi's Babylonian dynasty and the emergence of the Kassites, a group from the northeast, as their starting point for chapter six. The Kassite language was never written down, but numerous administrative documents in Akkadian survive from this period, which provide a glimpse into the Kassite style of government. The mid-second millennium saw the rise of a number of powers which were fully open to co-operating and trading with each other, as seen in the Amarna letters discovered at the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten's capital Akhetaten. The four hundred surviving cuneiform tablets, all written in Akkadian, describe the treaties and gift exchanges of the period's great powers in a rather peculiar diplomatic style, in

which thanking another king for a gift was frowned upon in favour of complaining about its lack of worth. The reader has to deal with the introduction of a number of new civilizations in this chapter, including the Hurrians, Hittites and Assyrians. The authors deal with them in a clear and concise way, however, ensuring that none of them feel like footnotes in the history of the ancient Near East, which could so easily have been the case in a book of this length.

Chapter seven discusses the Assyrians, with treatments of Assyria in general as well as both the Middle and Neo-Assyrian Empires. The inclusion of all the achievements of Assyria in one chapter is useful, as one is able to get an idea of the character of the people who called themselves Assyrians. The most famous and successful rulers of each period are described in detail, with special highlight on building activities; this is especially important as the kings were moving their residences away from Assur and some new palace centres were even being built on virgin land.

In stark contrast, or what the Assyrians would see as contrast, chapter eight discusses the Babylonians. The Assyrians and Babylonians had a rivalry from the early days of Mesopotamian civilisation, though the Babylonians seemed to have triumphed culturally as most of the Assyrian correspondence was done in the Babylonian dialect of Akkadian rather than the Assyrian dialect. This chapter details only the Late and Neo-Babylonian Empires along with the Persians, one assumes because the Persians were the ones to finally destroy Babylon and take over the region. Special attention is given to learning in Babylonia as well as Babylonian temple administration and private life. The exploits of the Persian Empire are discussed along with how Mesopotamian culture influenced them.

Chapter nine has the great task of examining the period from Alexander's destruction of the Persian Empire to the end of Mesopotamian civilisation. Great care is taken to render properly the goings on of the period without too much confusion on the part of the reader. The chapter opens with a short reminder of the accomplishments of Alexander and then a discussion of what his successors did, then goes on to discuss the Parthians and the Roman Empire. This is one of the many places where the authors shine. Considering this book is aimed at readers who are not academics and who may have not studied the subject before, the explanations are clear and concise

and leave the reader with no doubt as to the order of events. This approach is taken throughout the book and is especially well done when the history becomes confusing or complex. The inclusion of an excerpt from the latest cuneiform tablet known (from the first century AD) poignantly shows the end of Mesopotamian civilisation. Though there is hope, since Mesopotamian customs and culture have reached the empires that later occupied the same landmass.

Chapter ten concerns the Sassanian Empire, but begins with a discussion of the different religions present at this time in Iraq, which is very enlightening. We then get an in-depth treatment of the Sassanian Empire from its beginnings in the third century AD to its end with the coming of Islam in the seventh century. Attention is drawn to the art of the Sassanians and what Mesopotamian influences can be seen in it.

The epilogue of the book deals with the construction of the Iraqi Antiquities Authority and the emergence of the field of Assyriology. As Assyriologists, we find this section particularly interesting, but sad at the same time. Since archaeology was in its nascent years in the late 19th century, when digging in Iraq first became popular, the techniques used then would seem barbaric by today's standards. Tunnelling through walls to get to the next room in order to find tablets was especially harmful as we do not have city plans for many of these areas. In the final pages, the newest flavour of destruction is addressed. The authors do well to explain the situation without emotion, especially when discussing the looting of the Iraq Museum. Although the book ends on a sad note (at least for us), hopefully the skilled writing and unbiased descriptions of what occurred will make other readers realise just what a tragedy it is to have lost so much of the world's cultural heritage.

Civilizations of Ancient Iraq is a welcome addition to the general surveys of ancient Near Eastern history currently available, such as George Roux's *Ancient Iraq*, still regarded as a classic after over forty years in print. The authors bring something new to their book, however, with the inclusion of a large amount of information on the current heritage crisis in Iraq and the recent history of its antiquities. The book is clearly aimed at the non-specialist; their use of the term 'Middle East' rather than 'Near East', for example, suggests they are catering to an entirely non-academic

<http://rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue7/civilisations-iraq/>

audience, yet it is useful for new students of Mesopotamian history. Slightly more advanced Assyriologists, however, will still find this book enjoyable. For students of such a vast and sprawling civilisation, it can be extremely useful to have a single account of Mesopotamia's history reduced to its most salient points, in order to provide a focused framework onto which the more complex details of history and culture can be placed. *Civilizations of Ancient Iraq* achieves this with ease, and emerges with a huge amount of appeal for a diverse audience.