

## Review

**Peter Fibiger BANG and Walter SCHEIDEL (eds.):**  
*The Oxford Handbook of the State in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean.*  
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Diogo Paiva\*  
CHAM – FCSH/NOVA, UAc

The collection of handbooks published by the Oxford University Press is quickly growing and every year new books are being added to the series. This year is no exception and the scientific and academic community is presented with a new book, focused in pre-modern state formation process and structure, from III millennium B.C.E. until the birth of Islam. These roughly 4000 years of History encompasses the first known states of the world, although for practical issues the studies are geographically limited to the Mediterranean and the Near East. It thus excludes Central Asia, the Indian sub-continent and the Far East, which deserve a book (or more) of their own, due to their diversity and significance. These geographic limitations, which are the result of an editorial decision, are rightly justified by the editors in the Prologue.

Despite the above mentioned chronological and geographical framework, the number of chapters is a reflection of the large number of political entities and states that falls into the book's scope. Inside, the readers will find studies covering ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia,

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\* CHAM – Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas/Universidade Nova de Lisboa-Universidade dos Açores.

Anatolia, Israel and Iran, formerly called the Pre-Classical Civilizations, followed by several chapters covering the diverse political history of Ancient Greece, from the Minoan states to the Hellenistic empires after Alexander's death. The next section covers the Central Mediterranean powers, Carthage and Rome, being the latter divided into two chapters dedicated to Republican Rome and to the Roman Monarchic (Imperial) period. Finally, three more studies are presented, covering the Byzantine Empire, the Germanic successor states and the birth of the first Islamic empire, considering the transitional period that precedes the medieval state and marks the end of the ancient state.

For graduate students, as myself, and scholars alike, the first impression, after looking at the index, will probably be the striking length of the chronological frame. It's unusual that a book, other than a volume of a Universal History, encompasses such time span and diverse civilizations, combining different study fields that normally are only analysed independently, such as Egyptology and Assyriology, unless the aim of the publication is a comparative study. Taking this in account, the editors had the difficult task of guaranteeing some homogeneity to the book structure, especially since each chapter is written by a different author and study field.

Peter Bang, one of the book's editors, is the author of the Introduction (Part I), a 35-page length text that despite it may occasionally be perceived as a dense reading, is very useful for someone starting on the subject of the ancient state. Covering several theories applied for understanding the birth of the ancient state and its evolution, Bang provides the student reader a very useful body of theory, including contributions of sociologists, anthropologists, historians and political scientists, to understand the subjects in question.

This Part II is a very comprehensive analysis on the Near Eastern state, spanning some three thousand years of history and a geographical range that includes Egypt, Anatolia, Mesopotamia and Iran. This means that these seven chapters attempts to describe and explain the elements of almost ten different empires and city-state systems. Natu-

rally, each author would prefer to have more pages to better develop their chapters, but space constraints are a constant in broadband publications like this handbook series. Thus, it's expected that some of these chapters are more developed and straightforward than others, specially due to the need felt by some authors to spend a little more text in historical contextualization taking in account the better understanding of readers. This lead to some uneven chapters, reinforced by the lack or abundance of known historical sources, although such fact does not compromises the proposed goals of this book, especially from an introductory perspective.

For instance, J. Manning is the author that writes about the Egyptian state, but for a considerable part of his chapter, he felt the need to provide a historical introduction. This introduction took most of the chapter space and after it there are some few pages that summarize and point out the characteristics of the Egyptian state. It seems to be somewhat underdeveloped, especially considering some later chapters (i.e., Greece and Rome's), but compensating this is a neat textual structure and Egyptian state with 3000 years that presents long term characteristics and structures. To address Mesopotamia's diversity, two chapters are offered, one focusing the Ancient Near Eastern City-States and the other, the Imperial Mesopotamian States. The first, authored by S. Garfinkle, is a well-structured chapter, with considerable depth taking in account its relative small size, providing not only a chronological context, but specially a conceptual framework that students may appreciate by its structural methodology and coherence.

G. Barjamovic gives a general view of imperial dynamics in Mesopotamia over 2500 years, presenting the oscillation occurred in Mesopotamian history between political fragmentation and imperial centralization with the major Mesopotamian empires (Akkadian, Ur III, Hammurabi, Kassite, Assyrian and Babylonian), especially focusing in the Ur III and the Assyrian empire. From the student's point of view, this chapter is well structured and presents itself as a good introduction for the book's main subject, except for the com-

monly known Neo-Babylonian Empire period, which oddly is only briefly mentioned. This book includes some of the lead specialists on each field and T. Bryce is currently one of the most prolific scholars on the Hittite empire. In a very smooth and fluid style, Bryce describes the Hittite history and the successor states, commonly known as the Neo-Hittite kingdoms. The chapter is very focused on the Hittite kings and the relationship with the empire, based on the numerous clay sources already discovered. Within the smallest chapter in the book, dedicated to Jewish states, S. Schwartz was able to discuss some established ideas, such as the precocious Jewish nationalism, with a clear and direct speech while presenting, with a sober narrative, the importance that the Hasmonean kingdom represented as a regional power. Finally, condensed in one chapter are three major players in the Near Eastern history, the Achaemenids, the Parthians and the Sasanians. They are vividly presented by J. Wiesehöfer whose textual narrative reflects its passion over Iranian states history. First, he analyses each empire individually and then offers a comparative perspective, where he reinforces the idea of hegemonic and almost unsurpassed power shared by these empires.

Part III is focused on the Aegean, from the Bronze Age to the Hellenistic Empires. The importance given to Greeks states and state formation is a reflection of both the significance of Greek history and legacy, in its diverse forms of government, state constitution and cultural heritage for European modern history, and a natural result of a relatively larger number of sources available to the classical historians. Even though this part is much more geographically limited and spanning over a shorter period of time, it still includes five chapters that approach the theme in different perspectives, giving a deep understanding of the state in Greek history.

The first chapter of this part, written by J. Bennet, is a good example of how the archaeological research is paramount for Ancient History studies like the subject of this book. Taking on two different locations (Crete and mainland Greece, in the Bronze Age) the author

develops its study with a strong resort to archaeological evidence to try to fill the gap that the still undeciphered Cretan hieroglyphs and Linear A scripts represent for a clearer image of the origins of state formation in the Aegean of the early II millennium BCE. Not struggling so much with the scarcity of written sources, the following authors offer a very good perspective of the state development in Hellenic history, with complementary views without chapters overlapping, providing the reader a deep and cohesive analysis. A more conceptual view is given by M. H. Hansen with its chapter on Greek *poleis*, beginning with the word's meaning and then with a reconstruction of the *polis* organization and state activities, regulated by the community: defence, cult and finance. With the geographical expansion of Greek culture over the Mediterranean, I. Morris selects three cases of multicity states' formation: Athens, Sparta and Syracuse, to illustrate common characteristics and differences, between three distinct city-states (both economically and politically).

E. Mackil focused on the Greek phenomenon of *koinon*, a form of regional state comprised of multiple *poleis*, commonly translated as a federal state or league and most visible in mainland Greece and the Peloponnese, in the fourth through the second century BCE. Lastly, Alexander of Macedonia's legacy is considered and it's analysed the formation of the Hellenistic empires that followed the fall of the Achaemenid Empire and the death of Alexander, by J. Ma. The author focuses not only on the political institutions present in the several Hellenistic states, but also on their economic basis.

Beginning the fourth Part, our attention is once more shifted towards west, to the Central Mediterranean. Divided into three chapters, the readers have the opportunity to better understand the states of central Mediterranean, i.e., the two major powers of this region in the classical period: Carthage and Rome. Consisting on the history of these two great powers, Part IV is a reflection of how well we know, and how many sources we have at our disposal, Rome and Carthage. As a result, this part presents two successfully developed

chapters on the Roman state, spanning 75 pages, and a struggling 20-page chapter on Carthage, showing how much historians still have to go to bring Carthaginian historiography to deeper and more complex perspectives of Carthage.

W. Ameling is the responsible for the presentation of the Carthaginian state and in a quick read one can observe how structured this text is and the scarcity of textual historical sources is probably why Ameling opted for this style of writing. The severe dependency on Latin and Greek sources to understand Carthaginian state creates another difficulty. Nevertheless, Ameling presents the Carthaginian state, its institutions and functions, as well as the interaction of this city-state with its expanding territory, in a practical and direct form. The other two authors of this part, H. Mouritsen (Roman Republic) and P. F. Bang (Roman Monarchy), are certainly not confronted with such rarity of textual sources, and therefore were able to present much more complex and dense chapters, full of well-established relations and perspectives. For Mouritsen, the two structural characteristics of the Roman Republican Empire are its longevity, which spans through five centuries, and its «exceptional expansionism» (p. 3813), growing from a city-state to large territorial state, encompassing the Italian peninsula, as well as its ability to greatly increase its citizen body and population. In order to explain these issues and, ultimately, the gradual decline of the Republic and the emergence of the Monarchy, the author analyses not only the political bodies, but also the state's functions and the social dynamics that develop over those five centuries.

The following chapter covers the Roman Empire since the rise of Augustus to the fall of the western part of the empire, being the largest in this book and authored by one of the editors. Bang begins with the fundamental role of Augustus, unravelling the close relation of Roman monarchic longevity and a financial arrangement to support the growing Roman army. The central figure of the emperor and state's finances strengthened social and political cohesion of the Roman world, and thus Bang develops this relation and its implications, first by focusing on the military organization, and afterwards the impe-

rial court. Despite the importance of these central institutions for the Roman state to function and develop, Bang also shifts its perspective towards the decentralized institutions, the provincial elites, and the relation between central and local powers. This is especially significant due to above mentioned relation between the state's ability to guarantee its stability and the financial support of the military institutions, as provincial fiscal effectiveness is determinant to overall health of Roman Empire.

The book comes to closure, with the final fifth Part and its three chapters, covering several political entities that emerged from the end of Antiquity and the dawn of medieval times. The title, «Transformations of the Ancient State», reveals the editor's intentions to extend the book's scope beyond Antiquity, in strict sense, and still analyse successor states that continue to maintain diverse elements and characteristics of Ancient states. Not surprisingly, this includes the Byzantine state that greatly continued Eastern Roman traditions, and the Germanic states formed from the ruined West Roman Empire. The inclusion of the first Islamic empire is very interesting, since its original territory is external to Roman authority.

After a short historical introduction J. Haldon examines the Byzantine political and economic system, focusing on key aspects of the Byzantine state: urban society, military organization, state's economic role, political ideology and church. This chapter is not limited to the first centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire, but it goes on explaining how the state gradually failed and ultimately collapsed with the fourth crusade.

I. Wood takes on the Germanic successor states, in its variety, since its establishment still under the imperial authority, and the process of state building based on Roman political structures. Despite Roman continuities being a strong feature of Germanic states, some characteristics contrast with this statement, namely the military organization and the taxation system. The enforcement and guaranteeing of justice also shifts from central to local powers. In the conclusions the idea of a general common Germanic tradition is argued as well as the tradi-

tional view of successor kingdoms as small-scaled «run-down versions of the late empire» (p. 514).

The final chapter of this handbook is, as previously stated, about the first Islamic empire, the Umayyad Caliphate. C. F. Robinson introduces the uniqueness of this early Muslim empire with a graphic description of a hypothetic journey from west to east. A journeyman could travel from Cordoba to Merv under a single political entity, speaking only the Arabic, using the same currency and interacting using the same symbolic universe. The close relation between imperial construction and Islam is explained as the «state's function was thus to realize a religious plan, and Islam was the logic of rule (...)» (p. 521).

In conclusion, the handbook as a whole is very useful, for anyone researching the Ancient History or even just interested in such matters. Throughout the chapters the several states are analysed, their critical institutions and its dynamics are pointed out and explained. Obviously, there are some variations along the book, with richer and deeper chapters being followed by others with some limitations but, as stated above, those were essentially due to a rarity of textual sources. For the reader, this book presents itself as an excellent opportunity to explore 4000 years of history of a variety of political and cultural entities. This benefits both the student and the scholar, enabling the former to create a big picture of Ancient History in Mediterranean and Near East, and for the latter, to broaden its horizons beyond its field of expertise.