Finally, the epilogue summarises the main achievements of the book and proposes new lines of research, such as a diachronic study of the interactions between the Phoenicians and 'locals in the Mediterranean' (p. 316).

Overall, the recognition of a unique Phoenician identity could benefit from a more in-depth discussion of the socio-political reasons behind the absence of its claim, for example by investigating the socio-political relationship between the Phoenicians and other Near-Eastern and Mediterranean polities. The Chapter 'Intangible Legacies' could have benefited from a more accurate linguistic analysis of loanwords and legacies from the Phoenician-Punic epigraphic record. These aspects are, however, minor issues with respect to the broad scope of the book, and L.-R. may have omitted them in favour of the art-historical perspective adopted when analysing archaeological artefacts.

Undoubtedly, this monograph is a milestone in the history of Phoenician studies. It has the great merit of underlining, very convincingly, the significant role of the Phoenicians in shaping Mediterranean cultures, and how much previous scholarship has overlooked it. The extensive material that L.-R. meticulously investigates through a sound iconographical approach and the geographical vastness of the sources taken into consideration make the book an essential tool for researching the ancient Mediterranean, paving the way for a new line of studies that goes beyond traditional Hellenocentrism.

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THE NEO-ASSYRIAN EMPIRE

FAUST (A.) *The Neo-Assyrian Empire in the Southwest. Imperial Domination and Its Consequences*. Pp. xiv + 373, figs, ills, b/w & colour maps. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. Cased, £99, US$125. ISBN: 978-0-19-884163-0.

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Much has been written on Neo-Assyrian (NA) imperial administration. Historians have for some time described NA imperial endeavours particularly in a comparative fashion vis-à-vis other empires that rose and developed in the area. Recent studies, moreover, attempt a historical synthesis of textual sources with archaeological interpretations of material culture (M. Liverani, *Assyria: the Imperial Mission* [2017]). Much scholarship has tackled the core areas of the Assyrian imperial polity, while not long ago there was a shift in the field's literature to study in more depth the peripheral areas of the empire. The Northern frontier received special attention, leading to generalisations about how the Assyrians expanded into remote areas and managed them (B.J. Parker, *The Mechanics of Empire* [2001]). F.'s excellent contribution to the field is an attempt to speak mostly to the archaeological and historical approach and to address, in a critical light, some of the existing views on how the NA empire grew and developed in the periphery, with a particular concentration on the southwest frontier of the empire.

While F. accounts for the Assyrian interactions with other Levantine polities for comparative purposes (e.g. the coast and even areas more to the north-west, such as

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Kunulua/Tayinat), the main emphasis is on the areas of Israel/Samaria and Judah. Given that the period after the campaigns of Tiglath-Pileser III had a greater impact on the relevant sites, the book focuses mostly on Assyrian imperialism during and after that ruler's time. F. proceeds primarily by means of several regional overviews of archaeological surveys and interpretations of excavation reports, with which the author engages critically. The region under study is one of the most extensively excavated areas in the entire Near East. Yet all the data gathered over more than a century of archaeological work needs a systematic overview and synthesis. Each chapter sums up the evidence, weighs the pros and cons of diverging interpretations and, at different stages throughout the argument, offers preliminary conclusions that build up the case for a more complex and nuanced view of Assyrian imperialism in the Southwest Levant.

The view that emerges is that Assyria seems to have had little interest in the area. Considering the abundance of markers of imperial activity and administration elsewhere, the Southwest Levant data is surprising, first, because of its relatively small frequency. The typical markers – Assyrian Palace Ware (APW), cuneiform tablets, monumental architecture in the Assyrian style – are not very well attested in comparison with the Syrian periphery. This striking issue is underscored by the fact that several structures previously tagged as direct evidence of Assyrian administration have in fact been reinterpreted as something else, and, as a result, we are left with only a few examples, such as Meggido (p. 159). Even much of the rarely attested 'APW' was local imitation (p. 162). In addition to this, there is little evidence that the Assyrians invested in the local centres or built up their economy. There is, in fact, much evidence that the territories of Israel and, later, Judah comprised settlements that had increased in prosperity and population, reaching an apex right before the Assyrians wreaked havoc in the region (Chapters 2–3). Moreover, as far as we can tell, the evidence for any economic recovery during the period of Assyrian presence in the area is debatable, with only some places showing signs of either an increase in population or an improvement in the economy (pp. 210–13).

This would contrast with any sweeping generalisation to account for the entire area over the period. For some, the picture was one of destruction and impoverishment across the board, due to the negative impact of Assyria's presence (M. Liverani, *The Ancient Near East: History, Society and Economy* [2014], p. 412). For many others the situation for the entire Southern Levant is framed in a mostly positive way, in terms of the idea of an 'Assyrian Peace'. F. (pp. 245–8) mentions, for example, N. Na'aman, M. Van de Mieroop and W. Hallo – all of them well-known historians. The problem, according to F. (Chapters 9–10), is that, while Assyrian imperialism had mostly deleterious results in the southwest, there were also some positive developments that are used as a platform to make the case for an 'Assyrian Peace' interpretation. Upon re-examination, though, we are left with a mixed record, depending on the micro-region at stake.

The notion of an Assyrian Peace emerged in the earlier days of Assyriology as an analogy with the Roman empire, reflecting the early twentieth-century mindset favourable to the notion of 'benevolent' or 'civilising' expansion. It has been argued, for instance, that the Assyrians built up infrastructure in the places they colonised. They imposed order and controlled the use of violence among locals. They had a positive impact in the periphery by transforming the local culture and art, leading each province to embrace more sophisticated forms of architectural and artistic expression. This is a transposition of the Pax Romana ideology onto the Assyrian situation. F. (pp. 250–6) briefly reviews many of the problems with this approach: first, it embraces a view of empire that was not consensual, even among

the ancient Romans. Second, it reinforces some of the justifications that have been offered for colonial oppression in the way in which modern scholarship uncritically embraced and endorsed the Pax Romana ideology. Third, it reads into Assyrian political ideology some motivations that were very likely extraneous to it, in a rather anachronistic fashion (according to F., there is, for example, no evidence of an Assyrian perception that they had to 'civilise' the Levantine periphery).

F. (Chapter 11) shows that, contrary to the 'imperial peace' model, of the two levels of Assyrian interaction in the southwest (quasi-independent clients vs full imperial provinces), only the client polities (Judah/South), which were less directly under Assyrian influence, had leeway to recover. Eventually, some of them even prospered. Within the provinces (Israel-Samaria/North) those sites that experienced any minimal improvement over time were only a few, and in the border zone. As a whole, the southwest had very limited production capability and very little to offer Assyria in terms of direct material gains.

The costs of empire in the area, therefore, seem to have exceeded the benefits. The question then is why the Assyrians would project power onto the region in the first place. F.'s hypothesis is that the southwest expansion happened too quickly, on an ad hoc basis, in reaction to local revolts that had to be pacified (pp. 272ff.). There was not much strategic planning involved. (At times, F. seems to connect the drive to keep expanding to the Assyrian imperial ideology that postulated that each ruler had to control a larger jurisdiction than the previous one, but this theme is underdeveloped in the book.) On the other hand, the Assyrians could use the example of how they crushed the defiance of anti-Assyrian coalitions at different points in time in order to deter any potential future revolts (p. 280). Not only that, they could also muster some labour via deportation to work in more agriculturally productive areas of the empire. From this point of view, there was a limited rationale for the empire in the southwest.

Written primarily from an archaeological point of view, this book offers an excellent summary of the key data used by different scholars to offer rival interpretations of Assyria's impact on each main site in the Southwest Levant. Despite references to the Bible as a written document, it is unfortunate that other types of texts – cuneiform inscriptions and tablets – are not cited at length or engaged with, apart from an account of their findspots and what they generally contain. On the issue of why Assyria expanded southwest, F. draws mostly on material considerations to conclude that the move was mostly irrational as a 'grand strategy'. This runs the risk of letting modern views of grand strategy guide the approach. An alternative way of going about this question would be to look at texts potentially revealing the criteria that the Assyrians themselves, at that particular time, used in their policy-making – whether they relied on oracles, prophecies or a more broadly conceived ideology of imperial expansion that could better account for this apparently 'irrational' behaviour. In the end, such 'irrationality' could turn out to make perfect strategic sense if modern scholars adjusted the views of the goals of the empire to what the Assyrians believed them to be, in light of such texts.

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