

Review of *Ancient Mesopotamia Speaks: Highlights of the Yale Babylonian Collection*
(ed. A. Lassen, E. Frahm, K. Wagensonner)

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A catalogue of a collection of museum objects is normally not a text that one reads from cover to cover but rather consults for information about individual objects. This survey of highlights of the famous Yale Babylonian Collection will permanently change the catalogue genre, combining a detailed description of individual objects (pp. 201-278) with an imaginative choice of thematic articles about Mesopotamia based primarily upon objects in the Yale collections. Moreover, *Ancient Mesopotamia Speaks* manages to bridge the formidable gap between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', offering insightful views of an ancient society which inform specialists as well as the general public, without being overly technical or ridden with academic jargon.

The thematic articles on Mesopotamian life range from old chestnuts to avante garde. The opening chapter on the history of the Yale Babylonian Collection provides a somewhat nostalgic view of the heyday of collecting, conserving, and stewardship of antiquities from the Near East, by scholars committed to preserving world heritage, notably supported by the banker J. Pierpont. Morgan. The chapter on the history and geography of the region manages successfully to encapsulate the major periods into discrete political eras, thereby giving a succinct historical overview. Other chapters, on 'Kings and Conflict', 'Justice, Crime, and Punishment', 'Deities, Demons, and Monsters', offer discursive views of politics, law, and religion. The chapters on writing (including decipherment), mathematics (Number Culture), astronomy (Time and Space) and literature successfully round out the picture of intellectual life in learned circles, which are supplemented by two essays on school education (including hermeneutics) and on the resulting highly trained scholars and professionals (such as exorcists and diviners), as well as kings who claimed to be literate. One of the topics of such schooling was 'Mesopotamian Ideas of the Past', an historical perspective reflecting a stable and consistent curriculum extending over more than two millennia.

More off the beaten track is the enlightening essay on colour and polychromy resulting from recent laboratory analyses of Assyrian reliefs in the Yale collections, combined with descriptions of 19th century excavators. This research is remarkable in reconstructing the original colours of the

palace reliefs, and this type of data is not easy to find elsewhere. A further topical theme (although with few surprises) is reflected in the essay on Gender Roles, although the survey of Economy and Trade provides useful and concise information on trade routes not usually available, including use of the Silk Road by the first millennium BCE. The essay on medicine includes a description of a unique Yale tablet representing an 8th century BCE medical catalogue from the city of Assur, listing the titles of some 90 medical treatises, indicating a highly sophisticated and systematic corpus of medicine which was much more structured than the Hippocratic Corpus, dating some three centuries later. The most entertaining chapter is on food and cooking recipes among Yale tablets, which the authors used to try to reproduce ancient Mesopotamian cuisine. The overall impression provided by this catalogue is of a highly literate urban society.