

Bryn Mawr Classical Review

[BMCR 2015.03.16](#) on the BMCR blog

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2015.03.16

**Trevor Bryce, *Ancient Syria: A Three Thousand Year History*.
Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. xiv, 379.
ISBN 9780199646678. £25,00.**

Reviewed by **Matteo Vigo, University of Copenhagen (jlg904@hum.ku.dk)**

Preview

Trevor Bryce's book under review structurally conforms to his previous books on the civilizations of the ancient Near East.¹ The book is divided into five sections, each of which mostly covers the traditional historical periods.

Part 1 deals with the presentation of Syria during the Bronze Ages from Ebla's supremacy over the area (27th to 24th century BC) to the disintegration of the regional states (12th century BC). Bryce first presents the Akkadian intruders (24th to 21st century BC), the Amorite movements (20th to 18th century BC), and the Mariote hegemony (18th century BC). A short section (pgs. 31-38) gives an account of the Mittanian control over the region (15th century BC). The core chapters of this first part (pgs. 46-94) inform us about the struggle between Egypt and Hatti on the background of the small Amorite vassal kingdoms of Syria. A detailed chapter is devoted to the Hittite campaigns in Syria during the 17th and the 14th centuries BC.

Part 2 focuses on Iron Age Syria, from the period of the Neo-Hittite states that survived the 'Invasion of the Sea People', to Alexander the Great's sieges of Gaza and Tyre. A long chapter is devoted to the Neo-Assyrian raids. Here the narrative becomes much more analytic, probably influenced by the historical sources from which the author gained the bulk of information (predominantly royal inscriptions).

Part 3 is the richest of the whole volume. Thanks to the abundance of sources, Bryce gives a detailed outline of the history of the Seleucid Empire, one of the greatest of the ancient Near East, from the rise of the Seleucids, soon after the death of Alexander to the advent of the Roman control over Syria with Pompey the Great.

Part 4 concerns Syria under Roman rule. Chapter 13 explores the Roman campaigns against the Parthians, in which Syria actually played a crucial role, being the solid Roman outpost from which military operations were led. Chapter 14 briefly sketches the world of the Nabateans and their involvement in Syrian trade and policies. Chapter 15 focuses on the great Syrian Emperors namely Septimius Severus, Caracalla, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus II, alias Elagabalus,

and Severus Alexander. Chapter 16 introduces the Sasanians, who invaded the Roman territories in Mesopotamia and upheld the end of Roman supremacy in the Near Eastern territories (3rd century AD).

Part 5 is an *excursus* on the reign of Palmyra and the half-legendary figure of Queen Zenobia. The book ends with the Muslim occupation of Damascus in 661 AD.

Lists of maps, figures and abbreviations open the book. Very useful appendices offer a chronology of major events and periods, king-lists and the list of the literary sources at hand. Notes for each chapter are unfortunately at the end of the book. A four-page bibliography and a short (and somewhat limited) index of names and places close the book.

All in all, this book is easily readable, engaging and informative. It is accessible to erudite scholars, non-specialists, and amateur enthusiasts. His tale is well-told and the narrative twists and turns through the millennia (from the 24th century BC to the 7th century AD), providing us with a vivid picture of the history of Syria. However, the narrative method is sometimes questionable given the uneven quality and quantity of his material. For instance, the chronicle narrative applied to chapters 7 (Neo-Assyrian invasions) and 10 (Seleucid military campaigns in the East), turned out to be unsuitable to tell us about Bronze Age Syria, for which we obviously have less written documentation. The long digression on the 'Urhi-Teshub Affair' (pg. 77-81) reveals the author's knowledge of the history of the Late Hittite Empire, but it is a lengthy deviation from the main subject of the chapter (i.e. the political situation of Syria in the 13th century BC). The same can be said of the Seleucid *excursus* where the Seleucid expansion in the East has sometimes scanty relation with the events of the Seleucid Antioch in Syria.

Regrettably, the scholarly impact of the book will be limited. The author has occasionally overlooked the most recent scientific contributions to specific matters he wanted to focus on and sometimes offers traditional interpretations to old problems by ignoring fundamental academic updates. Just to provide one example: on the alleged request by Ramesses II for a meeting with the Hittite king Hattusili III in Canaan (page 79), (according to Bryce on the basis of what can be inferred from the letter KBo 8.14), Mauro Giorgieri has recently proved that the letter's first edition by Edel needs to be completely revised.² Similarly, the accounts of the Sargonic campaigns against the kingdom of Israel (ca. 722-691 BC) on the basis of biblical sources are no longer tenable.³

In addition, the linguistic scenario of the Nabateans depicted by Bryce (page 242) is not completely exhaustive. The author states that scholars generally conclude that the language spoken by the Nabateans was a form of Arabic, whereas they used Aramaic as a written language. However, during the time of the Nabatean expansion from Arabia to Syria (late 2nd century BC), various forms of Aramaic were spoken by the local population, and even if the Arabicization of the countryside was still on its way, the majority of Syrian population under Nabatean control was still speaking some forms of Aramaic as their mother tongue. This scenario may have influenced the choice of the written language, indeed, but we cannot exclude that the complexity of the linguistic situation within the very close Nabatean community (i.e. different Arabic dialects) may have played a significant role as well.

Other minor incorrect pieces of information are provided here and there. Bryce usually retains the old reading Mitanni instead of Mittani. The author emphasizes Ebla's discovery by its excavator, namely Paolo Matthiae (pgs. 14-15), though it might be stressed that the identification with Ebla of the huge site unearthed since 1974 by Matthiae himself must be attributed to Mario Liverani. Bryce describes the site of Ebla in detail (p. 15) and mentions the book by Akkermans and Schwartz in footnotes (notes 4 ff.).⁴ The exiguous bibliography does not reflect the scope and length of the book and caters only to English-speaking readers.⁵

The very few misprints do not diminish the quality of the final product.

In conclusion, *Ancient Syria* should be read, studied or consulted by those who want to deepen their knowledge about an amazing country, cradle of cultures and civilizations. I really appreciated Bryce's effort to convey in a single book such a vast material. It has not been done before in such a comprehensive way. One must be grateful that the multiple fascinating (hi)stories of ancient Syria are now accessible to a wider audience.

Notes:

1. Trevor Bryce, *The Kingdom of the Hittites. New Edition*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2005; *Idem, The World of the Neo-Hittite Kingdoms. A Political and Military History*. Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

2. Mauro Giorgieri, *Il frammento di lettera KBo 8.14: un nuovo tentativo di interpretazione* in Itamar Singer (ed.), *ipamati kistamati pari tumatimis. Luwian and Hittite Studies Presented to J. David Hawkins on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*. Tel Aviv: Monograph Series of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University No. 28, 2010, pgs. 64-75. The aforementioned document was indeed drafted in Hattusa by Hittite scribes. Therefore, what can in fact be implied from this highly fragmentary tablet is that Hattusili III is addressing Ramesses II (not the other way round) in order to get news on the exact position of Urhi-Teshub, the betrayer. Accordingly, the events reported by Bryce about Urhi-Teshub's escape in Egypt and/or in Syria (pg. 77 f.) have to be reconsidered in light of Giorgieri's authoritative re-analysis. Something analogous has already been cautiously suggested. See Itamar Singer, *The Urhi-Teššub affair in the Hittite-Egyptian Correspondence* in Theo P.J. van den Hout (ed.), *The Life and Times of Hattušili III and Tuthaliya IV. Proceedings of a Symposium held in Honour of J. De Roos, 12-13 December 2003, Leiden*. Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten/Netherlands Institute for the Near East, 2006, pgs. 27-38; Philo H.J. Houwink ten Cate, *The Sudden Return of Urhi-Teššub to his Former Place of Banishment in Syria* in Theo P.J. van den Hout (ed.), *The Life and Times of Hattušili III and Tuthaliya IV. Proceedings of a Symposium held in Honour of J. De Roos, 12-13 December 2003, Leiden*. Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten/Netherlands Institute for the Near East, 2006, pgs. 1-8.

3. Such historical misinterpretations have been refuted by Mario Liverani for decades. Cf. Mario Liverani, *The Ideology of the Assyrian Empire*, in Mogens T. Larsen (ed.), *Power and Propaganda: A Symposium on Ancient Empires*. Copenhagen, 1979, pgs. 297-317. Elsewhere (see for instance pgs. 202-203), Bryce blames the books of Maccabees, which are the main source available to reconstruct the events connected with the Jewish rebellion, for their highly

emotive, biased and even fictitious character.

4. Peter M.M.G. Akkermans and Glenn M. Schwartz, *The Archaeology of Syria. From Complex Hunter-Gatherers to Early Urban Societies (ca. 16,000-300 BC)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003.

5. For example, in the selected bibliography there is no reference to the fundamental study of Bronze Age Syria by Horst Klengel: Horst Klengel, *Geschichte Syriens im 2. Jahrtausend v.u.Z.*. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1965.

[Read comments on this review or add a comment on the BMCR blog](#)

Home	Read Latest	Archives	BMCR Blog	About BMCR	Review for BMCR	Commentaries	Support BMCR
----------------------	-----------------------------	--------------------------	---------------------------	----------------------------	---------------------------------	------------------------------	------------------------------

BMCR, Bryn Mawr College, 101 N. Merion Ave., Bryn Mawr, PA 19010