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Book Review: The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran, edited by D. T. Potts

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BOOK REVIEW

The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran. Edited by D. T. POTTS. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xxx + 1021. Hardcover, \$175.00. ISBN 978-0-19-973330-9.

Ancient Iran is a big topic. Even a thousand-page book can only give us a taste, but *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran* commendably achieves its goal of providing an authoritative, up-to-date, multidisciplinary overview of this region for all periods up to the Islamic conquest, thanks in large part to the meticulous oversight of its editor D. T. Potts. As is the wont of the *Oxford Handbook* series, we generally get breadth over depth, with most of its fifty-one chapters leaving us wanting more, but excellent bibliographies at the end of each chapter enable further study. Given how important Iran is to the study of Graeco-Roman antiquity, classicists will find parts of the volume very useful. Indeed, a recurring theme throughout the volume is the paucity of native sources and our heavy reliance on non-Persian; for the Achaemenid period and following those sources are primarily Greek and Roman.

The volume is divided into seven sections, following a rather thin introduction by Potts and a set of nine maps (there are additional maps in some chapters). The arrangement is generally chronological. The first section begins with a brief history of research and excavation by Ali Mousavi and then proceeds in three chapters to survey the main features of Paleo- and Neolithic Iran. Part II covers the Chalcolithic Period and begins to break archaeological surveys down to the regional level.

With the Bronze Age (Part III) we move into the historical period of various parts of Iran, especially Khuzestan, which saw the rise of the important Elamite civilization. In several regions we begin to see the interaction of various cultures, whose differentiation often becomes challenging for archaeologists. This connects with the larger issue of what we mean by "Iran" (*infra*). A number of chapters in this section and the following on the Iron Age (Part IV) draw attention to our unfortunate reliance on Mesopotamian sources for understanding the Elamites and the Medes.

The next section (Part V) focuses on the Achaemenid period. Rémy Bouchardat illuminates the circumstances in which Cyrus the Great likely established his supremacy; among other things he reinforces the recent trend to reject Herodotus' depiction of a Median empire. From Maria Brosius we get a useful survey of Greek sources on the Persians, with the important reminder that we must account for their biases and schemas, e.g., East vs. West, when using them as sources for ancient Iran.

Part VI is somewhat less coherent in that it ranges from Alexander to the end of the Arsacid period. Stefan R. Hauser's chapter is important for challenging long held views about the Parthians, who tend to get short shrift compared to the Achaemenids and Sasanians. Hauser correctly notes that we should more properly refer to them as Arsacids to maintain the parallel with the other two, which are dynastic names.

Part VII focuses on the Sasanians, with important discussions by M. Rahim Shayegan on political ideology, including the true extent of their alleged claims to an Achaemenid heritage, and Peter Edwell, who outlines relations with the Romans. As with the Arsacids, we rely heavily on Roman sources, but for the Sasanians we also get important but challenging material in Armenian, Syriac, Arabic, and other sources. The final chapter, by Michael G. Morony, takes on the challenge of finding evidence of the Islamic conquest in the material record, with the acute problem that a new Islamic style is not distinguished in the ceramic record in Iran until the eighth century, implying more continuity than literary accounts suggest.

While the book is excellent in general, it is unfortunate that Potts' introduction did not seize the opportunity to define the term "Iran," which takes on different meanings throughout the volume. It is also clear that Iranian identity shifted over the centuries. Readers would have benefitted from both a political, ethnographical, and linguistic overview, beyond a mere summary of the book's contents, and a consideration of how the concept of Iran changed over time. The latter is especially important given the emphasis in recent scholarship on constructed identities.

Compiling a handbook on such a large topic presents significant challenges, not least of which is the decision of what to cover. It is almost unfair to ask more of a volume that covers so much, and Potts is quite correct to refer to it as a "foundation from which to expand [one's] reading and investigation of ancient Iran" (xxix). Nonetheless, given the central importance of Zoroastrianism, one might have preferred that Prods Oktor Skjærvø's diachronic treatment be divid-

ed into two chapters, one for the Achaemenids and one for the Sasanians (the latter is better documented and rather more complicated than Skjærvø conveys). Also, while we have chapters on Elamite interactions with Mesopotamian cultures and on Roman-Sasanian relations (and to a lesser extent Roman-Arsacid), there is a curious lack of treatment of the Achaemenid involvement in the Greek world.

However, these quibbles are minor and do not diminish the overall achievement of this handbook. This is a volume in which experts in history, archaeology, numismatics, linguistics, and other fields have been brought together to give a rich, multifaceted picture. Many chapters, especially those that focus on material culture, offer brief histories of earlier research but also provide the latest thinking and occasionally correctives of outdated assertions. The volume is sweeping, ambitious, and exemplary. Classicists will find within these thousand pages many nuggets of scholarly gold.

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