Book Review

Commerce and Colonization in the Ancient Near East


Reviewed by

Philip Boyes

Best known for her work on first-millennium B.C.E. Phoenician trade and expansion, particularly in the western Mediterranean, Aubet has now significantly expanded her interests with this wide-ranging study of trade and settlement in Mesopotamia, the Levant, and Anatolia during the fourth to second millennia B.C.E. In the introduction, she lays out the volume’s twofold aims: to counter what she sees as the excessive influence of ideas drawn from modern European colonialisms (“acculturation, civilising mission, centre and periphery, ethnicity, imperialism, domination, indigenous cultural subordination, economic exploitation, asymmetrical power relations or unequal trade” [1]) on studies of the ancient world and to explore the history of Near Eastern colonial experiences as a means of better understanding the situation in first-millennium Phoenicia, especially Tyre. These goals are reflected in the division of the volume into two halves: the first is essentially theoretical, sketching an intellectual history of the ancient economy, while the second principally consists of three case studies—fourth-millennium B.C.E. Uruk, Egyptian interaction with Byblos, and the Old Assyrian karums in Anatolia.

Despite citing postcolonial theory in justification of her attempt to jettison the baggage of modern notions of colonialism, Aubet largely forgoes engaging substantially with the main ideas of postcolonial approaches. This is overwhelmingly a study of the “colonizers,” defined
in a culturally bounded and reified way: little attention is paid to the cultural dimensions of colonial situations, to ideas of cultural hybridization, or the roles of “colonized” populations in helping negotiate these encounters. Adding to the sense that the “colonialism” aspect of the book is somewhat undertheorized—especially in comparison with other recent work on the subject emerging from Phoenician studies (e.g., P. van Dommelen, “Colonial Interactions and Hybrid Practices: Phoenician and Carthaginian Settlement in the Ancient Mediterranean,” in G. Stein, ed., The Archaeology of Colonial Encounters: Comparative Perspectives [Santa Fe, N.M. 2005] 109–42)—is that it is not until the third chapter that the term is even properly defined (41). While Aubet acknowledges a distinction between “colonization” and “colonialism” and many scholars’ preference for the former, it is the latter term that is used throughout the book, including in its original Spanish title, Comercio y colonialismo en el Próximo Oriente Antiguo: Los antecedentes coloniales del III y II milenios a.C. Given that Aubet wants to avoid the baggage of modern colonialisms, it is surprising that the author does not explain more explicitly the reasons for this terminological choice.

Instead, the book’s theoretical discussion is primarily in response to Karl Polanyi’s ideas about the ancient economy, and specifically the extent to which markets, private commerce, and protocapitalist economic processes existed in the ancient Near East. Aubet does a good job of summarizing and synthesizing developments in much of this long-running debate, but the most recent research is underrepresented. The author echoes some of the most productive recent approaches to ancient Near Eastern economies that have attempted to break down the monolithic blocks of “state” and “private” and place increased focus on ambiguity, overlap, and fluidity (e.g., C.M. Monroe, Scales of Fate: Trade, Tradition, and Transformation in the Eastern Mediterranean ca. 1350–1175 BCE [Oxford 2009]). Aubet argues that ancient Near Eastern economies encompassed both “state” or “private” trade, in proportions that varied over time and space. One might push this further, asking whether these are helpful categories at all for understanding ancient economic structures (particularly given the author’s reluctance to project back modern assumptions about colonization into antiquity). Aubet approaches such a conclusion in places—for example, when discussing the Ugaritic merchant Šipit-Ba’al, she concludes that “[o]bviously, private enterprise mingles with operations on behalf of the royal palace in the activities of this merchant, so much so that it is pointless to discuss whether Sipit-Ba’al was a private trader or an agent of the administration” (156)—but for the most part this volume is content to conduct its discussions firmly within the traditional state/private dichotomy. In general, its theoretical and methodological discussions provide useful summaries of the debates without advancing the discussion significantly themselves.

The three case studies that make up the book’s second part maintain this sense of synthesis rather than substantial innovation. Each is clear and marshals the evidence to good effect to summarize how economic concerns led to the creation of communities of merchants,
officials, and others outside their original homelands. These chapters form readable introductions to Uruk’s expansion into other parts of Mesopotamia, Egypt’s interactions with Byblos, and the Old Assyrian karums in Anatolia and will likely be particularly useful to students. They are not, however, free from problems. As in the theoretical portions of the book, the author at times draws from quite a small pool of scholarly sources, not all of which are particularly recent. A more substantive problem is that these chapters never quite fulfill the initial objectives of the work as set out in the introduction. The three examples are highly diverse, and the case is not really made that they benefit from being lumped together under the single label “colonialism,” particularly when it is presented in a relatively simplistic form, as here. How these shed light on the situation in first-millennium Phoenicia is left frustratingly vague. The initial goal of “analysing the Phoenician case from the East that is from a geographic, economic and socio-political perspective that situates Tyre as the last link in a long train of colonial experiences in the East” (2) appears somewhat forgotten by the book’s end, with Phoenicia only given a few superficial mentions in the brief concluding thoughts.

It would be unfair to dwell overly on presentational issues, but it would also be remiss not to point out the many minor errors, infelicities, and inconsistencies that plague the work, especially regarding other scholars’ names (“Lemberg-Karlovsky” [48], “Horni Bhabba” [73]), or, in one case, the scholar’s gender (Joan Oates [181]). “Muddle Bronze Age” (252) is particularly unfortunate. While hardly significant in themselves, these distracting errors may prove confusing to the students who are likely to be this book’s major audience and undermine the work’s authority.

In summary, while there is plenty to recommend in this book, particularly as an accessible introduction to and synthesis of this complex topic, it falls short of achieving its promise, lacking the theoretical engagement and strong argumentation necessary either to fulfill satisfactorily its own goals or to move forward discussion of ancient Near Eastern “colonization” or trade.

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