

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Conquête de la steppe et appropriation des terres sur les marges arides du Croissant fertile. (= Travaux de la Maison de l'Orient méditerranéen, vol. 36) by Bernard Geyer

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6. P. 551. The problem of rations was perhaps somewhat more complicated. The rations were quite sufficient and causing no trouble, but to cultivate the land meant hard work. Nevertheless, to have land (even as a holding) was more respectable, and the warriors therefore preferred having the land.

7. P. 556. As was already shown (note to the p. 552), the proposed interpretation of § 30 of LH is wrong.

8. P. 571. The longest dynasty in Mesopotamian history was not the Kassite dynasty, but the Assyrian.

9. P. 579. It would be very interesting to learn how “les terres privés furent transformées en tenures et les anciens propriétaires devinrent des soldats”?

10. Pp. 580-584. § 45 of MAL A is really difficult to interpret, and the translation and interpretation proposed there do not seem to be convincing.<sup>4</sup> First of all, it is not clear whether the verb *erēbu* could be used there and then referring to fields. Farther on, there hardly existed the “current market rate of a field in that city” or somewhere (cf. fn. 2 at the previous page). The procedure proposed by these translations looks too complicated. Why, for example, not to lease the field to some tenant and obtain a rent? The military allotment ought to be enough for a family, why is it not enough for a single woman? And so on ... I have to admit, that I can not propose any convincing answer.

11. Pp. 592-593. The meanings of terms *šahhan* and *luzzi* as well as that of TUKUL remain rather unclear. Some 40 years ago I have made some propositions as to the understanding of these terms.<sup>5</sup> For example, to translate TUKUL as “tool” and not as a “weapon”. H. A. Hoffner in the previously mentioned edition gives no translation of this word at all. It would be advisable at present to avoid too categorical statements.

12. P. 615. The Assyrian king hardly was a supreme owner of the land: Sanherib tells in his inscription that he has bought some land in order to build a palace there.

The theoretical controversy and all critical remarks (other specialists could, of course, make some more) do not diminish the high estimation of the volume. It is a real treasury of facts and ideas selected and systematized with great care. And, which is very important too, the book is finely written. The authors and

<sup>4</sup>) The translation by M. Roth (*Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor. Writings from the Ancient World Society of Biblical Literature*, vol. 6. Scholars Press, Atlanta, Georgia 1995, pp. 170-171) is essentially the same. But the numerous lacunae are duly marked, and necessary notes of interrogation are put in.

<sup>5</sup>) In a review of the book Менабде Э. А., Хеттское общество. Тбилиси 1965 (Menabde E. A., *The Hittite Society*, Tbilissi 1965), VDI 4, 1969, pp. 152-158.

the editors surely deserve compliments and gratitude from all colleagues.

St. Petersburg. Vladimir A. Jakobson.

**Bernard Geyer** (Hrsg.), *Conquête de la steppe et appropriation des terres sur les marges arides du Croissant fertile*. 218 pp. Lyon, Maison de l'Orient Méditerranéen – Jean Pouilloux, 2001 (= *Travaux de la Maison de l'Orient méditerranéen*, vol. 36). € 28,-.

The result of an important interdisciplinary effort, this volume gathers the contributions of a number of scholars with a variety of interests. The more obvious subdivision is that between ancient and modern data – four chapters being concerned with the former, and six with the latter. They all share equally an interest for archaeology and geography, and to a more limited extent for the ethnography. A marked difference between the two main sections of the book is the total absence of epigraphic concerns in the first part (whereas they are significantly present in the second).

Ample space is given to the publication of primary data, whether archaeological (M. Fortin on a site in the Khabour, F. Braemer and J. Sapin on built enclosures in Jordan, M. Konrad on the towns from Palmyra to Raqqa, F. Villeneuve and S. Sadler on a site in Jebel Druze, J. Bujard, D. Genequand and W. Trillen on two sites in Jordan), geographical (B. Geyer and Y. Calvet on soil and climate conditions north of the Palmyra ranges), or epigraphic (M. Griesheimer on the inscriptions of a town near Apamea). In every case, the quality of the presentation is high, and this alone makes the volume an excellent resource for the study of this region. In most cases, the data are presented as case studies in function of a particular thesis that distinctly relates, in each instance, to the main topic: the progressive exploitation of the steppe from prehistoric to medieval times.

The remaining chapters deal with broader issues: B. Lyonnet on the relations between pastoralism and nomadism at the beginning of the historical periods, P.-L. Gatier on the territorial boundaries of the provincial system in Byzantine times, B. Geyer and M.-O. Rousset on the fluctuations in the eastward expansion in the region east of the Orontes.

It is clear even from this brief review that the chapters are rather *dissecta membra* than integrated components of an organic whole. One misses a set of indices – it would have helped bridge the separate areas and perspectives. If there is a unity to the volume it is that the authors remain true to the central topic, so that all the data and the conclusions drawn from them on an individual basis are ultimately pertinent. How-

ever, one would have welcomed a true synthesis, all the more so as so many intriguing avenues are opened and partly followed in the various chapters. But where do they all lead? As a contribution to this issue, and as an indication of the benefit I have derived from reading this volume, I would like to offer here two sets of considerations in a “synthetic” mode. They draw on the material from the book and they are both linked to the key notions expressed in the title: the notion of “margins” and the notion of “conquest.”

The term “marges arides de la steppe” suggests that we are dealing with the margins of, precisely, the steppe: in other words, the steppe is at the core, and the margins are at the periphery of this core. But what the book demonstrates is that the exact converse obtains: the margins of which it speaks are the margins of the fertile area as it expands towards the steppe. The reason why this is significant is that these “margins” are quite different between the eastern and the western region: they are in fact a reflection not of a uniform center, but rather of the disparate modes of urban adaptation that we find in the “Levant sud-est” on the one hand and the *zôr*, i. e. the long river oasis of the middle Euphrates on the other. To put it concretely, we do not find near Mari or Terqa sites like Zeraqon, Bab edh-Dhra, Jawa or Umbashi (on the latter see pp. 80-84). Tadmor (later Palmyra) may be a lonely exception as early as the Middle Bronze Age (see presently), but it is at a much greater remove from the cities of the *zôr* than any of the other settlements are from the western cities, and certainly not part of a pattern, and may perhaps be linked more with the west than with the east (see M. al-Maqdissi, “Note sur les sondages réalisés par Robert du Mesnil du Buisson dans la cour du sanctuaire de Bel à Palmyre,” *Syria* 77, 2000, pp. 137-158, esp. p. 148).

The very notion of “conquest” is nowhere articulated in any detail, not only and not so much in terms of its deeper meaning, but also and especially in terms of the distinct structural patterns that it exhibits, and for which I would like here to propose a subdivision in four distinct stages. (1) *Pre-urban stage*. In prehistoric times, we have scattered settlements that are not part of any organized broader regional network. Interestingly, there seems to be at this time more important settlements (however non-urban in character) in the heart of the steppe than in the succeeding Early Bronze Age. (2) *Para-urban stage*. Late in the Early Bronze, we witness an important structural change, even if no cities develop as yet in the steppe. The human groups living in this region consist of herders whose economy presupposes in an essential way the existence of the cities (hence the term “para-urban”) and who are most explicitly identified with the Amorites. In my view, their mode of life is deeply set in urban origins because they hail from the urban areas of the middle

Euphrates, from which they progressively gain independence. (3) *Urban endogenous*. In the Late Bronze, the first truly “steppe city” develops in Palmyra, the center of a wholly new urban and political network originating within the steppe itself. This urban network emerges as the kingdom of Amurru, a name that celebrates the memory of its (para-urban) origins. It is endogenous because neither the initial stimulus nor the actual controls come from outside the steppe: the fulcrum of the urban network is now, for the first time ever, established within the steppe region. It is only at this juncture that the steppe can be seen as expanding outwards, towards the fertile regions. (Incidentally, this period, which is of crucial importance for an understanding of the overall structural sequence, is nowhere treated in the book under review.) (4) *Urban exogenous*. With the Assyrian empire, and then more fully under the Roman and Byzantine empire as well as (with some modifications) into the Islamic period, the steppe comes to be fully integrated into the outer urban world. But the direction of the control is now inverted: the urban network no longer originates within the steppe proper, but is rather an external reality that imposes its controls on the steppe by dividing it into provinces that are organically dependent from the outer centers of power. The endogenous dimension, as manifested especially in Palmyra, continues, but it is more clearly integrated within the broader network of a new cosmopolitan world of which the steppe is more readily considered part and parcel.

The juxtaposition of articles about modern as well as ancient times is revealing, and suggests interesting interpretive lines – which however remain rather isolated in their own respective domains. For instance, the extensive discussion of provincial boundaries and of the interesting system of “tetrarchies” (especially in Gatier’s article on the early Byzantine period) emphasizes the contrast with the Mari period, when the ample epigraphic evidence suggests that no such effort at controlling the steppe took place: the Mari state, *qua* organized entity, extended only to the juncture between valley floor and steppe. In several respects, the thrust of the volume goes to show that the contrast between steppe and sown land is not so much in terms of nomads versus sedentary, but rather in the modalities through which the steppe as a territory was brought within the sphere of centralized political control based outside the steppe.

Some of the more interesting conclusions that are based on original methods of analysis are found in the article by Geyer and Rousset. On p. 114 they offer a chart that is quite enlightening as to the recurrent cycles of expansion eastwards and retraction westwards. Also very clear is the geographical map on p. 116 (see also the one on p. 59) that nicely graphs the limits of these cycles in relation to environmental

features, discussed in detail in the text. (It would seem that some of these fluctuations may be related to the diffusion of the new long distance trade based on camel caravans.)

The lack of a single reference to the Amorites is astonishing – and indicative. Astonishing, because the phenomenon associated with them (however one may wish to consider the question of their ethnic identity) overlaps fully the development covered in the first half of the book. And indicative, because it confirms the impression one quickly gains, namely that the authors of the first part of the volume do not make sufficient use of the contemporary written sources for the ancient periods. However interesting their references to modern written sources may be (such as those attesting to the number of people and animals in the 17<sup>th</sup> century AD, p. 17), one would clearly expect to hear more about sources from the 19<sup>th</sup> century BC than passing mentions (such as those given on p. 19). The conclusion that there were no cities in the Khabur region in the early second millennium can hardly be supported with a casual reference (p. 20) to the fact that the Akkadian word *ālum* refers to a village as well as to a city. There is no question about the word being indeed polyvalent, but such an otherwise well known fact can hardly be the basis for an argument to the effect that there were no cities! In fact, many of the “cities” so qualified in the Mari texts have been found archaeologically in the ground, and are quite respectable settlements. (J.-R. Kupper, *Lettres Royales du temps de Zimri-Lim*, ARM 28, Paris 1998, gives ample evidence of this. It must be noted that the geographical boundaries of the regions discussed are rather fluid, not only within the book from chapter to chapter, but also specifically in the chapter by B. Lyonnet to which reference is being made here: but there seems to be little doubt that her assessments pertain to the Khabur region as a whole.) One aspect of the Amorite question that would have been particularly relevant for the central topic of the volume is the one that I have termed the “steppe revolution,” and that I have developed in a number of articles to which no reference is made. (See especially “From Khana to Laqê: The End of Syro-Mesopotamia,” in Ö. Tunca, *De la Babylonie à la Syrie, en passant par Mari. Mélanges Kupper*, Liège 1990, pp. 229-253. On one occasion I have in fact described this phenomenon as a “conquest,” more specifically the “conquest of a new socio-economic niche, i. e. the exploitation of the steppe as range land and the development of tribal pastoralism,” in a paper delivered in 1994 at a meeting in honor of Cyrus H. Gordon, and widely distributed as a typescript.)

With regard to the relationship between nomadic and sedentary populations in the ancient periods two divergent positions are proposed side by side. Lyonnet

argues that the Khabur region in the third millennium was essentially pastoral rather than urban, and in the next chapter Fortin argues that, while indeed there were nomads, they were in a dimorphic relationship (following Rowton), with established urban centers like Tell Atij. The first view, which also places the process of urbanization in the late third millennium, runs counter to much evidence which is only in part new. Urkesh, for example, has massive monumental architecture dating back to the early third millennium. Interestingly, both positions belie the notion that is put forth in the title of the volume, because what they support is the traditional view, of a conquest *from*, rather than *of*, the steppe. The notion of a “revolution of the steppe,” which I have developed in the articles just mentioned, serves in a way as a link between the two positions: the “nomads” are in fact “nomadizing” sedentary. They are in the process of becoming nomads, while retaining at the same time a fundamental tie to their urban (or “para-urban”) roots. Such a genetic link between the two explains the inevitability of the urban dimension that remains typical of these particular nomads.

Some of the features of the landscape that seem particularly important but are either ignored or mentioned only in passing are wells and caves. Wells are a characteristic feature of the Syrian steppe, and given the relatively easy access to the water table they were certainly in use in the early historic periods: one could not otherwise explain the wide exploitation of this immense range land by the early (Amorite) shepherds. Caves, too, must have served in good stead not so much for shelter, but for temporary storage while taking care of the herds. I have seen such caves used today in the Palmyrene region for just such purpose in the summer, and it seems only likely that they should have been so used in antiquity as well (though I did not inspect any cave for possible ancient material remains). The only caves mentioned in the volume under review are those that were incorporated within settlements, sometimes with the addition of walls at the front (pp. 166, 169, 186).

These comments aim to stress the great benefit one derives from a study of the book and of the issues it addresses. Clearly the results presented are based on an active interaction among the specialists, and they are indicative of the richness and promise of such an interdisciplinary approach.

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