

Review

Peter M.M.G. Akkermans, Glen M. Schwartz,
The Archaeology of Syria: From Complex Hunter-Gatherers to Early Urban Societies (ca. 16,000-300 BC), Cambridge World Archaeology Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004 Pp xv, 476. ISBN 0-521-79230-4. \$110.00 (hb). ISBN 0-521-79666-0. \$40.00 (pb).

Review by Matthew Whincop

This much anticipated synthesis of recent developments in Syrian Archaeology is, as its back cover reminds us, the “[f]irst book to present a comprehensive review of the archaeology of Syria from the end of the Paleolithic period to 300 BC.” With such a broad period and diverse cultural history in mind, this book is certainly a good introduction to the archaeology of the region.

Previous attempts at an ‘Archaeology of Syria’ have been generally inadequate, often taking the form of mere addenda to the study of neighbouring regions, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, or the Southern Levant. In these studies Syria tended to be discussed only when deemed relevant. Admittedly, ‘Syria’ is a region of cultural overflow, or, as the authors themselves recognise, a ‘crossroads of civilization,’ which leads them, and I would hope also the reader, to question whether Syria is “a discrete geographical or cultural entity?”

While Akkermans and Schwartz answer both yes and no to this question, the brevity with which this issue is discussed, two paragraphs in the introductory chapter (page 2), is disappointing. One may have expected more explanation for the definition of the study’s boundaries. On the one hand, the rainfall-farming plains of the Syrian interior support larger populations than the coastal plains of Lebanon and Palestine, justifying its independent consideration, but then does not Syria also have a coastal plain? On the other hand, Syria boasts a different cultural horizon to the alluvial farming of Mesopotamia and the

highland culture of Anatolia. However, these two points ignore the fact that not all Syria lies within the 200mm annual mean rainfall belt. In the end the reader is left still asking the question, ‘does Syria host an homogenous cultural horizon, and therefore warrant our exclusive attention?’

This is the main fault with the book. Some discussion of the actual term ‘Syria’ may have alleviated the confusion. Is the reader to reconcile the term ‘Syria’ with the modern ‘Syrian Arab Republic’? There is obviously an awareness of the term’s ambiguity, but there is no real discussion, no presentation of an argument as to why we might consider Syria separately from Lebanon, Palestine, south-eastern Anatolia or northern Iraq. One might argue that the Syrian coast, particularly during the early Iron Age, bears more resemblance, comparatively speaking, to the coast of Lebanon and northern Palestine. Or again, should we consider the Amuq merely an area of cultural overlap, or a coherent component of the ‘Syrian’ cultural horizon?

This work is a survey of archaeological work, and as a result some areas of discussion are somewhat brief, but this is not a fault. We could hardly expect more from a single-volume publication. Peter Akkermans is the author of chapters 2-5, in which he deals in an insightful and thorough fashion with the ‘Neolithic transformation’ and the onset of sedentary and agricultural life, and then the development of private property, social inequality and economic specialisation. The later periods are not dealt with in the traditional culture-historical approach and instead, Glenn Schwartz, the author of chapters 6-11, shows a clear awareness of the complex relationship between material culture and text. This book is clearly not a history of Syria. It is a synthesis of the archaeological record and current interpretations of that record and represents a good introduction to recent archaeological work of the region. It is a timely contribution and fills a conspicuous gap in current archaeological literature.

Matthew Whincop is a doctoral student at the University of Durham.