

## Reviews

**Trevor Bryce, 2014 *Ancient Syria: A Three Thousand Year History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, ISBN 9780199646678, xix+379pp, £25.**

Reviewed by Andrew S. Jamieson

In *Ancient Syria: A Three Thousand Year History*, Trevor Bryce, one of Australia's leading Ancient Historians and Classicists—an Honorary Professor at the University of Queensland and Emeritus Professor of the University of New England—explores the history of ancient Syria from the Bronze Age to the Roman era and beyond. Bryce states at the beginning of his book 'The purpose ... is to tell a story, more precisely a series of stories, and sometimes stories within stories. All of them are about Syria, have Syria as their focus, or start from or end there' (1). Above all, he is interested in the human actors who instigated, participated in, and became the victims of the events of these stories. His penetrating study is based primarily around the surviving written sources on ancient Syria.

In writing his historical narrative the author stresses he has confined his attention almost entirely to the political and military events of the periods in question (4). One short statement at the beginning of text encapsulates volumes: 'Syria was strategically important' (7). According to Bryce that's why Syria's history seems to be dominated by stories of outsiders fighting one another over it. The Hittites and Egyptians, Assyrians and Babylonians, Persians and Macedonians and even the Romans are all involved in the history of Syria. Syria suffered at least as much as it benefited from its international intruders. In focusing primarily on the political and military events of the ages covered by this tale, and particularly on the big names that feature in the stories of these ages, Bryce has concentrated on but one aspect of Syria's remarkable history, allowing for an in depth understanding of these significant aspects.

Conveniently for the reader, *Ancient Syria* is arranged chronologically. It comprises five parts: the Bronze Ages; the Iron Age to the Macedonian Conquest; Syria Under Seleucid Rule; Syria Under Roman Rule and the Rise and Fall of Palmyra. The first section is the longest covering a period spanning seventeen hundred years. The second to fourth sections are approximately the same length. The last section is the shortest. The headings and sub-headings structure the text making the complex history of Syria easy to navigate. At pivotal points throughout the study pertinent comments are inserted (often in parenthesis) that help guide the reader. The book also contains three handy appendices: Chronology of Major Events and Periods; King-Lists; and Literary Sources. A concise Bibliography (over 90 sources) lists the most relevant and recent scholarship. A detailed Index enables readers to look up and find topics easily. And the text is enhanced by a series of useful maps (1-12) and figures (1-27). The

following summary provides a précis of some of the key historical developments.

In Part I *The Bronze Ages* (9–94) it is noted that the discoveries made by Italian archaeologists working at Tell Mardikh, ancient Ebla, in north-west Syria dramatically transformed our understanding of the history of this area. Paolo Matthiae and his team uncovered a multi-chambered complex, known as Palace G, belonging to the third millennium BC. But the most spectacular aspect of the find was a massive collection of thousands of clay tablets, inscribed with cuneiform script. The tablets excavated between 1975 and 1976 provide us with early evidence for writing in Syria. Many of the tablets were written in a local Semitic language, referred to as Eblaite. Bryce points out that the Ebla tablets are the oldest significant evidence we have for any Semitic language on written form. The majority of the tablets are administrative documents. They indicate the existence of an enormous royal, highly centralized bureaucracy. The tablets also reveal a thriving textile industry associated with wool production and tell of the distribution of these products, both to local officials within the Ebla regions and to important foreigners.

From both written and archaeological sources, it is possible to build up a picture of Ebla as the most politically and commercially powerful kingdom of northern Syria in the Early Bronze Age (15). The Kingdoms of Mari, Yamhad (Aleppo), and Qatna are also considered in the survey of the bronze ages covered in Part I. Syria's external relations with Egypt and Hittites are discussed in some detail. Other key groups considered include the Amorites, Hurrians, and Mitanni. Bryce records that the final days of Ugarit (Ras Shamra) provide a microcosm of the forces of upheaval and destruction that engulfed much of the Near Eastern world in the late 13th and early 12th centuries BC – ending an era of internationalism. For the Syrian coastal kingdom, the dangers came particularly from the sea. Ugarit is caught up in the havoc that brought the Late Bronze Age civilizations to an end in both the Aegean and Near Eastern worlds. Egyptian records associate these devastations with enigmatic groups called 'peoples from the sea'; more commonly known as the Sea Peoples.

Part II *From the Iron Age to the Macedonian Conquest* (95–155) extends over five centuries, taking the reader from the 12th century BC through to the end of the 7th century BC, up to the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. It encompasses the dawning of a new age, the so-called Iron Age, when the Neo-Hittite kingdoms were a marked feature of Syria's political and cultural landscape, through the period of Assyrian domination of the region, followed by the domination in turn of the Babylonian and Persian Achaemenid empires, and the short-lived empire built by Alexander the Great.

The time span covers much of the period commonly dubbed the Iron Age by archaeologists and historians. As Bryce notes, in Syria and Palestine, the 'era of iron'

saw profound changes in the region's geopolitical configuration (100). One of the most distinctive features of the new era was the appearance of new population groups, most notably the Aramaeans which were to have a profound effect on the history, culture, and ethnic composition of the states, cities, and peoples of Syria and Palestine. Prominent among the new states to emerge during the early Iron Age was a group referred to as the Neo-Hittite kingdoms. The earliest and most important of the Neo-Hittite states was Carchemish on the Euphrates (Carchemish, one of the most important capitals of the ancient Near East, was originally excavated by C.L. Woolley and T.E. Lawrence under the auspices of the British Museum, more recently a Turkish-Italian team has worked at the site). Originally tribal pastoral groups, now believed to contain indigenous elements from the region of northern Syria, the Aramaeans spread widely through the Near Eastern world during the Iron Age. They spoke a West Semitic language called Aramaic. Aramaean and Hittite elements became closely blended in a number of Syrian states. Both the Canaanites and Phoenicians are examined before a consideration of the Assyrians.

Bryce notes that the Assyrians under Shalmaneser III conquered Til Barsib (modern Tell Ahmar – see below) on the east bank of the Euphrates, the strong hold of the Ahuni, king of Bit-Adini in 856BC (122). As the Assyrian Empire expired under its last king Ashur-uballit II (612–601BC) two years after the fall of Nineveh, the Neo-Babylonian Empire, founded by Nineveh's destroyer Nabopolassar, rose rapidly to take its place. For Syria and Palestine, the fall of Assyria and the rise of Babylonia simply meant an exchange of overlords (141). No major power could claim supremacy in the Near Eastern world without undisputed control over the kingdoms and cities that lay between the Euphrates and the Mediterranean. Despite his extensive conquests and the assertion of his sovereignty throughout many of the regions where the Great Kings of Assyria had once held sway, the empire which Nebuchadnezzar built began to crumble soon after his death. In 539BC, in the reign of Nabonidus, it fell, weak and divided, to a new power emerging in the east, the kingdom of Persia. The ruler of this kingdom was a man called Cyrus II. We know him better as Cyrus the Great. Syria was soon to be a satrapy with a new overlord. Damascus was most likely the capital of the new Persian satrap. Strabo calls it 'the most famous of the cities in that part of the world in the time of the Persian Empire.' (149) It became the headquarters of the Persian forces in Syria. Bryce recounts that in the summer of 333BC, Alexander descended through a pass in the Taurus Mountains into Cilicia, on the south-eastern coast of Asia Minor. The invasion of Syria and the seizure of its coastal cities was an urgent priority for the Macedonian. Darius, king of Persia, was determined to stop him before he could penetrate Syrian territory. The forces of the two kings met, this time on Syria's north-western frontier near the city of Issu, located just west of the Amanus range. In November 333, in the narrow plain outside the city,

the contest took place. The Macedonian's victory was decisive – although Bryce concedes that the details of the battle are hazy. Under Alexander's influence, trade and commerce flourished on a scale unprecedented in the Near East – with a number of Syrian cities becoming focal points of an extensive trading network (155).

In Part III *The Rise of the Seleucid Empire* (157–217), we are once again in a transformed world, the world which began with the death of Alexander and the squabbles among his heirs over the spoils of his empire. Control of Syria was contested by Alexander's Ptolemaic and Seleucid heirs, with the latter finally prevailing. But the Seleucid Empire was to give way when Pompey the Great made Syria a part of the Roman world in 64BC. Bryce underscores the point that following the Death of Alexander, in 320BC at a town called Triparadeisos in northern Syria, probably on the Orontes river a meeting was convened that was to affect profoundly to the future course of the history of both eastern and western worlds. One of Alexander's most steadfast comrades called Seleucus was rewarded for his services with the satrapy of Babylonia. A new royal capital was established, Seleuceia on the Tigris river. Occupying an excellent strategic position on a route which linked Iran with Syria and Anatolia via Mesopotamia, Seleuceia rapidly became one of the great commercial centres of the Near Eastern World. It became a major centre for the spread of Greek civilization eastwards, for it was planned primarily as a Greek city, with a mixture of Jews, Syrians and other population groups in its citizen body. In 300BC, another Seleuceia was founded, this one at the mouth of the Orontes, where there was an excellent harbour. But both Seleuceias were to be eclipsed by another new city built by Seleucus called Antioch, after his father Antiochus. It was well placed strategically, at the junction of several major routes which linked Anatolia with Syria and the Levantine coast, and to the east with the lands beyond the Euphrates. Many new cities arose in Syria, ensuring the continuing prosperity of Syria as one of the great hubs of international trade network. Disputes over the division of these strategic territories provoked an ongoing series of Syrian wars between Seleucid and Ptolemaic rulers, without any conclusive outcome until the Ptolemies were finally expelled from the region in 198 BC by Antiochus III, a later ruler of the Seleucid dynasty.

In Part IV *Syria Under Roman Rule* (219–271), Rome becomes the dominant character in Syria's story. In the year 64BC, Syria became a province of Rome. By and large the Syrian world was receptive to Roman rule, for its new overlord held out hopes of greater political and economic stability than the Seleucid regime had provided. The reader is reminded that Syria became one of Rome's most important provinces. The province of Syria as created by Pompey stretched to the Euphrates in the north-east, and Augustus had reached agreement with the Parthians that the Euphrates would mark the boundary between their empires. During the second half of the second century, Syria enjoyed increasing prosperity as

goods from the east flowed through it to meet the ever-more voracious demands of the markets of the west. The affluence of Syrian society becomes particularly evident in what was effectively a new era in Roman history, the so-called Severan period (AD193-235).

Part V *The Rise and Fall of Palmyra* (273–323) of the book tells the evocative story of Palmyra, focusing on queen Zenobia who became one of Rome's most formidable enemies. Palmyra's oasis-location in the Syrian desert mid-way between the Euphrates and the coastlands of Syria made it a natural focus of the caravan trade which brought the goods and products of a remote eastern world, from as far afield as Indonesia, China, and India, to the lands of the Mediterranean. For many centuries Palmyra (also known as Tadmor) played an important role in the history of regional and international Near Eastern trade. But it was in the first two centuries of the Roman imperial period that Palmyra experienced its greatest development. This was the time of the 'caravan cities' of Petra, Palmyra, and Hatra. By the early decades of the Roman Empire, the material transformation of Palmyra had begun, and in the following three centuries the city developed progressively, with its rich cultural mix, into one of the most distinctive centres of urban civilization in the ancient Near East. Palmyra benefited greatly from its association with Rome, and enjoyed a highly privileged status in the Roman imperial period. A great boost to the city's fortunes came on AD106 when Petra, capital of the Nabataean kingdom, was annexed along with the rest of the kingdom by the Emperor Trajan. Palmyra's unique geographical position gave it a major advantage. Palmyra displayed many elements of a Greco-Roman city. But in fact, the distinctive Palmyrene culture arose from a blend of these elements with indigenous ones, the latter reflected in sculptural representations of a number of Palmyrene deities and cult memorials. In the reign of Septimius Severus, Palmyra was elevated to the status of a Roman *colonia*, the highest civic status that could be accorded a city of the empire. The inhabitants of Palmyra enjoyed full Roman citizenship rights. Around 250BC Septimus Odenathus (known locally as Udaynath) a citizen of Palmyra makes his first appearance, and goes on to become a self-styled-king. The death of Odenathus was sudden and unexpected and his widow Zenobia became *de facto* ruler of the Palmyrene world. Bryce notes Zenobia's ancestry is slight and confused, however, she sought to create about herself a court that was renowned for its culture and learning. Zenobia embarked on a programme of westward expansion; however, her territorial aspirations were unfulfilled. In one account she was taken to Rome and beheaded. In other sources Zenobia lived on in comfort and security in a house near Hadrian's villa.

Under the heading 'A blend of cultures' Bryce explains Palmyra's administrative structure, noting it was organized along Greek lines, with the institution of an assembly called by the Greek term *demos*, and a deliberative council by the Greek term *boule* (280). Greek and Latin nomenclature was widely used alongside Palmyrene

terms. But Arabic was the most frequently heard language in the city's streets and thoroughfares. Probably at least half of the city's population was of Arabic origin, their ancestry could be traced back to nomadic desert wanderers. But the language most frequently appearing in the city's written records was Aramaic. Palmyrene is a local version of Aramaic. The Greek language also appears at Palmyra, many of the wealthier elements of the city's population spoke both Greek and Palmyrene. Given the city's active involvement in international trade, fluency in both languages was essential. Beneath its overlay of Graeco-Roman culture, Palmyra had many features that were reflective of Near Eastern cultural elements and traditions.

It becomes conspicuously apparent from the history of Syria presented by Bryce that a feature of many of its ancient cities was linguistic diversity; it is a tradition that endured for centuries. But it was not just limited to languages, Bryce's astute commentary includes abundant references to other diverse artistic, architectural, religious and cultural traditions of ancient Syria.

In reading this book I am reminded of my own association with Syria that goes back decades. I was fortunate to be involved in a number of archaeological excavation projects (including ten years working at Tell Ahmar, ancient Til Barsib, conquered by Shalmaneser III in 856BC – one of the important sites mentioned in Part I) in the Euphrates River valley. Over the years and in numerous conversations I frequently heard many Syrians describe Syria as a 'mosaic.' For a lot of Syrians they see their country as made up of many discrete parts that fit neatly and harmoniously together. Bryce's book critically assembles the disparate historical portions of ancient Syria into a highly readable, accessible, intelligible whole. His book brings together three thousand years of history in crisp, focused, and informative fashion, allowing readers to form a clear picture of the rich history of this fascinating land. The author is an engaging writer and one quickly gets the impression that he has enjoyed researching and writing this book. The style is one that is not overly burdened with theoretical debate. There are few books devoted to the history of Syria; therefore Bryce's book is a welcome edition and one that will become indispensable for anyone with an interest in ancient Syria.

In closing, and with the current tragedy in Syria in mind, it is pertinent to return to that short statement by Bryce: 'Syria was strategically important' (7). The unfolding conflict in Syria is a catastrophe on many levels. Inevitably, Syria's heritage is one of multiple casualties resulting from the armed conflict. Bryce's book provides a lucid account that assists our understanding of Syria's historical importance and continuing strategic location.

Andrew S. Jamieson  
Classics and Archaeology,  
University of Melbourne, Australia  
[asj@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:asj@unimelb.edu.au)