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tel. +39 051 2097700; fax +39 051 2097802; antonella.tonelli@unibo.it

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RECENSIONI

Mario Liverani, <i>Paradiso e dintorni. Il paesaggio rurale dell'antico Oriente</i> (Giacomo Benati)	153
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RECENSIONI

Liverani, M. 2018, *Paradiso e dintorni. Il paesaggio rurale dell'antico Oriente*. Pp. i-x+187, figs. 21, tables 3. Rome-Bari: Laterza. 20.00 € (hardcover). ISBN: 9788858133354.

The book under review consists of a broad-brush historical overview of the evolution of the agrarian landscape in the Ancient Near East (hereafter ANE), based on the analysis of textual materials and on data from archaeological surveys. The essay results from a collection of studies that the Author undertook since the 1970s and, save for the series of seminal articles on the shape of the Sumerian fields (Liverani 1996; 1997), never saw the light in book form. The book provides to the reader interested in pre-Classical history a larger intellectual and methodological framework for understanding the rationale that guided Italian historians in approaching ancient Mesopotamian economic and social history during a much fertile season of study.

The book is opened by a preface, and then is divided into ten chapters, completed by an appendix, a bibliographic apparatus and an index of names. The first two chapters consist of (I) a brief summary of the accounts given by western travelers that in the medieval and early modern periods visited the Middle East. Chapter II consists of a short ecological, climatic and geographical introduction to the ANE, completed by a very brief discussion of historical sources useful for reconstructing the agrarian landscape and few notes on technology. Chapters III to X consist of a diachronic analysis of agricultural systems, internally divided according to large ecological zones (rain-fed northern vs. irrigated southern Mesopotamia) spanning from the onset of farming down to the Hellenistic period. Chapter III spans from the origin of farming during the Neolithic period to the so-called “Urban Revolution” that culminates in the introduction of artificial irrigation in southern Mesopotamia and writing, which made possible, for the first time in human history, to record the administration of agricultural production, instrumental for the functioning of the centralized economy of early states. Chapter IV focuses on the 3rd millennium BC

agrarian landscapes of southern Mesopotamia. It is further divided internally according to the historical periodization that sees the Early Dynastic period followed by the Akkadian and the Ur III ones. The main tenets of this chapter are the evolution of the artificial networks of irrigation channels and the shape of the fields (a trademark of the Author throughout his career). The Author relies heavily in R. McC. Adams’ datasets for the irrigation network, and on administrative sources combined with royal inscriptions to tackle the changes in the management of arable land. It is worth noting that this section is enriched by quantitative data on cereal yields, average extension of the cultivated plots and data on the hierarchic structure in place for the exploitation of the fields. Chapter V focuses on 3rd millennium BC rain-fed landscapes of northern Mesopotamia. However, the enormous amount of new archaeological fieldwork conducted in the regions of northern Mesopotamia and the Levant (Iraqi Kurdistan, Syria, south-eastern Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel) in the last 20 years is overlooked by the Author and the chapter results in a very brief account indeed. Particularly puzzling is the complete absence from Chapter V of a treatment of the outstanding evidence on agricultural management coming from the Royal Archives of Ebla (recent literature is, however, enlisted by the Author in the additional bibliographic apparatus at the end of book), and from the integrated analysis of Tell Beydar landscapes (Ur, Wilkinson 2008). The subsequent chapter (VI) is a review of the abundant evidence on the management of the agricultural domains in the Old-Babylonian and Kassite periods in southern Mesopotamia, again following the above-mentioned structure in terms of management of fields and canals. Chapter VII deals with Syria and Anatolia during the Middle and Late Bronze ages. Given the quantity and quality of the written evidence (the archives from Kanesh, Mari, Emar, Alalakh, Ugarit, etc.), the chapter consists of a particularly rich description of Anatolian, Middle Euphrates, inner Syrian and Levantine agricultural exploitation modes with economic, political and social underpinnings (notably absent here is reference to the outstanding

contribution by J. Lauinger [2015] on Alalakh VII archives). The chapter also delves into Hittite and Middle-Assyrian agricultural practices and the introduction of new technologies. Chapter VIII deals with the innovations in terms of technology and settlement patterns that characterize the beginning of the Iron Age in the ANE and then sets off with two well-documented case studies, the agriculture in Israel and the large-scale state-sponsored Neo-Assyrian agricultural projects. The chapter is closed by brief examinations of the Middle-Babylonian situation in southern Mesopotamia, characterized by a crisis of the urban and artificial irrigation systems, and the Southern-Arabian one. Chapter IX summarizes the developments in the Mesopotamian “periphery”, namely Urartu and Iran, which by the Iron Age become important players in the ANE check-board. Then there is a brief excursus on central Asia, and the chapter closes with the regeneration landscape of southern Mesopotamia during the Neo-Babylonian period, that enjoyed prosperity, high levels of state spending on irrigation infrastructures and intense private agricultural entrepreneurship. Chapter X focuses on the innovation brought about by unification of much of the ANE under the Achaemenid dynasty and then under Hellenistic rule, to conclude with some thoughts on the drivers of change and continuity in the ANE landscapes. The Appendix (*Paesaggio e utopia*) explores, from the textual point of view, different dimensions of landscapes that can be found in the ANE administrative and literary sources. Finally, the bibliographic apparatus is divided, as per Liverani’s habit, in two parts: first the references cited in the text, second, a large series of additional bibliographic references divided according to chapters, enriched by notes on the relative importance of each reference for the development of the arguments treated in the book. The book’s final part is an index of names.

Overall, the book is a highly readable account of the long-term development of the ANE agricultural landscapes, which could be easily managed also by non-experts. Furthermore, to be highly appreciated is the incredibly vast bibliographic apparatus that provides a rich resource for the reader, scholar or student alike, interested in deepening his/her understanding of topics related to Mesopotamian agrarian economies. On the other hand, the main shortcoming of this work relies in its outdatedness and in its very partial use of archaeological sources. Very few works published in the 2000s and 2010s are referenced by the Author and only the surveys carried out by R.

McC. Adams in the 1960s-1970s are consistently incorporated into the analysis (and used as sources for illustrations). In the eyes of a non-expert, this very narrow selection could be perceived as resulting from a general lack of attention of the scholarly community towards landscape topics. Although Adams’s achievements still stand as a landmark in the scholarship on the ANE (see the recent volume dedicated to Adams edited by N. Marchetti and D. Domenici [2018]), archaeological fieldwork conducted in the last two decades in Syria, northern Iraq and Anatolia, and – with renovated momentum since 2011 also in southern Iraq – has made available an unprecedented mass of fine-grained settlement and environmental data that are positively changing our understanding of human ecology in the ANE (only to cite a few influential ones: Kühne 2008; Morandi Bonacossi 2014; Wilkinson, Rayne, Jotheri 2015; Lawrence *et alii* 2016; Rattenborg 2016; Lawrence *et alii* 2017; Styring *et alii* 2017; Wilkinson, Jotheri forthcoming). The motivation beyond this selection may be found in Liverani’s criticism towards contemporary approaches, exemplified by the findings of the MASS project (Wilkinson, Gibson, Widell 2013, see its review in *Ocnus* 23: 199-205) – probably the most far-reaching attempt to define a new framework for studying ANE landscapes – dubbed by the Author as «[...] of disconcerting triviality, and devoid of links to evidence historically distinctive» (Liverani 2016: 364).

This notwithstanding, it must be stated that Liverani’s book poses a crucial problem, and potentially paves the way for a renovated (and reformed?) interest in key historical topics. So far, no attempt to historically frame the long-term development of ANE agrarian landscapes has been provided in the field of ANE studies. The interest of scholars has rather focused on specific periods or areas, *de facto* neglecting *longue durée* perspectives, or on specific data-sources (archaeology vs. textual archives vs. settlement or environmental data, etc.), rarely integrated into interdisciplinary frameworks. Given the staggering amount of qualitative and quantitative information from textual sources and the equally staggering amount of archaeological work (surveys, excavations, studies on material culture) conducted since the 1840s in the Middle East, and the availability of powerful computational tools, it is probably time to focus more on building and investigating aggregate datasets for conceptualizing large-scale issues, in tune with recent trends in global history (Turchin *et alii* 2017; Harrison 2018). The amount of data-gathering and the ever-increasing sophistication of analytical tools

required to undertake such endeavors calls for the creation of interdisciplinary teams of researchers with different expertise and complementary skills, not to speak of large budgets. It is to be hoped that this change of researchers' behavior – also coherent with the benchmarks set by major funding bodies such as the European Research Council, the National Science Foundation, etc. – may stimulate historians and text-oriented researchers to seek more systematic collaboration with other disciplines. The present book can be an important stimulus for bringing back long-term, large-scale studies into the research agenda of ANE scholars and for changing researchers' behaviors.

Giacomo Benati

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