

REVIEWS

THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

THEO VAN DEN HOUT:

A History of Hittite Literacy. Writing and Reading in Late Bronze-Age Anatolia (1650–1200 BC).

448 pp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020 (online), 2021 (print). £90. ISBN 978 1 108 49488 5.

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The records of the Hittite scribes are attested from Late Bronze Age Anatolia (now Turkey), roughly between 1600 and 1200 BC. Hittitology is a fast-developing field and in recent years the aspects of writing and literacy have received more attention. Thus, much data and many discussions have accumulated, and a comprehensive handbook is currently needed. This gap is filled by the book under review. One of the main intentions of the author, who dedicated many years of research to this topic, is to “present an overview and a coherent picture of the function of writing in early historic Anatolia and in the Hittite Kingdom for a non-specialized readership” based on existing evidence. Although most of the topics in this book have been addressed and discussed before, they have not yet been combined in an up-to-date comprehensive book. It presents a detailed introduction to the history of Hittite writing, the work of the scribes, the use of different scripts, and includes an updated overview on Hittite text types.

The introduction presents a general overview on the Hittites, chronology, the textual sources and how they are approached in research. Chapters 2–6 and 8 describe the established history of Hittite literacy, beginning with the first sources in the Old Assyrian Period. Subsequently, the origins and import of the cuneiform script (in the Old Hittite Kingdom first used for the Akkadian language) as well as its adaptation to write Hittite (and other Old Anatolian languages) are explained in detail and an appendix includes a brief introduction to the Hittite cuneiform script. Furthermore, the role of literacy and writing during the reigns of different Hittite kings and their chancellery are described, as well as the texts and genres that emerged during the course of the literalization process. The author admits that in chapters 1–6 he mostly reused familiar material (apparently from his earlier publications), but this does not derogate the information in any way, notably for the non-specialized reader. The content of chapter 8 could also have followed that of chapter 6 since it also deals with the cuneiform sources while chapters 7 and 9 focus on a different script, but the author preferred a chronological order.

In chapter 7 the development of the Anatolian hieroglyphs as a local script of the Hittite ruling elite is described and how its use and purpose is different from that of cuneiform. The appendix of this chapter includes a brief introduction to the Hieroglyphic script. Chapter 9 gives an overview of the different forms of hieroglyphic sources (inscriptions on stone as well as on small objects, seals, graffiti). Chapter 10 discusses the problem of the wooden writing boards which are not attested as archaeological objects in this scribal culture, though their existence is highly likely. Chapter 11 describes the role of seals, that are found on bullae and other objects from the Hittite capital, and their connection to the wooden writing

boards. Another interesting part of this chapter discusses the so-called double sealings that could have been used to avoid forgery.

Returning to the cuneiform corpus, chapter 12 is dedicated to the organization of tablet collections and record-keeping, the work of the scribes in the production, copying and editing of texts. It includes another appendix with a detailed example showing the editing process. Chapter 13 has a strong focus on the scribes and scholars, their societal status and training.

What is humbly labelled as “excursus” in chapter 14 actually includes a detailed reassessment of the hieroglyphic sign known as L.326 that is usually interpreted as the title “scribe”. The author presents a detailed study of all the attested material and suggests a new interpretation of this sign connecting it with the similar sign for “seat” and a high social status like that of the elite class of officials known from Hittite texts as “the grandees”. His proposal has consequences for the interpretation of some text passages and for the identification of certain individuals as scribes and will surely stimulate new discussions on these aspects.

Finally, chapter 15 takes a short look at the time after the end of the Hittite kingdom and summarizes the main parts of the book.

The book provides a solid basis and a good starting point for readers who are generally interested in this topic, but it often also dives deeper into certain subjects and gives plenty of information and related literature. The text is accompanied by adequate examples, which will appeal to the student’s curiosity. The book includes a map of Late Bronze Age Anatolia, a timeline with Hittite kings, 50 figures (hand copies of tablets and seals, small photos of inscriptions on tablets and stones as well as small maps of buildings) and 43 tables (listing and comparing sign forms and sign values of cuneiform and hieroglyphic script; names and titles of scribes in different sources; distribution of genres and manuscripts; editing stages and much other valuable data).

At the end of the book the reader finds an Index Locorum including all textual sources used in this book (divided into Cuneiform Texts, Unpublished Cuneiform Texts and Anatolian Hieroglyphs). This is followed by a General Index which also includes linguistic terms, names, and find spots.

This book represents a valuable handbook that is especially useful for research and teaching (though, as usual, due to the fast development of research in this field, some of the information will probably have to be updated in later editions). It will not only attract readers interested in Hittitology or other Ancient Near Eastern studies but also those who study literacy in other fields or as a general subject.

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IAN RUTHERFORD:

Hittite Texts and Greek Religion: Contact, Interaction, and Comparison. xviii, 385 pp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. £80. ISBN 978 0 19 959327 9.

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The book is a well-balanced study of contacts between Anatolian and Greek traditions. After four general and methodological chapters, chapters 5 to 12 explore