Amanda H. Podany, *Brotherhood of Kings: How International Relations Shaped the Ancient Near East*; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, xxiv + 398 pp.

This very readable book deals with the main lines according to which 'international' or 'diplomatic' relations were conducted in the Bronze Age Near East, but also with a characterization of their specific features in each period. The significance of the use of the quotation marks with these terms will be explained below.

The work is arranged in four main sections. Part I (Chapters 1–2) covers the Early Dynastic Period in Mesopotamia and the Akkadian Empire (2500–2000 BCE), focusing on the political alliances made by the kings of Ebla and Akkad and other, minor polities, who arranged peace treaties and celebrated inter-dynastic marriages in order to cement political bonds. In this period we have documented for the first time the notion of 'brotherhood' as expressing political alliance and reciprocity between two polities. The selection of this term in treaty terminology is deliberate, as 'the whole state came to be viewed as an extended household, with the king at its head' (p. 29). In this period there is also evidence of the circulation of luxury goods (precious stones and metals, etc.), coming to Syria and Mesopotamia from the periphery and making trade a dynamic part of political contact as well.

Part II (Chapters 3–4) addresses the Old Babylonian Period (2000–1595 BCE) and the reigns of Zimri-Lim of Mari and Hammurabi of Babylon. Diplomacy in this period is carried out by messengers/ambassadors travelling between the courts, key figures for arranging the exchange of goods (still coming from distant lands) and princesses, and for crafting political alliances in the Syro-Mesopotamian world. Trade with the regions of Meluhha and Dilmun, in the Persian Gulf, is evident in Mesopotamia, and Assyrian traders made their entrance in Anatolia, establishing a trading post in Kanesh.

Part III (Chapters 5–7) deals with the final part of the Middle Bronze and early Late Bronze Age (1595–1400 BCE), a period of crisis in diplomacy marked by turmoil in southern Mesopotamia, due to the appearance of the Kassites in Babylon and their takeover of the city, along with the expansion of the Hittite and Egyptian empires in Western Asia, facing the kingdom of Mitanni. As a result, diplomacy was adapting and war was the main means of contact between the kingdoms.

Part IV (Chapters 8–12) addresses the Amarna Age (ca. 1400–1300 BCE), the quintessential Near Eastern period of 'internationalism'. The generalized conflict from the previous period has ended and peace and gift-giving predominate. The political scene is dominated by the Great Powers of the time: Egypt, Hatti, Mitanni, Assyria and Babylon. The whole diplomatic system revolved around the exchange of gifts, in the form of luxury goods, women for inter-dynastic marriages, and specialists (physicians, ambassadors, etc.) between the Great Kings. This ritualized exchange served as a means of diplomacy, alliance and geopolitical order. This diplomatic system – a perfected version of the one started in the Early Dynastic Period in Mesopotamia – came to an end with the break of interpersonal relations between kings and in broader lines with the general crisis that affected the Near East in the 12th century BCE.

An Epilogue sums up the nature of diplomacy during the whole of the Bronze Age, commenting on the disappearing of the 'brotherhood' system in the first millennium, marked by the universal imperialism of the Neo-Assyrian kings, and the reappearance of diplomacy in modern times.

This work seems to be conceived not only for an academic readership but also as an introduction for students in the field and to appeal the nonspecialist reader with an interest in ancient Near Eastern civilizations. Throughout the book, we find vivid descriptions of events and a focus on the main characters as they appear in the extant sources. To be sure, there is an accomplishment in this. However, in doing so, at times it seems the attention paid to narrative style (which is, let us say it again, an important achievement) leaves some analytical and interpretative problems out of focus.

For instance, it should be recognized that adjectives like 'international' or 'diplomatic' are modern analytical terms with a modern semantic burden. 'International' refers in the context of this work to two or more nations engaging in political or economic intercourse. But the question is to what extent can we use the term 'nation' to describe faithfully the political organizations (from city-states to empires) of the ancient Near East. In such a sense, 'nation' and 'international' seem to be anachronistic, if used without any caveat ('inter-regional' or 'inter-polity' could be in fact a better terminology for characterize this sort of connection). And

the very same may be said of 'diplomacy/diplomatic'. Such concepts did exist in the ancient Near East, but they were embedded in a symbolic and cultural universe rather different from our own. This is, of course, a well-known and ubiquitous problem for the historian of ancient civilizations: how to approach political relations, economic behaviors and social practices, framed within a different cultural world, without losing meaning in translation. Podany is very careful in her treatment of the textual evidence and her use of bibliography, but at times it seems methodological reflexivity has been downplayed in this skillfully written work. I believe the reason for this – besides making the book more readable and thus appealing to a wider readership – is the historiographical trend into which historians, consciously or not, inscribe themselves and their works: at least since the first generation of the French *Les Annales* school, one can approach history either as a *process* (politics, diplomacy, key figures, etc.) or as a *problem* (construction of the historical object, past-present epistemic relationship, etc.). This book clearly belongs to the first category.

Having said that, I think this book makes a highly valuable contribution to the field, bringing together a considerable amount of data and making a very well-written, up-to-date and coherent synthesis of our knowledge of political history and 'international' relationships in the Near East of the 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE.

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