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Yousif, Ephrem-Isa: Les figures illustres de la Mésopotamie. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012 (Peuples et cultures de l'Orient). 256 S. ISBN 978-2-296-99432-4. 29,00 €.

With this book Ephrem-Isa Yousif, born in a village of northern Iraq, has provided the reader with a concise and readable introduction to the illustrious figures of Mesopotamia.

This work is designed to describe, for a popular audience, the kings of dynasties and kingdoms which existed in that land during three millennia of its history: using few archaeological sources while insisting more on the textual and art historical aspects, the author explores the history of Mesopotamia from the Early Dynastic period times down to the Persian empire (6th century BC), in terms which may, of course, be useful for the general reader, and not for specialists. The volume, written through synthetic presentations of each subject, includes an introduction (quickly going through the history of Mesopotamia and its cultures) and two main parts divided in different chapters, extending from Gilgamesh to the last Babylonian king Nabonidus, with narrative parts alternating with textual and literary quotes. At the end of the book, there are a chronological table, references and two maps of Mesopotamia. Each chapter opens with an image that portrays, or has been commissioned by, the main character discussed.

For obvious reasons of space it is impossible to comment on each chapter of the volume, but some of them, I think, deserve attention and a brief discussion. In part one, dedicated to Sumer, Akkad and Babylon (including great figures such as Gilgamesh, Eannatum, Urukagina, Lugalzagesi, Sargon, Naram-Sin, Shar-Kali-Sharri, Gudea, Ur-Ningirsu, Ur-Nammu, Shulgi, Amar-Sin, Shu-Sin, Ibbi-Sin, Ishbi-Erra, Warad-Sin, Hammurabi, Samsu-iluna), the author starts talking about Gilgamesh, the celebrated king of Uruk (in the early third millennium BC), who is said to have been the one who fortified his city with its city-wall. German archaeologists digging at Warka (ancient Uruk) have, in fact, found the remains of a mud-brick fortification wall that enclosed the Early Dynastic settlement and the city appears to have reached its maximum extension in Early Dynastic I. 'Gilgamesh' is the oldest epic

hero known, similar to those of the Homeric poems for intensity of expression, depth of themes and the importance he had for the culture that generated him.

The author, as textual guide in this first part, refers to the 'Sumerian King List', probably compiled after the downfall of the Ur III Dynasty: it is composed by lists of kings (with the title of LUGAL, a Sumerian word literally meaning 'big man', that expresses the Akkadian term *šarrum*) with their lengths of reign, dynasty by dynasty, winding up with the well-known rulers of Ur III and their successors at Isin. The list presents a formulaic view of politics in the third millennium BC, whereby the rulers of some of the city-states exercised a more or less transitory hegemony, known as dynasty, over some or all of the others. The author uses the standard system of transliteration of names, from the Sumerian to the Akkadian languages. It is important to point out recent studies that provide additional contributions to the transcription of proper names (see the Appendix of G. Marchesi, in G. Marchesi, N. Marchetti, *Royal Statuary of Early Dynastic Mesopotamia*, Eisenbrauns 2011, pp. 240-247, for new transcription of names).

During the Early Dynastic period, the region was divided into city-states that were governed by local rulers. Dating from Early Dynastic IIIb is the Stele of Vultures found at Girsu (Tello) in Tell K, the first carved story of military exploits by Eannatum King of Lagash (Tell el-Hiba), a city in the south of Sumer, to report on the conflict between the city of Lagash and Umma for the control of a territory rich in farming and grazing lands. In the stela, a masterpiece of ancient Mesopotamian sculpture, the written story is juxtaposed to the iconic representation, which is equally eloquent in its view of the relationship between winners and the vanquished, and in the relationship between human and divine spheres of action.

The rise of Akkad marked the end of the age of the city-states in Mesopotamia. A new historical phase, which represented at the same time the point of arrival of a series of political and cultural developments that occurred in the Early Dynastic period and a definite break with the past, began with the newcomer Sargon, the founder of the Akkadian dynasty. With him and his successors, Akkad became the capital of a vast territorial state encompassing Upper Mesopotamia, the middle Euphrates, the whole of Babylonia, and the plain of Susa in Iran. With Naram-Sin (2254-2218 BC), grandson of Sargon, the Akkadian empire was extended touching the culmination of the expansion: it expands to the north and north-west realizing the supremacy thus said 'from sea to sea' on the military and commercial policy. His stele (ca. 2300 BC), found at Susa, celebrates his victory against the Lullubi (or Lullubians) inhabitants of the Zagros Mountains: the king, wearing the tiara or the helmet with horns, was the first ruler of Mesopotamia to proclaim himself divine; he dominates the vanquished enemies, protected by the symbols of the gods. After a period of turbulence, the Sumerian 'renaissance' was under Gudea, ensi of the dynasty of Lagash: his typical activities are that of builder and administrator, with less reference to political action. The end of Guti is the work of the kings of Uruk: Ur-Nammu, ensi of Ur and the founder of the 3rd Dynasty of Ur, with his political, territorial and administrative organization created the foundations that brought his son Shulgi to establish the first Mesopotamian empire. The downfall of the Ur III Dynasty was caused by the Amorites: in fact, the later years of the dynasty saw an increasing pressure from these nomads outside the borders of the settled lands. The

period is often referred to as the 'Isin-Larsa' period, as Isin was one of the first cities to establish itself as an independent state with Ibī-Sin. At the beginning of the second millennium BC the old Sumerian-Akkadian symbiosis was replaced by the new Akkadian-Amorite one. In this politically fragmented scenario emerges the figure of Hammurabi, Amorite sovereign, sixth king of the first dynasty of Babylon (18th century BC), who achieved a complete unification not only in Southern Mesopotamia. Thanks to the correspondence with Mari and Sippar, two city-states in Northern and Southern Mesopotamia, and to his code of laws, which was inscribed on a stele erected in the sanctuary of the god Shamash at Sippar, the activity of this ruler is well known (foreign policy; system of large canals built to guarantee the agricultural income in the whole country).

In part two, dedicated to Assyria and the Chaldean dynasty (and the illustrious kings Shamshi-Adad, Ashur-uballit I, Shalmaneser I, Tukulti-Ninurta I, Ashurnasirpal II, Shalmaneser III, Shamshi-Adad V, Sargon II, Tiglath-Pileser III, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, Ashurbanipal, Nabopolassar, Nebuchadnezzar and Nabonidus), the author starts talking about the rise of the Middle Assyrian kingdom, that endangered Babylonia, with the ruler Tukulti-Ninurta I (1244-1208 BC) who conquered the city in 1225. This sovereign was a great leader, a builder-king and one of the most important kings in the Middle-Assyrian age: he built a new capital, Kar Tukulti-Ninurta, in front of the holy city of Assur and ruled all of lower Mesopotamia and consolidated his kingdom in the northern and western regions. In his artistic productions, on a stone altar dedicated to the god Nusku in the temple of Ishtar at Assur, the king reveals the first example of figurative interest for the movement of the figure, for the representation of an action that will produce in Assyria after some centuries the great season of historical narrative relief. With the death of the king, Assyria faced a period of weakness that ended in the second half of the tenth century BC with the rise of the Neo-Assyrian kingdom. King Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BC) marks a new height of the Neo-Assyrian state, which in time will extend or reach from Cilicia to the Zagros Mountains, from the Urmia Lake to Syria and the Mediterranean Sea. In his new capital, the site of Nimrud/Kalhu, he builds his palace where he made a revolutionary innovation in a historical perspective: the design of the vast figured decoration program of relief on orthostatic slabs with mythical-symbolic subjects and war and hunting themes covering the walls of the throne room and the rooms arranged around it. After a succession of kings, the reorganization of the state continued with Sargon II (721-705 BC): author of an ambitious program of renewal that announces a glorious kingdom with large territorial gains. Together with his imperial unification of the known world, he founded a new capital, Dur Sharrukin (Khorsabad), conceived as a new Akkad, recalling its founder Sargon of Akkad. His son Sennacherib (704-681 BC) moved the capital to the city of Nineveh and the king Esarhaddon (680-669 BC) returned the interest to Babylon, initiating a process of reconciliation with the Babylonians. With the last Assyrian ruler Ashurbanipal (668-627 BC) we have the maximum expansion of Assyria, capturing the city of Thebes in Egypt and conquering the Elamites. The king, leading the wars from the capital and not on the field, unlike his predecessors, was a great historian, and a cultured man: the proof is his vast library that was found in Nineveh, considered to be the main source for the reconstruction of the

history and culture of Mesopotamia. The Assyrian army almost suddenly collapsed under the blows of the Medes and Babylonians allies. The internal crisis was in conjunction with the expansion of a new principality near the Iranian plateau, Media, and the definitive affirmation of the autonomy of Babylon. With the sovereigns of the Chaldean dynasty, Nabopolassar (625-605 BC), Nebuchadnezzar (605-562 BC) and Nabonidus (556-539 BC), Babylon reaches the greatest splendour: here, the celebration of the god and the king took place in the whole city, which is considered the first city in the world. Under the last ruler Nabonidus a series of revolts destabilized his power and allowed the Persian army of Cyrus the Great (539 BC) to come to Babylon, and to be welcomed as the new ruler of the city.

In the final part of the book there is a short appendix regarding some illustrious female figures (Shammuramat, Zakûtu, wife of Sennacherib, some queens of Nimrud and Adad-guppi; the priestesses Enheduanna and En-nigaldi-Nanna; and some female scribes): here the author goes quickly through their history. Three women are best known and they identify specific categories: Enheduanna, Sin's priestess and daughter of Sargon of Akkad; Adad-guppi, queen and mother of the king of Babylon Nabonidus, and Shammuramat/Semiramis, mother of the Assyrian king Adad-nirari and a mythical image of the Mesopotamian woman. The author could have increased this section with details and references that emerge from recent work on the subject (see F. Pinnock, *Semiramide e le sue sorelle. Immagini di donne nell'antica Mesopotamia*, Skira, Milano 2006).

Although this book is certainly written for the general public, one would have wanted more illustrations. The images used at the beginning of each chapter are of poor quality, do not have a correct caption and lack any reference to their source. In addition to this, the author offers to the general reader a selected bibliography which prefers historical-literary texts in French language. Nevertheless, the author – showing a real passion for his land, its origins and its ancestors – with his passionate and fluent writing allows the reader to enjoy and imagine the life and deeds of the main figures that characterized ancient Mesopotamian history.

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