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Radner, Karen: *State Correspondence in the Ancient World. From New Kingdom Egypt to the Roman Empire.* Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014. XIV, 306 S. m. Abb. 8° = Oxford Studies in Early Empires. Hartbd. £ 58,00. ISBN 978-0-19-93577-1

The earliest state-level societies in the ancient Near East, such as those of the Sumerian cities, seem to have been of limited geographical extent, affording their rulers direct knowledge of the activities of their relatively limited populations and allowing efficient application of the

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means of coercion upon uncooperative citizens. But the rise of territorial states beginning with the “Sargonic Empire” in the mid-third millennium brought with it new challenges. Basic governance, let alone domination and exploitation, of extensive territories demanded that an empire develop effective means of communication between its center and its distant peripheral holdings. As the Greek orator Aelius Aristides observed, “it is easy for him (the Roman emperor) to stay where he is and manage the entire civilized world by letters, which arrive almost as soon as they are written, as if they were carried by winged envoys” (quoted p. 1; cf. p. 172).

Of course, Aelius was a bit optimistic in his assessment of the speed with which the Roman *cursus publicus* – or any other pre-modern messaging system – could operate. But prompt passage of news, queries, and instructions between a monarch and his officials was indeed crucial for the maintenance of the integrity of early polities of any significant extent, and successive states sought to improve the operation of their communication networks. Naturally, before the development of motorized transportation and the electronic transmission of information, measures to boost efficiency in communication were restricted to the realm of organization.

In order to survey how various early states responded to this exigency, and as part of her research project, “Mechanisms of Communication in an Ancient Empire: The Correspondence between the King of Assyria and his Magnates in the 8th Century BC,” Karen Radner convened experts on several ancient imperial administrations at University College London in April 2011 and July 2012. They were each charged with describing the practice of long-distance communication as utilized in the cultures that they study, with particular attention to a list of key questions:

“What are the roles of envoys and letters in long-distance communications? What is the role of scribes or secretaries? What languages are used for the state correspondence? Is there a privileged state communication system? How is it organized? How is information safeguarded while in transit? Are there patterns and routines of state communication? Are there obligatory rules of communication? When and how are letters publicized? Are letters archived for future reference?” (pp. 3–4).

The volume under review presents the seven essays that resulted from the investigations generated by these queries, as polished following mutual discussion among the participants. Despite the common instructions, the chapters are remarkably divergent in content and focus, due primarily to the widely differing types of source materials available to each author.

Jana Mynářová (“Egyptian State Correspondence in the New Kingdom: The Letters of the Levantine Client Kings in the Amarna Correspondence and Contemporary Evidence”) describes the means by which the 14th-century pharaohs Amenophis III and Amenophis IV/Akhenaten exchanged information with their representatives and vassal rulers in Egypt’s domains in Syro-Palestine. These considerations are based on the 300 or so Akkadian-language letters that make up the only significant body of cuneiform material yet recovered in Egypt, as well as on a few mutilated Egyptian-language papyri. I wonder whether the demotic missive translated on pp. 14–15, which was found in duplicate yet contains practically no real information, might not be a school text intended to exemplify conventions proper for communication with the monarch.

In addition, the author’s suggestion that cuneiform tablets might have been fired specifically in order to guard their contents from tampering is unlikely (p. 22), since it is not possible to emend or add text without detection to even sun-dried texts after they have hardened.

On the basis of some 700 published letters generated by the Hittite royal bureaucracy, Mark Weeden (“State Correspondence in the Hittite World”) draws a detailed picture of the functioning of its communicative infrastructure – media (clay tablets), vehicles (mules, pp. 52–56), scribal conventions, and personnel. He also contributes a useful appendix that categorizes the available epistolary material according to its sender(s) and recipient(s).

Karen Radner (“An Imperial Communication Network: The State Correspondence of the Neo-Assyrian Empire”) begins by describing the maintenance and operation of the royal post road that facilitated the movement of government-sanctioned messengers and messages across the vast realm of the Sargonid kings (pp. 71–81). Then she examines the corpus of cuneiform letters from the reign of Sargon II (8th century B.C.E.), recovered primarily from Nineveh. The Aramaic language was also in use in Assyrian governance, but not for state correspondence (p. 84).

Since the bulk of documentation surviving from the Neo-Babylonian period comes from its major temples, Michael Jursa (“The Lost State Correspondence of the Babylonian Empire as Reflected in Contemporary Administrative Letters”) must study its royal epistolary practices by utilizing a couple dozen letters sent by kings to temple authorities and preserved in the archives of the latter (list, p. 100). He suggests that the monarchs of this dynasty conducted most of their correspondence in Aramaic on perishable materials, while on occasion honoring the conservatism of the religious authorities by sending them Akkadian-language tablets.

Amélie Kuhrt ("State Communications in the Persian Empire") could make use of descriptions of the Royal Road (from Susa to Sardis) in Classical sources, as well as of the practical documentation contained in thousands of (mostly) Elamite-language tablets from the "Persepolis Fortification Archives," which document the issuance of rations for governmental travel during a fifty-year period in the late 6th to early 5th centuries B.C.E. Once again, most of the once-plentiful correspondence in Aramaic (Greek *Assyria grammata*) has been lost (pp. 129–31).

Despite its more general title, the contribution of Alice Bencivenni ("The King's Words: Hellenistic Royal Letters in Inscriptions") concentrates on evidence from Asia Minor, most of which consists of letters from Seleucid and Attalid rulers confirming rights or granting favors to particular cities, whose local grandees had them commemorated through inscription on stone monuments. In an appendix, the author provides a catalogue of preserved Seleucid and Attalid state correspondence.

Simon Corcoran ("State Correspondence in the Roman Empire: Imperial Communication from Augustus to Justinian") also has lapidary material at his disposal (some 600 inscriptions), as well as a few papyri from Egypt (pp. 177–79) and the letters exchanged by Trajan and Pliny the Younger (*Letters*, Book 10). But since all pronouncements of the Roman emperor acquired legal force (p. 173), many items of his correspondence with governmental subordinates found their way, often abridged, into the Theodosian and Justinian Codes (pp. 179–80). Particularly interesting is the reconstruction of the operation of the upper levels of the imperial administration that Corcoran is able to reconstruct from these sources (pp. 185–201).

This fine collection of essays will prove most useful to all those who research the means by which the "One Percent" of the past exerted their power over the remaining members of their societies.