ForeWord Reviews

HISTORY

Civilizations of Ancient Iraq
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The Epic of Gilgamesh, Hammurabis Code, Babylon astronomy-the dimly remembered foundations of literature, law and science…It's an undeniable benefit to have *Civilizations of Ancient Iraq* (note the plural), 190 pages of crystal-clear and well-illustrated narrative ranging from the earliest villages (c. 8000 BCE) to the Arab conquest of 637 CE. To their text Benjamin and Karen Foster, professors at Yale in Assyriology and Ancient Near Eastern Art, add an epilogue that introduces-most interestingly-the history of regional archaeology, noting the role of the formidable British Arabist Gertrude Bell in establishing Iraq's archaeological museums. The authors also assess the terrible toll the Gulf and Iraq wars took on the regions heritage of unique artifacts.

A glance at the contents indicates the Foster's organizational skill and success in offering a *narrative* of successive peoples, their lives, environments and culture rather than a catalogue of names and dates. The authors illustrate the achievements of the Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, the later Babylonian states, the post-Alexander Seleucids, the Romans, and the Persian Sassanids. An organizational genius underlies much of Iraq's story: irrigation projects; land-holding, taxation and labor laws; the support of religion-including a successful campaign to recover the statue of Marduk from the Elamites-while palace and temple-building reflected the need to confirm power through grandeur, and stability through stature.

The treatment of the "invention" and development of cuneiform is particularly interesting; we see the ancient mind at work creating the modern science of information transmission. Despite brilliant breakthroughs and startling finds (in particular the *Epic of Gilgamesh*), only a fraction of the cuneiform record has been translated.

Throughout the book the authors have the happy gift of leavening their scholarship with story. We master the Amorites, Kassites and Hurrians, but also learn the proper presentation of a roasted bird: "loosen the jointsÉattach the legs to the sides with a string." A woman gazing at a plaque of naked men strumming lutes might pen a spell to capture her beloved: "Keep bursting

forth like the sun upon me / Keep renewing yourself for me like the moon."

Two later chapters, "Mesopotamia Between Two Worlds" (the two worlds being those of Alexander and then Rome) and "Sassanian Iraq" (the Persian inthrust) bring us the clash and interaction of civilizations and the impact of Iraq's genius upon the wider Mediterranean and Asian world. This is a most rewarding book with fine illustrations and a challenging bibliography.