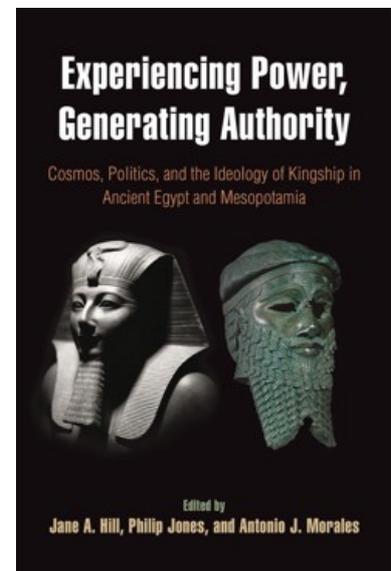




## Birmingham Egyptology Journal

Review by Steven R. W. Gregory

J. A. Hill, P. Jones, and A. J. Morales (editors). *Experiencing Power, Generating Authority: Cosmos, Politics, and the Ideology of Kingship in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia*. Penn Museum International Research Conferences, Volume 6: Proceedings of 'Experiencing Power–Generating Authority: Cosmos and Politics in the Ideology of Kingship in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia,' Philadelphia, November 5-11 2007. University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia. 2013. ISBN 9781934536643. £45.50. xxx + 448 pages, 49 figures, 11 tables, and 3 appendices.



In the foreword to this book [pp. xxix-xxx] the series editor, Holly Pitman, explains the core mission of the University of Pennsylvania: to further understanding of human culture on a world-wide scale as reflected in the artefacts of the Penn Museum, while recognizing the importance of collaborative and multi-disciplinary research and analysis. The achievement of such aspirations is surely reflected to some degree by the varied disciplinary backgrounds of the thirteen contributing authors represented in the various sections of the work, disciplines including those of anthropology, archaeology, linguistics, and historical studies as related to various regions of the ancient world, principally those of Egypt, the Levant, and Mesopotamia.

Further aims are set out in the introduction, authored by Hill, Jones, and Morales and entitled: 'Comparing Kingship in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia: Cosmos, Politics and Landscape'. Here the writers explain that the present work follows on from that of Henri Frankfort's 'Kingship and the Gods'<sup>1</sup> in the examination of the relationship between kingship, cosmos, and politics in a comparative study of ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures – and in view of the excellence

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<sup>1</sup>*Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1948).

of Frankfort's work, in my opinion a valid guide to the topic to this day, the ideal is certainly a worthy one.

The basic question addressed [p. 5] asks whether kingship in the ancient world was either, in essence, cosmic or political – recognizing that both views have been favoured in scholarship. Indeed, some argue that kingship was a blend of both spheres. The intention, therefore, was to combine these various approaches and, to this end, contributors had been asked to focus on specific aspects of kingship rather than produce 'synthetic accounts' of kingship in general [p. 6]. To facilitate this approach the book is divided into three sections: the first two covering the relationship of kingship to cosmos and politics respectively; the third devoted to the area in which those relationships appear to merge – landscape. In the following pages [pp. 9-16] a synopsis of each individual work in the volume is given, from which it becomes apparent that widely differing approaches to the study of kingship can be productively pursued, each offering informative perspectives upon the phenomenon in question. In this review, I will concentrate primarily on those chapters specifically relating to Egyptology.

The section 'Cosmos' has two essays which relate directly to Egyptology; the first, entitled 'Propaganda and Performance at the Dawn of the State', is presented by Ellen Morris who discusses the manner in which pharaonic rule was articulated in propaganda and performance to convince the population of the necessity for the office of kingship in the maintenance of cosmic order. Morris focusses particularly upon the manner in which such ideals were articulated in artistic form using the examples of the Narmer palette and the mace heads of both King Narmer and King Scorpion. These artefacts, dating from the Predynastic Period, encapsulate fundamental aspects of kingship which 'remained essentially unquestioned for millennia' [p. 35]. The principal notions covered by Morris relate to the identification of the king with the god, Horus, and with the power of the bull, notions placing the king beyond the realm of ordinary mortals, enhancing his 'elevated otherness' as one chosen by the gods [p. 44]. The king is also presented as the unifier of the land, head of the administration, and bestower of bounty. Perhaps of most significance from an Egyptological perspective, the king was not primarily a 'man *of* and *for* the people ... [but] *of* and *for* the gods' [p. 60].

In general, Morris' interpretation of the various symbolic elements of the selected artefacts is well reasoned and informative regarding the beliefs underpinning the ideology of the early dynastic state. However, the idea that the manner in which Narmer grasps his mace when viewing the decapitated corpses on the palette evokes the masturbatory 'world-creating act of the cosmic deity' seems somewhat fanciful. In the context of the scene, this notion seems both anatomically and ideologically unlikely and, as Morris herself points out, sometimes 'a mace is just a mace' [p. 44].

The second chapter in the section 'Cosmos' specifically relating to ancient Egypt is that of Ludwig Morenz entitled: 'Texts before Writing: Reading (Proto-)Egyptian Poetics of Power'. Morenz begins by considering the earliest forms of literacy as apparent in the Mesolithic Period with the reading of animal signs and the movement of the stars, going on to discuss the formative phases of writing in diverse cultural settings before focussing on Egypt, where the development of writing was fundamental to Egyptian cultural identity. Morenz focusses on the decorated knife handles, combs, and palettes of the Naqada Period upon which the imagery presents 'a sort of encyclopedic listing generating a mental landscape' within which kingship was contextualized [p. 128]. The symbolism establishes the superhuman status of the ruler as the link between humankind and the gods, the genre of artefacts considered conveying this political message during the transition from proto-writing to the period of early writing in the Nile Valley.

Three further essays complete the opening section of the book. "I Am the Sun of Babylon": Solar Aspects of Royal Power in Old Babylonian Mesopotamia', authored by Dominique Charpin, primarily considers solar metaphors in Old Babylonian texts and the association of kings with the sun-god, notions surely having some correlation with the ancient Egyptian culture – Charpin himself makes some allusion to the Amarna Period in this respect – and with notions of kingship in many cultures [p. 66]. 'Rising Suns and Falling Stars: Assyrian Kings and Cosmos', by Eckart

Frahm, begins by considering the cosmological, mythological, and political dimensions of supernatural entities as defined by the Roman scholar Marcus Terentius Varro. Varro's perspective, based on his study of the Greco-Roman pantheon, seems particularly apposite to the study of cultures of the ancient Near East where traces of the divine can be found 'in the sphere of earthly government' and, as earlier pointed out by Frankfort, where notions of deity were 'closely connected to the ideology of kingship' [p. 98], a viewpoint one may consider central to the understanding of the nature of kingship in ancient Egypt. Following the introductory passages, Frahm focusses on the relationship between astral deities, predominantly solar, and the political ideology of kingship in Assyrian culture.

The final study in the opening section, entitled 'Images of Tammuz: The Intersection of Death, Divinity, and Royal Authority in Ancient Mesopotamia', is the work of JoAnn Scurlock. As the title suggests, Scurlock deals largely with concepts relating to post-mortem existence – particularly that of a king – and how concepts of the afterlife and notions of royal divinity may be understood from the ancient Mesopotamian perspective; here it is perhaps the differences between Mesopotamian and Egyptian customs, rather than the similarities, which are worthy of note.

The second section, 'Politics', is opened by Juan Carlos Moreno García with an essay entitled: 'Building the Pharaonic State: Territory, Elite and Power in Ancient Egypt in the 3rd Millennium BCE'. García aims to consider kingship in ancient Egypt in relation to general structures of state administration, beginning with focus on the rise of Hierakonpolis as the centre of political and economic control from which its rulers subsequently went on to establish residences at Abydos and Memphis to better assert their hegemony over the wider areas which had come under their control [p. 190]. A primary source of evidence considered is that of seal stamps found in the context of early royal burials. In discussing such artefacts, García draws attention to the fundamental structure of the early pharaonic state as a network of economic establishments under the control of the crown and administered by royal officials and, most likely, members of the regional nobility. The establishments in question were recognized by the terms *hwt* and *pr* [p. 203]. García places particular emphasis on the political and economic functions of such structures, a point which is worthy of some note when considering the religious terminology often used to describe them in much recent discourse.

Miroslav Bárta presents the second Egyptological contribution under the head of 'Politics' with an essay entitled: 'Egyptian Kingship during the Old Kingdom'. Bárta, focussing on primary source evidence as derived both from royal monumental architecture and the tomb development and titles of non-royal members of the elite, considers various aspects of kingship – royal ideology, kingship display, aspects of state administration, and pharaonic society itself [pp. 257-8] – in demonstrating dynamic changes in the role during his period of interest.

At times, Bárta does appear to make unsupported, and likely unwarranted, assertions; for example, metrological references to volumes of decoration, measured in 'running meters', and the areas of storage spaces included in royal pyramid complexes, with little consideration of the range of criteria which may have had some bearing on the causes of the observed phenomena, do not appear to justify conclusions regarding the significance of the royal cult over time, nor serve as reliable evidence of the 'parsimonious' nature of the policies introduced by particular rulers [pp. 264-6]. The occasional apparent non sequitur offers additional distraction for the reader, as in the remark that in a particular period tombs 'are more fully decorated, being limited by the ground plan of the chapel' [p. 268]. Further examples could be cited, and while these may seem minor points they perhaps indicate some need for caution in assessing the value of the paper. This is not to say that the observed phenomena are not themselves of value in a discussion of kingship, rather that they might be open to a more nuanced interpretation when considered within a wider range of pertinent criteria – which may not have been entirely possible in a relatively short essay – and, at times, presented with more reasoned argument.

Three further papers complete the 'Politics' section. In 'The Management of the Royal Treasure: Palace Archives and Palatial Economy in the Ancient Near East', Walter Sallaberger

considers how the composition of archived administrative material – primarily cuneiform documents from Ebla – reflects the ‘political, social, economic, and religious role of the ruler’ in the ancient Near East [p. 220]. On a number of occasions I found that Sallaberger’s arguments were not particularly well structured and, consequently, were difficult to follow. Clearly, the various aspects of the documents discussed may be interpreted to provide some picture of palace economy as related to various aspects of Mesopotamian culture during the period in question; that Sallaberger has drawn such a picture convincingly seems less certain. In any event, this is an essay with limited interest from an Egyptological perspective.

In ‘All the King’s Men: Authority, Kingship and the Rise of Elites in Assyria’, Beate Pongratz-Leisten discusses the hierarchical power structure and the difficulties encountered in modern academic study when attempting to discern the individual roles played by the nobility and the scholars in Assyrian society. In attempting to resolve these difficulties, the author adopts an approach which some may find pertinent to the study of ancient Egypt and, in a sharply focussed and well considered essay, Pongratz-Leisten exposes the manner in which members of the aforementioned elite groups contributed to the ideological discourse – expressed in texts, images, and ritual [p. 288] – which represented and sustained the cultural worldview, the source of their own elevated social status, as well as consolidating the ideology sustaining royal power [p. 291].

Finally under ‘Politics’, D. Bruce Dickinson presents ‘Kingship as Racketeering: The Royal Tombs and Death Pits at Ur, Mesopotamia, Reinterpreted from the Standpoint of Conflict Theory’. This study considers the interplay between two specific, though not mutually exclusive, theoretical approaches to the study of state formation: integration theory and conflict theory. The latter, in Dickinson’s view, has been given insufficient attention in recent discourse; too little emphasis has been placed on the tendency of governments to maintain societal structures by violent means [p. 314]. Drawing analogies from modern societies, Dickinson presents the notion that in their formative stages the early states were probably ‘a kind of extortion racket’ and interprets evidence from the royal tombs and death pits at Ur – with some reference to early Egyptian royal burial practices as evident at Abydos [p. 321] – to demonstrate ‘the social conflict and state violence that very probably produced them’ [p. 316].

The ‘Landscape’ section of the book consists of three essays, that of Alan B. Lloyd, ‘Expeditions to the Wadi Hammamat: Context and Concept’, relating directly to ancient Egypt. Wadi Hammamat provided a link between the Nile and the Red Sea coast facilitating trade between those regions throughout pharaonic history. The wadi was also a source of mineral wealth, the mining and quarrying of which may be thought of today as distinctly secular activities. However, analysing a group of five texts recorded on quarry walls, Lloyd attempts to establish that such activities were ‘highly charged with religious significance’ [p. 362]. This is certainly true to a point, the significant factor here being that the ‘religion’ of ancient Egypt, as presented in the texts and images of state sponsored monumental architecture, was very much focussed on kingship. Lloyd hints at this aspect of the considered texts in the remark that the ‘religious conception of these expeditions also made it possible to use them for propagandist purposes’ [p. 376]; it seems that this aspect could have been given more emphasis.

The discussed texts do make considerable reference to the gods, however, the implied function of the gods is primarily to sanction the actions of the king, additionally emphasizing his prowess and effectiveness as a ruler. This is the rhetoric of kingship, in which mythology relating to the supernatural forces of creation – of which kingship, represented as the god Horus manifest in the form of the living king, is one – is the foundation of the ideology of the state. Within such a system the degree to which matters may be thought of as either distinctly secular or sacred in nature seems questionable. The texts may in fact be seen to be highly charged with political ideology rather than with ‘religious significance’. The texts certainly do not appear to suggest that mining and quarrying expeditions were performed as an act of worship for the gods, rather they legitimize

the rights of the Horus king and, by extension, the officials acting on his behalf, to ownership of the mineral wealth of the land.<sup>2</sup>

Also under the head 'Landscape' is the essay by Michael Roaf: 'Mesopotamian Kings and the Built Environment'. Roaf considers the diversity of ruling styles subsumed under the single head of 'Mesopotamian kingship' [p.322] and outlines the variety of possible conditions disguised by such non-specific terminology. Suggesting that there is little of consequence in the nature of kingship that can be thought of as 'typically Mesopotamian', he points to inscriptions related to the construction of buildings and other monuments by Mesopotamian rulers as a common feature for the promulgation of prevailing ideology, and therefore a primary source of information regarding the nature of such ideology [pp. 336-7] – a point perhaps pertinent to parallel studies relating to ancient Egypt.

The final study under the head 'Landscape' is that of Mehmet-Ali Ataç entitled: "'Imaginal" Landscapes in Assyrian Imperial Monuments'. Here the author considers the interplay of mythical and political-propagandistic constituents of panoramic palace reliefs in attempting to assess how aspects of the artistic repertoire related to kingship and notions of universal rule, and offers the suggestion that the structuring of the mythological with the philosophical was the manner in which "'reality" per se was perceived and recorded in the ancient Near East' [p. 385] – once more, a topic of some interest to scholars engaged in the interpretation of the pharaonic ritual landscape.

In summary, the discussed essays present a very useful compendium of both knowledge and beliefs informing present understanding of various aspects pertinent to ancient notions of kingship. From an Egyptological perspective, this volume is particularly useful in that it engenders a wider outlook on ancient culture. Ancient Egypt, despite its oft-stated insular nature – whether such perceptions result from its geography or its political agenda (as concepts existing in reality or merely imposed by relatively modern scholarship) – did not exist in isolation. To varying degrees, Egypt was constantly under the influence of surrounding cultures; the reviewed work therefore serves as a useful primer for both scholars and students when considering the nature and possible impact of such influences. The utility of the volume is enhanced by an index; by appendices presenting maps of the discussed regions showing locations of primary interest; and a glossary of terms in common use in Akkadian, Hebrew, Sumerian, and Egyptian. I suspect my copy will become a much-valued, and much-used, addition to the bookshelf.

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<sup>2</sup> Here it may be pertinent to consider the recognized economic functions of other areas presented in modern Egyptological discourse as having particular religious significance, as discussed by Moreno García in the reviewed volume.