



Andrew Jamieson, Caroline Tully and Louise Hitchcock, eds, 2024 *Plague in Antiquity*, Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Supplement, 65, Leuven: Peeters, pp. xiv, 264, ISBN 9789042950689, EUR 165.

Reviewed by Christopher J. Davey

This book was conceived in the wake of Covid-19 to explore the possibility that historians and archaeologists of the ancient world may be able to relieve the ‘social anxiety caused by pandemics’ and to review ‘our own research in a fresh, new light’ (p. 1). There are ten contributions, ordered alphabetically by the authors’ surnames, spanning the Bronze Age to Late Antiquity in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Levant, Cyprus, Anatolia and the Indus Valley. Classical and biblical literature is not included, although there are some Old Testament references where they relate to cuneiform texts.

Plague and pandemic were probably more common in the ancient world than they are now, but they do not feature prominently in historical research. The experience of Covid-19 has brought the subject to the fore. Several of the contributors to the book are early-career academics so the topic will no doubt be revisited by them for some years to come.

The book commences with an introduction, which defines the topic, summaries the main themes and outlines each contribution. Authors are not only expected to draw on the study of the ancient world, but also on their own encounters with the Covid-19 pandemic. Reflection on personal experience is often deemed anecdotal and irrelevant in scholarly circles, however, physical

involvement in a subject area appropriately applied, as it is in this book, adds legitimacy and accuracy to the studies. It assists that most readers will have their own vivid memories of Covid-19.

Chapter One is the first of the five contributions dealing with cuneiform literature. It is by Troels Pank Arbøll, an Assistant Professor in Assyriology, University of Copenhagen, and a Junior Research Fellow, Linacre College, University of Oxford. The paper focusses on second and first millennium BCE texts as sources for plague events. It begins by discussing problems with Akkadian terminology: words referring to mass death or depopulation events may in fact describe famine, flood, or massacre, rather than a medical event. Relevant cuneiform texts are not only Mesopotamian, but also include Hittite literature from Anatolia, and the Amarna Letters from Egypt. Also discussed are apotropaic and prophylactic procedures such as omens and rituals, the close relationship between war and epidemic, and the Erra Epic. This paper is a fitting lead-in to the subject and has a useful bibliography.

Chapter Two is by the late Professor Robert Arnott, Green Templeton College, University of Oxford, who discusses malaria in the Harappan Civilisation, using environmental and archaeological data. He concludes that malaria may have had ‘depressive effects’ in the Pre-Harappan Phase, but by the Mature Harappan Phase, with ‘ecological and geographical changes and human intervention such as improvements to farming techniques, malaria would have been reduced to a manageable level’ (p. 35). In other words, malaria was not an epidemic in the Harappan Civilisation.

A second paper on cuneiform is in Chapter Three. Maria Erica Couto-Ferreira, Universität Heidelberg, Seminar for the Languages and Cultures of the Near East, is an Independent Scholar in Assyriology, and is also an author of horror genre novels. In addition to themes discussed in Chapter One, Couto-Ferreira refers to *Atra-ḫasīs*, the role of Nergal, the Mesopotamian god of pestilence, and the idea that plague was a means used by the gods to control population growth and to punish humanity. She also explains that in cuneiform texts there was a recognition that personal contact could transmit disease, leading to the practice of isolation and quarantine as a means of disease control. In cuneiform texts, both demonic causation of epidemics and personal behaviour as prophylaxis could be written about in the same text.

In Chapter Four, Louise Hitchcock, previously of the University of Melbourne and now retired, discusses Amarna Letter EA 35, which reports that copper supplies to Egypt had dwindled because the men, including copper-workers, in the land of Alašiya had been slain by Nergal (p. 71). However, 500 units (maybe talents) of copper were sent to Egypt with the letter, which according to Hitchcock, indicates that the pestilence had not resulted in the cessation of copper production. There is no convincing justification for this point. Instead, Alašiya is identified to

be *Alassa-Palaitaverna*, and there is a discussion about a substantial building excavated there that post-dates Letter EA 35 and is deemed to have had Mycenaean connections. The reference to a Mesopotamian god in a letter from Cyprus is interesting, but does not draw comment.

Brandon McDonald, Rumsey Family Assistant Professor in Interdisciplinary Studies, Classical Studies, Tufts University, contributed Chapter Five, which discusses the reason for the environmental decline of the Negev in the sixth century BC: was it the Justinianic Plague or the Late Antique Little Ice Age (LALIA)? The Justinianic Plague began in the eastern Nile Delta in July AD 541, and spread throughout the Empire. DNA analyses referenced by McDonald confirm the pestilence to be *Yersinia pestis*, the bacterium that causes bubonic plague. The LALIA was triggered by a series of earthquakes. Based on archaeological and written evidence, McDonald decides that the plague was the primary cause of the Negev's decline. However, as the paper acknowledges, the reason for the ongoing depressed state of the region is an open question.

Strahil V. Panayotov, Curator Assyrian Medicine British Museum, and Assistant at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, wrote the third cuneiform paper, Chapter Six. Demons, which in Mesopotamia were far less than gods, were deemed to be the cause of disease. Panayotov considers that this is parallel to the way people today view viruses, however, he does not take the next step and link different demons with specific viruses. He focuses on the way people treat unseen demons and viruses, developing diverse apotropaic rituals, which he considers analogous to the constant development of vaccines. He concludes 'the juxtaposition of demons and viruses exemplify how little [the] human mind has changed since Mesopotamian times' (p.121).

Chapter Seven by Nicholas Vlahogiannis, Honorary, School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, University of Melbourne, considers attitudes to disability in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. This scholarly essay draws on texts and iconography to explore the topic, but does not develop aspects of social structure. He notes that disabilities appear amongst the lower classes in Egyptian tomb paintings. Maybe, like today, people with disabilities in lower classes live with their families, while the affluent were able pass such people off to servants. Whatever the case, disability has little or no relationship to plague.

Klaus Wagensonner, Associate Research Scholar, Near Eastern Languages and Civilization, Yale University, prepared Chapter Eight, dealing with plague and misfortune, and the production and use of amulets and charms to ward off evil. In doing so, he presents cuneiform tablets from the Yale Babylonian Collection and the British Museum, some of which were unpublished. The texts list stones to be threaded to form amulets and sometimes describe the purpose of the amulet. The paper is a reminder that ancient bracelets and other adornments often had a function and were not just for display.

Chapter Nine by John Z. Wee, National University of Singapore, Tembusu College, Faculty Member, previously of Yale University, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, discusses Mesopotamian etiological divination in the light of the Greek Hippocratic writings, *On the Sacred Disease*. According to Wee, *Sacred Disease* considered the attribution of diseases to divine action, common in Greek society at the time, to be false because the origin was in fact 'the impersonal forces of nature' (p. 221). Wee thinks that Mesopotamian divination practice was like common Greek practice and so stands equally condemned. This is a fascinating discussion, which remains relevant in a world where anti-vaccinators are not uncommon. However, as argued in Chapter Six, in Mesopotamia sometimes diseases were thought to be the result of demonic activity rather than that of the divine.

The last chapter by Valeria Zubieta Lupo, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz, Institute of Ancient Studies, and Independent Scholar, Ancient History, returns to the issue of plague. In about 1320 BC, after fighting against the Egyptians, the Hittite King, Šuppiluliuma, returned to Hattusa, the Hittite capital with many prisoners, only to find an infectious disease spreading through the kingdom. The records associated with the epidemic were discovered in the royal Hittite archive. Šuppiluliuma died on his arrival home, probably from the plague. His successor, Muršili II had to deal with what became 20 years of recurrent epidemic. Lupo describes the Hittite actions against the epidemic using the World Health Organisation's five critical stages: anticipation, early detection, containment, control and mitigation, and elimination or eradication.

The subject of the book will be of interest to scholars of the ancient world, and its contents will have a certain resonance with readers who remember Covid-19. Some may not be enthusiastic about the inclusion of five papers dealing with cuneiform texts; however, they provide a wealth of relevant material for study. While every paper is interesting, a number do not focus on plague. The religious practises described to manage the medical unknowns in a pre-scientific age may seem quaint to readers now, until one remembers Covid-19 and non-scientific responses often made by governments. Nor have we, in Australia at least, had any independent scientific inquiry about the pandemic and the measures taken to manage it. Like so many people who lived through the events mentioned in this book, we had to make our own decisions and suffer the consequences. But ultimately, vaccinations were available to us and we did not have to sacrifice our pets to placate angry gods or recite incantations to fetter demons.

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