
For the modern scholar, Elam provides one of the more complex and elusive fields of study in the ancient world. Broadly speaking the name is used in ancient sources to refer to a region or regions lying to the east of Mesopotamia, in what is now south western Iran. Archaeological evidence for human occupation in the region dates back to at least the 6th millennium B.C. However, it is not until the appearance of written records in the 3rd millennium B.C. that we can effectively begin to construct a history of Elam. By the middle of the millennium at the latest, Mesopotamian scribes were using the ideogram NIM to refer to Elam, as indicated in the Sumerian *King List*. Indeed the name may be attested as early as 3000 B.C., amongst the texts of this period discovered in Uruk.

Subsequent textual references to Elam cover a period of more than 3000 years—down to references in Arabic sources in the late 1st millennium A.D. For the first two millennia of their attested existence, Elamites in their peak periods constituted a significant political and military presence in the Near East. Their conflicts with the Sumerian city states Kish and Ur are recorded in the Sumerian *King List*, they destroyed the city of Ur c. 2000 B.C., they had significant involvement with Babylonia in the 2nd millennium and in the first millennium they fell victims to attacks by Assyria and were finally overrun and annexed by the Medes and Persians.

From these references it is clear that any comprehensive treatment of the ancient Near Eastern civilizations needs to take as full account as possible of the role played by the Elamites in the region throughout the Bronze and Iron ages. Yet the general tendency in many such treatments to make the briefest possible references to these people serves to demonstrate the difficulties involved in trying to define who precisely they were, how they were constituted—politically, culturally, and ethnically—and where precisely they were located.

The work under review begins by addressing some of these questions in Chapter 1. Here the author investigates the etymology of the name,
proceeds to a consideration of the chronological framework of Elamite history, and concludes with the extremely vexed question of where Elam was. The difficulty in answering this last question is due partly to the fact that the name ‘Elam’ is an artificial construct (a name coined by Mesopotamian scribes), partly to apparent inconsistencies between archaeological, epigraphic, and literary data, and partly to differences in different periods between the territories referred to as Elam. Thus the identification of Elam with lowland Khuzistan (the modern Iranian province), based on Biblical and extra-Biblical sources, is inconsistent with later sources (e.g. the Greek geographer Strabo) which give Elam a highland location. This latter, says the author, is equally misleading. ‘Elam is not an Iranian term and has no relationship to the conception which the peoples of highland Iran had of themselves... From the Mesopotamian perspective, the easterners—lowlanders and highlanders alike—were all Elamites in the direction of Susa and beyond.’

This first chapter provides a prelude to the treatment of Elam in subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 deals with environmental and climatic factors, Chapter 3 with the precursors of Elam, Chapter 4 with the relationship between Elam and Awan, and the remaining seven chapters with the history and culture of Elam from the rise of a new power centred on the region of Shimashki in western Iran (mid-late Ur III period) to the period of the Sasanian empire (3rd to 7th centuries A.D.).

In general, the book is an extremely valuable contribution to the Cambridge World Archaeology series. It is meticulously researched, up to date, and in areas where no certainty can be reached presents all the related material with clarity and objectivity. In keeping with its title, and with the primary aim of the Cambridge World Archaeology series, the book has a strong archaeological focus. It is liberally illustrated with photographs, sketches, maps, and tables, which provide a very useful visual record of the ‘Elamite civilization’ over a period of several millennia. Yet in contrast to many reference works on archaeology, it also provides the reader with a relatively substantial historical framework for the various periods with which it deals. From the point of view of students and scholars working in related disciplines, this is an important feature.
Yet the book is no casual read. The mass of detail contained in each chapter and the extensive review of conflicting theories and the arguments on which they are based make this very much a work for the specialist student in Near Eastern studies. And there are times where even the specialist may lose direction in the plethora of detailed argumentation. The insertion of the numerous bibliographical references in the text also tends to detract from the reader’s concentration. This can be quite irritating in passages where sentence-flow, particularly in a complex, detailed argument, is constantly interrupted by strings of bracketed references. On the other hand the framing of each chapter by a synopsis and introduction at the beginning and a conclusion at the end provides a useful encapsulation of the content and drift of the chapter.

This book is unlikely to find a large market. But as a ‘state-of-the-art’ reference work on an important but elusive group of peoples of the ancient Near East, whose history extended over several millennia and who at times played a significant role in the history of their contemporaries, it would be a valuable acquisition for any University which offers ancient Near Eastern studies in its programme of courses and research fields.

Trevor Bryce
University of Queensland