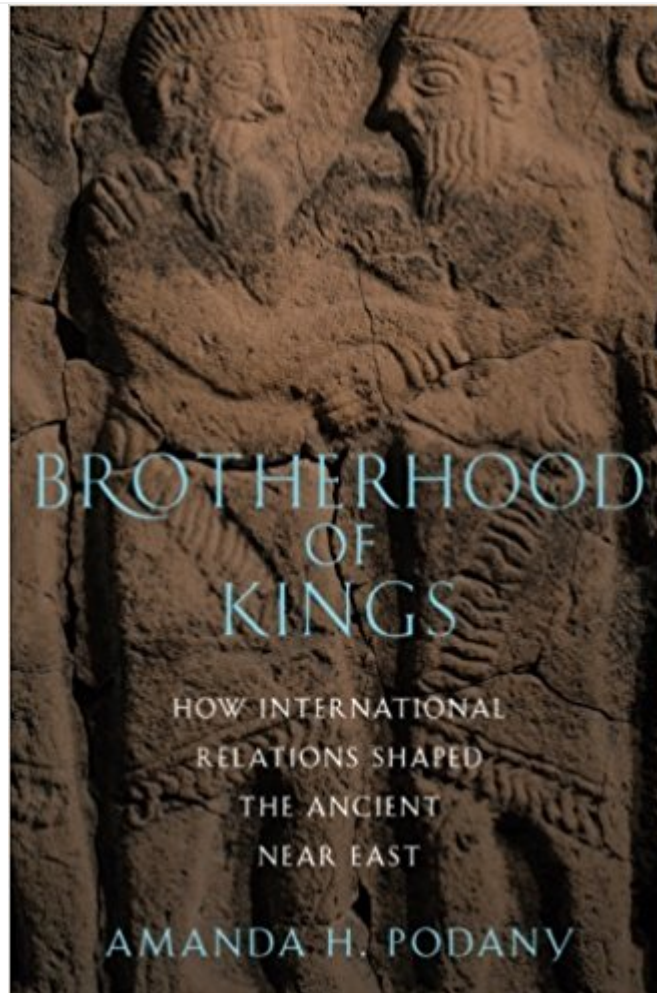


{essays in history}

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Brotherhood of Kings: How International Relations Shaped the Ancient Near East



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Reviewed Work(s)

Brotherhood of Kings: How International Relations Shaped the Ancient Near East. By Amanda H. Podany (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Pp. 432. Hardback, \$34.95.

As Assyriologists have often remarked, cuneiform tablets receive far less attention from the general public than their significance merits.^[1] The aim of *Brotherhood of Kings* is to draw attention to the history and importance of diplomatic texts, and Podany's introduction provides a sound and interesting overview of the life history of a typical tablet. Equally interesting is her decision to form the structure of the book around significant periods in Syrian history. Podany correctly notes that Syria was an important crossroads of the Near East and is often overlooked in general histories that focus on Egypt or Mesopotamia.

Any discussion of diplomacy in the ancient Near East necessitates mention of a considerable number of individuals. To aid readers unfamiliar with many of the historical figures, Podany begins her book with an excellent "cast of main characters" that includes deities, kings, messengers, and royal women, including the time period and approximate dates for each individual (xiv-xvi). Podany curiously chooses the vague descriptors "early New Kingdom" and "late New Kingdom" for many of the Egyptian kings, rejecting the more conventional division into the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties. The timeline is more conventional with its mention of the start of the Eighteenth Dynasty, but it marks neither the start of the New Kingdom nor the Nineteenth Dynasty (xx-xxi). Despite these minor quirks, both the cast of characters and timeline should prove quite useful as references for a reader unfamiliar with the ancient Near East.

The first part of the book deals with Ebla and the Early Dynastic (ED) period in Mesopotamia. This time saw the first empires in the ancient Near East, and Ebla was conveniently located between coastal Syria and northern Mesopotamian cities like Mari. Capitalizing on this location, rulers of Ebla established treaties with neighboring towns and placed taxes on goods coming through the city. Many of the luxury goods were

destined for the royal household; Podany describes the contents and implications of a diplomatic letter written to the king of Ebla by the king of Hamazi, discussing the exchange of royal gifts.

Podany displays a keen familiarity with military skirmishes and the difference between an oath sworn by a vanquished foe and a treaty signed by a rival. Podany does, however, neglect to discuss the tremendous uncertainties of interpreting the Stele of the Vultures due to its decidedly fragmentary nature (33). Podany is to be commended for her inclusion of Early Minoan Crete in her discussion of the Early Dynastic period; although the island was still largely isolated, it played a key role in later trade, and a brief mention of its earlier history is certainly appropriate. Podany also addresses the important concern of preservation bias; while Ebla was certainly an important city at its peak, its significance may be overblown due to the unique preservation of its records.

The second portion of the book focuses on the Old Babylonian period, and Podany's third chapter centers on the diplomatic relations between Mari and Mesopotamia, Canaan, Egypt, Anatolia, and the Mediterranean. Podany humorously addresses the anxiety with which kings fretted about their status among their peers; a promotion to "brother" was to be celebrated, whereas a demotion to "son" was to be mourned or rebuked. She describes the interactions between cities during this time period well, noting that kings' sons in addition to messengers often made the journey to neighboring states of interest. She brings up the issue of status again in the outrage of the Mari ambassadors upon being slighted (73) and in the rejection of an insufficient gift from an impoverished lesser king (76). Concluding the chapter on diplomacy, she discusses the process of creating a treaty and the role of diplomatic marriages in securing an alliance.

Podany addresses trade in the Old Babylonian world in her fourth chapter. She is best at home in her coverage of Mesopotamian trade with the Persian Gulf; her description of the decline of Meluhha (Indus Valley) and Magan (Oman) and the subsequent rise of Dilmun (Bahrain) is excellent and often ignored in histories of the ancient Near East. Particularly intriguing is the description of the unique voyage of dignitaries from Dilmun to Mesopotamia. Her account of Old Assyrian trade with Anatolia is similarly excellent and discusses the links and

exchanges between the two in detail, including mention of the enormous amount of textual material from *karum* Kanesh. Podany is less adept in her coverage of trade with Minoan Crete and Egypt, however; her suggestion that Minoan pottery found at Lahun indicates a Minoan presence is interesting but unwarranted. The goods could have been easily obtained through trade, and the imitation of the pottery in the local style suggests no Minoan artisans were present; the pottery is no doubt unique primarily because virtually no other Middle Kingdom settlements have been comprehensively excavated. Podany ties in literature with an excellent analysis of the tale of Sinuhe and his adventures in the Sinai and Canaan, but she has difficulty reconciling the brutal campaigns of Egyptian kings with the more genial depiction of Canaanites in the tale. A discussion of the terms *topos* (official propagandistic policy) and *mimesis* (practical, everyday policy) would have been appropriate here and were introduced to Egyptology to resolve the conundrum.^[2]

The third portion of *Brotherhood of Kings* covers the first period of the Late Bronze Age, roughly 1600-1400 BCE. The first chapter deals with Babylon and its dealings with the early Hittite Empire. The attack of Mursilis I on Babylon is described in good detail, and Podany floats the intriguing idea that a memory of the Old Assyrian trade may have been partially behind the attack (123), though she curiously overlooks the suggestion that the Hittites and Kassites were in league, the latter sweeping into Babylon and seizing control after the Hittites had sacked the city. The return of the statues of Marduk and Sarpantium to Babylon by the repenting Hittites is also discussed and is intriguing as one of the first examples of the subsequent Late Bronze Age royal correspondences. The second chapter centers on early Egyptian interactions with the Near East, particularly the Mitanni. This time period is relatively flush with inscriptions, including the so-called annals and day-books that record battles and campaigns. Podany makes full use of these sources and quotes, for example, the biography of Ahmose son of Ebana.

Particularly intriguing and representative of the recent research covered in the book is the remark that Tell Fakhariyah has been conclusively connected with the Mitannian capital of Washukanni through the analysis of clay tablets; as Podany notes, the discovery of the site would radically change the way historians reconstruct the Late Bronze Age. The

Egyptian expulsion of the Hyksos and the subsequent forays into Canaan, Hatshepsut's Punt and Nubian expeditions, and the battle of Megiddo under Thutmose III are all reconstructed vividly and accurately. More questionable is Podany's enthusiastic acceptance of the Avaris palace as a sign of a diplomatic marriage with Crete; there exists no indication of an island-wide centralized authority in Crete until 1450 BCE, and the Egyptians made no references to or depictions of Cretan princesses. Though Cretan ambassadors were depicted in several Eighteenth Dynasty tombs, Minoan frescoes indicate that women had high status and were not simply chattel to be married off for diplomacy. The so-called "throne" flanked by griffins at Knossos played a cultic function and was located in a probable shrine. The third chapter describes the creation of a peace treaty between Amenhotep II of Egypt and Shaushtatar II of Mitanni. Podany notes that the treaty with Mitanni would have been the first of its kind among the Egyptians (169), though it would be far from their last with a great Near Eastern power. The reasons for both Mitanni and Egypt wanting such a treaty are outlined in detail, as is the process by which the Mitannian king sued for peace. The terms of the treaty are discussed, as well as the cementing of ties through royal gift exchanges.

The fourth and final portion of *Brotherhood of Kings* discusses the Amarna period, stretching in the book to cover 1400-1300 BCE. This part is the strongest one of the book and focuses on Mitannian interactions with Egypt and to a lesser extent, Babylonia and Hatti. Podany begins with a discussion of the intricate workings of international diplomacy during the time of the great powers. She describes the role of the important Mitannian messenger Keliya in restoring the ties between Tushratta of Mitanni and Amenhotep III of Egypt, making the perceptive observation that the ancient kings could and did address each other quite harshly at times without disrupting the peaceful brotherhood (194). Equally astute is Podany's note that Amenhotep III made no reference of this peace in his monuments (196). Though she offers no explanation, this absence may have been due to Egypt's unwillingness to accept other states as equals; even the treaty with Hatti carved at Karnak portrayed the Hittites in a most unflattering light. The discussion then moves to the exchange of royal women and its role in diplomacy. Podany provides excellent descriptions of the enormous dowries and describes the festive celebrations accompanying

the arrival of foreign princesses in Egypt. As she notes, these princesses usually vanished from view upon arrival at their destination.

After discussing the exchange of letters and women, Podany moves into a comprehensive discussion of the political events of the time. Her account of Alashiya (Cyprus) is well informed and surprisingly detailed, and she notes that the island's enormous quantities of copper made it a more valuable player in the Late Bronze Age than its size or military might would otherwise suggest. The contents and probable course of the Uluburun shipwreck are mentioned, though the presence of Mycenaean wares as far west as Iberia belies Podany's claim that the Mycenaeans were not as prone to sea-faring as the Minoans (259). Podany includes a discussion of the connection of the Ahhiyawa of Hittite records with Mycenaean Greece, though the description of the political interactions between the two is unfortunately lacking in appropriate detail.^[3] Podany then discusses the rise of Hittite imperial power under Suppiluliuma and its effects on the delicate balance of diplomacy. The Egyptians, recognizing the nascent power of the Hittites, tacitly withdrew support from Mitanni, and after acquiring additional support from Babylonia and the Syrian port city of Ugarit, the Hittites swept through Syria, acquiring a great deal of Mitannian territory. It was at this point that an Egyptian royal widow wrote to Suppiluliuma, requesting a Hittite prince; had this marriage taken place, the structure of the ancient Near East might have been changed forever (285). Podany ends the book with a discussion of the fall of Mitanni to Assyria, the reinstallation of a king on the throne of Mitanni by the Hittites as a buffer state, and a brief overview of events following the fall of Mitanni in the epilogue. Particularly notable is Podany's humble and perspicacious remark that new discoveries continue to prove publications, including her own, outdated in some areas nearly as soon as they are published (308).

As a general introduction to international relations in the ancient Near East, *Brotherhood of Kings* is a compact source with a considerable amount of information, generally accurate and presented in a readable style. Although several more detailed books on Near Eastern interactions have been written recently with the general public in mind, most focus solely on the Late Bronze Age and do not encompass the same ambitious chronological scope of Podany's work. *Brotherhood of Kings* is also relatively unique in its Syrian focus; most comparable works focus on

Egypt or one of the great Near Eastern powers, typically the Hittites or Babylonians. The book, unfortunately, leaves out the exciting and dynamic thirteenth century BCE, during which the Hittites and Egyptians dominated the international stage and brought their countries to renewed heights of wealth and stability.[4] This omission excludes any mention of the lively correspondence between the Hittite queen Puduhepa and foreign royalty, including her “sister,” Nefertari of Egypt, consort of Ramesses II. Although the title of the book is indicative of its focus, mention of this female correspondence would have been of interest to many readers. Nevertheless, *Brotherhood of Kings* will no doubt find a place on many bookshelves.

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[1] See, for example, Edward Chiera, *They Wrote on Clay* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938).

[2] Egyptologists Antonio Loprieno, Stuart Tyson Smith, and Thomas Schneider have discussed this problem extensively. The idea was first introduced in A. Loprieno, *Toposund Mimesis. Zum Ausländer in der Ägyptischen Literatur* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrasowitz, 1988).

[3] For better coverage, see Trevor R. Bryce, “Relations between Hatti and Ahhiyawa in the last decades of the Bronze Age,” in *Hittite Studies in Honor of Harry A. Hoffner on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Gary Beckman et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003) 59-72.

[4] A reader interested in this period is best referred to the excellent work by Marc van de Mieroop, *The Eastern Mediterranean in the Age of Ramesses II* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).



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