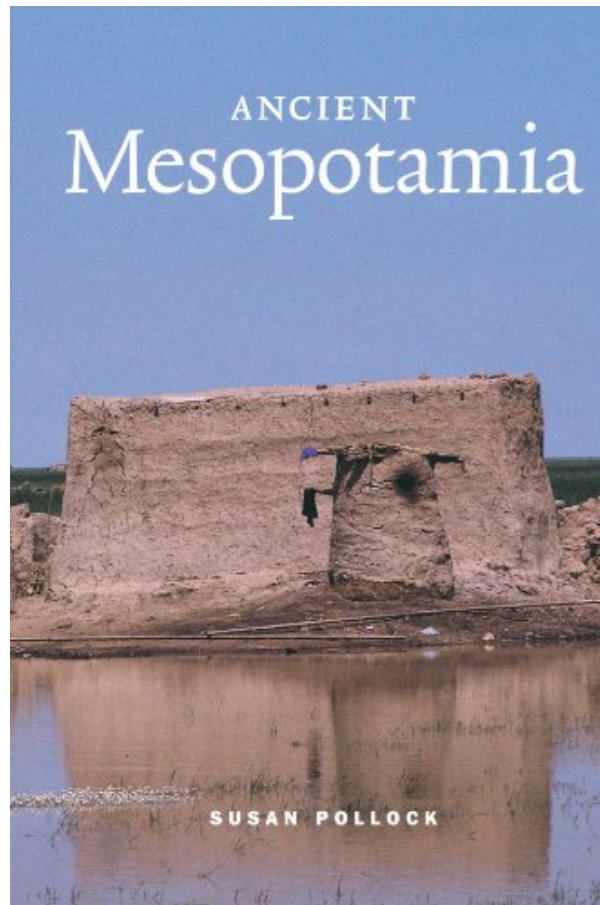
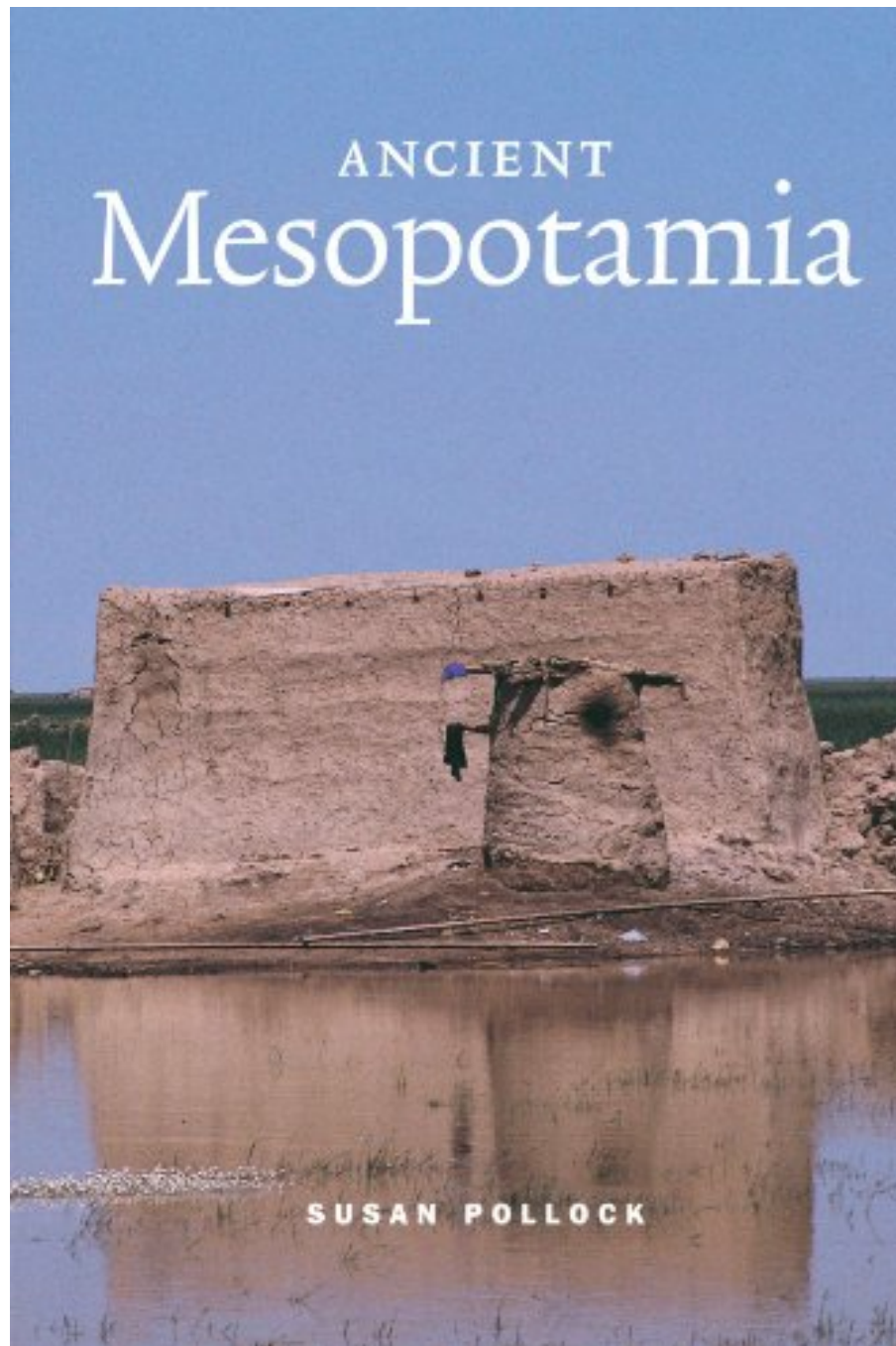


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This is an in-depth treatment of the antecedents and first florescence of early state and urban societies in lowland Mesopotamia over nearly three millennia, from approximately 5000 to 2100 BC. The approach is explicitly anthropological, drawing on contemporary theoretical perspectives to enrich our understanding of the ancient Mesopotamian past. It explores the ways people of different genders and classes contributed and responded to political, economic, and ideological changes. The interpretations are based on studies of regional settlement patterns, faunal remains, artifact distributions and activity patterning, iconography, texts and burials.

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Most helpful customer reviews

24 of 31 people found the following review helpful.

A cold and biased view of Mesopotamia

By Mario de Vivo

Dr. Pollock presents a cold, distant and very biased view of a fascinating subject. She is, for instance, very worried about the role of women in Sumerian societies from the very first pages, continues to complain about "male domination" throughout the book, and finishes by proposing that future studies focus on this subject (women role in Mesopotamia). I wonder why she did not develop any such study herself. Unfortunately, since she was not able to present a feminist history of early Mesopotamia, she has apparently

chosen to present us a history without men as well.

Dr. Pollock description of the "household" economy is unconvincing, obscure, and it is not rare that she begins some paragraph with several "maybes" and "ifs" only to end it with some sweeping statement. It would be ok to present a somewhat speculative view of early Mesopotamian economy if it was not so blatantly ideologic. She actually concludes her book by stating that any other approach would be "to participate" (her words) on the side of oppressors against the oppressed.

Her disdain for the written record is amazing! According to Dr. Pollock, it reflects the life of the elite and is riddled with maleness, and therefore she ignores it until about page 142. But even after recognizing that written records do exist, nothing of it is used in her interpretations of the archeological data.

The entire Mesopotamian religion(s) is presented as a domination tool of the elite against the poor. At the same time she (following Oppenheim) claims that the Mesopotamian religion we know was not that of the common people, but an elite business. She perhaps forgets that in order to be a domination tool, a religion must be believed by the dominated.

I read the book throughout and did not learn anything about possible distinct peoples inhabiting the area, their languages, their beliefs, the tension between city-states and the evolution of regional countries. No mention (except for Sargon and his son and even so in the briefest manner) is made of rulers. In fact one may finish reading the book and believe that rulers had no impact at all on the daily lives and the economy of the region.

Unfortunately Dr. Pollock's ideological battle against objectivity irritates and detracts from some useful information she compiles. If some older views of Mesopotamian history were excessively romantic, Dr. Pollock's view is one that conveys the impression that the author dislikes her study subject.

25 of 26 people found the following review helpful.

An excellent, readable under grad textbook on Mesopotamia

By Steve Erickson

I have been reading a ton about Mesopotamia lately, and this book was terrific. Be warned, though - it is written very clearly in a text book style.

It is dry writing - Dr. Pollack does not really attempt to liven up her writing with colorful stories, myths, etc. An example to contrast with is Kramer's book "History Begins at Sumer," where he tries to give a more informal, evocative spin on similar issues. (Kramer's book is itself another take on his own dry, previous book on Sumeria. Amazon has both of these, if interested.)

She is matter of fact and gets right down to business, in each of her chapters. She covers a standard set of topics for a culture - death, writing, bureaucracy, economics, etc.

So be warned - it's not written to enchant or lure you in. It feels very much like a college textbook. In this respect, it is very brief - each chapter is only 25 pages long or so. The whole book has only 224 pages of core text. Very short for a textbook - I have the trade paperback version, so it is light and thin - very easy to read,too.

But now to the meat of it: the reason I liked this book so much was exactly for the strengths that come with it being an undergrad textbook: she presents evidence and little details that are very, very interesting.

Most other books will just SAY that the Uruk period had less social differentiation than the later, more urbanized Early Dynasty periods. But she gives you little, easy to read tables and graphs that show the actual breakdowns of how much pottery was found at each time. You get to think a little for yourself as to what that means. My favorite example was when she discusses gender in pictures on Mesopotamian art. Women (or what are interpreted to possibly be women) are shown in groups making textiles. Men are shown with

textiles too, but also alone, also in combat, herding animals, etc. She infers that women are not individuated like the men can be on occasion in the artwork.

The concise tables she gives are easy to peruse yourself and fun to see how archaeologists actually form conjectures as to what it actually means. I loved that. By the way, she focuses on gender along the way, a nice surprise and refreshing for most of these types of books.

Another great bit was on burial methods - in the earlier Ubaid period, the official (but not necessarily actual) societal position was that in death, we are all part of the community, not so much individuals. Graves show mostly similarity to each other. Not so for the Early Dynastic, where social differentiation is now heavily emphasized. Graves have objects that show striking disparities of wealth and status between members of society. So we can see that over time, stratification is increasing as civilization 'progresses.' Fascinating.

Are these observations interesting to you? If they seem obvious, then this book may not be so good for you. If you like a little more info on what anthropologists actually FIND, then this is a worthwhile book. Lots of little details - how scientists gauge stratification by the types of bones found in different houses; the age at which animals are killed helps determine whether they were raised primarily for meat (males killed young), or wool (both genders killed later)- these are the little things that abound, and that I just had a ball with. I liked seeing how archaeologists try to make sense of the brute artifacts themselves.

I already have a strong interest in Mesopotamia. I'm not sure if this book will be lively enough to spark an interest not already present. But I read it in a day - very easy to read. It is dry, official in its style, yet not terminologically dense. You can just see her trying to write in that academic style while having her undergrads be able to understand what her point is.

I recommend this book. I wish, though, that she spent more time on certain details: more on how widespread the infamous death pits at the Royal Cemetery at Ur were. What is the overall evidence for human sacrifice, for the death pits. Also, I was very unsatisfied with the depth she went into the actual mythology of the area. At the end, she states that two areas she wants to explore more in the future are gender and the lives of ordinary folk. So it was surprising that the meaning and the themes of the literature and mythology are not more than cursorily addressed here. I guess that is due to her archaeological approach: she talks a great deal about tombs, houses, plant findings. You can find these things in the ground. Meaning? Well...

In addition, what about sex? She addresses gender - how males and females relate socially, but not sexually. Let me tell you, I recently read a translation of the 12 tablets that Gilgamesh was written on, and there is a great deal of ripe, vivid sexuality to be seen there. Raised on Christianity, I was not used to seeing the divine and explicit sexuality together. Enkidu and the courtesan, as well as in other myths: Enlil rapes (!) his future wife Ninlil. Perhaps sexuality is too touchy for undergrads...

So in sex and the meaning of the Mesopotamian literature and religion I think she either overlooks it altogether or glides right over it.

But all in all, a great book. I'm on Amazon now seeing what else she's written...

21 of 24 people found the following review helpful.

Through a glass darkly

By John R. Mitchell

I did not find the book as dry as the one reviewer did. The author is well informed and provides lots of interesting information as well as good bibliography. She is also mostly lucid and engaging. The book is well illustrated. A serious distraction in the presentation for this reader was the very heavy ideological slant adopted by the author. The political and social agendas seemed very pronounced and illustrated to some extent the idea of Foucault that all history writing is fiction. Marx's hostility to class differentiation and his dream of a future paradise of undifferentiated life in the absence of civil society shine through on many pages of the book. For example, the word "tribute" occurs ad nauseum. The author also displays some hostility to the development of complexity of social and economic life in early Mesopotamian civilization. Scholars of the Ancient Near East should give more thought to the idea of epoche or bracketing of personal prejudices as practiced in the history of religions. Despite the ideological distraction, the book is well-written

and worth reading but should be balanced by a more main-stream presentation such as that by J.N. Postgate, Early Mesopotamia.

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