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In this extensively researched essay, the author challenges the common assumption that international power-balancing "was quintessentially a product of European statecraft culminating in the eighteenth century—often dubbed the 'golden age' of the balance of power" (421). He argues that a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon should begin with ancient Western Asia, which by the second millennium BCE provided an international arena where states were integrated within a political network which was based on interdependence and power-balancing. Though a precise definition of 'power-balancing' or 'balance of power' remains problematic, the logic behind it is, in his view, clear: "a true balance policy emerges when in a given situation a state allies itself with the weaker of two possible partners, because it recognizes that the other may finally prove the greater menace. Yet the overriding aim of balancing behaviour has usually been to sustain equilibrium amongst Great Powers and not uphold a general peace" (422).

These observations provide a background for the author's discussion of the political and strategic interconnections and interrelationships between the polities of ancient Western Asia, or more narrowly defined, the ancient Near East. His particular focus is on the second millennium BCE, the period of the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. He acknowledges, however, the already old and rich tradition of diplomatic relations, in the age of the Sumerian city-states, the dynasty of Akkad, and the First Dynasty of Babylon.¹ Bigger political communities, he comments, emerged out of core political entities—the city-states—leading to the formation of a regional system "with multiple power centres in Syria and upper Mesopotamia, later on in Anatolia as well, competing and interacting as peer polities" (424). This is illustrated by a well-known text from Mari, cited by the author (424 with n. 31), which lists a diversity of contemporary polities in Middle Bronze Age Mesopotamia and Syria ruled by a diversity of kings "jostling for advantage where the control of territory was never permanent or guaranteed" (424-425).

Against this background, the middle centuries of the second millennium BCE saw the emergence of five major states, the 'Great Kingdoms' of Egypt, Hatti (the Hittite kingdom), the Hurrian kingdom of Mittani (now the preferred spelling), Babylon, and Assyria, with a motley range of smaller states throughout the regions of Anatolia, Syria, and Mesopotamia which were generally subordinate, as vassal states, allies, or client kingdoms, to one of the Great Powers. (Assyria replaced Mittani as one of these Powers after the latter's destruction by the Hittites in the 14th century.) The author misleadingly claims independent status for Arzawa in western Anatolia and Alasiya in Cyprus.² The states comprising the Arzawa

¹The only other recent comparable treatment known to me of this topic is that of Amanda Podany, *Brotherhood of Kings. How International Relations shaped the Ancient Near East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Of some relevance to the topic, though now dated, is Guy Kestemont, *Diplomatique et droit international en Asie occidentale* (Louvain-La-Neuve: Université Catholique de Louvain, 1974).

²For a comprehensive treatment of the Arzawa Lands and their fluctuating relationships with Hatti, see Susanne Heinhold-Krahmer, *Arzawa. Untersuchungen zu seiner Geschichte nach den hethitischen Quellen* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1977). For translations

complex were frequently bound to Hatti as vassal states in a series of treaties that were unilaterally imposed by the Great King upon vassal rulers, and Alasiya was at least nominally subject to Hatti for part of its Late Bronze Age history.

A remarkable and oft-noted feature of Late Bronze Age Near Eastern history is that this four-century span was almost free of major wars between the Great Powers, in marked contrast, the author points out, to more recent periods in international history where war rather than peace was primarily responsible for maintaining a balance of power (425-426). By way of developing this point, the author cites three major conflicts to demonstrate the workings of balancing behaviour in Western Asia, both at a local and regional level: the battles of Megiddo (circa 1457–1455 BCE), Qadesh (circa 1274 BCE), and Nihriya (circa 1237 BCE). The outcome of the first of these, Megiddo,³ which had been triggered by a revolt of more than 300 city-states, was that Egypt “truly became a Near Eastern Power, establishing a permanent presence in Palestine” (426). The Assyrian victory in the battle of Nihriya, fought against the Hittites in northern Mesopotamia, is seen by the author as the endpoint of a decade-long struggle between Hatti and Assyria for control of the last remnants of the Mittanian empire. It resulted, in his view, in the political reality of Assyria’s rise to Great Power status (427). The battle of Qadesh, fought between Ramesses II and the Hittite king Muwatalli II in 1274 BCE, resulted in an ultimate Hittite victory when seen in terms of Hatti’s consolidation of its control over the two disputed subject territories, Amurru and Qadesh, which are located in the border regions of both powers. But the heavy casualties suffered by both sides ensured that their military might would never again be tested on the field of battle. The famous peace treaty between Ramesses and the current Hittite king Hattusili III was in part a tacit admission of this. The author suggests, as have other scholars, that the treaty was prompted in part by the increasingly aggressive role played by Assyria in the region and “the potential existential threat” it posed to both long-established Great Powers (429). However, Assyria is not mentioned in either version (Hittite and Egyptian) of the treaty. Thus any influence it may have had in bringing the treaty-partners to the negotiating table remains purely speculative,

In any case, the author concludes that the examples above “show that the polities of the region realized they were part of an interactive arena—without having an understanding on the workings of the balance, this would not have been possible” (429).

The mid-fourteenth century cache of letters from the so-called Amarna archive, which includes diplomatic correspondence exchanged between the pharaohs Amenhotep III and Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten), their vassal rulers, and the pharaohs’ royal peers, throws important light on the complexities of international and intranational relationships between the Great Kings and their subjects, with a particular focus on the Syro-Palestinian region. “In fact,” the author comments, “the brief Amarna age is part of a larger period of relative Near Eastern peace and prosperity that lasted several centuries and was maintained by shrewd statecraft and diplomacy” (429). On the diplomatic front, he justifiably comments that “the Amarna letters offer a rare opportunity to enter the international arena of the pre-modern world outside the European experience.... the Amarna collection constitutes one of the key elements to understand interpolity relations in the ancient Near East during the Late Bronze” (428).⁴

The answer to the question ‘Was there a Balance of Power System in the Ancient Near East?’ must in broad terms be yes. Yet a precise definition of what exactly the term ‘balance of power’ means in an ancient Near Eastern context remains elusive. And attempts to formulate such a definition raise various methodological issues, particularly with regard to the use of the raw data provided by the wide range of sources on which the author’s arguments are based. Account needs to be taken

of Hatti’s vassal treaties with the Arzawan states, see Gary Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 69-93. On Alasiya’s relations with Hatti, see Trevor Bryce, *The Kingdom of the Hittites* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 135-136, 321-323.

³ Puzzlingly, the author refers to this conflict as “one of the earliest known military clashes in the ancient world” (426). The history of ancient Near Eastern warfare is replete with conflicts fought on a regular basis from the emergence of the Sumerian city-states in the 3rd millennium through to the Asiatic campaigns of the pharaohs beginning with Thutmose I.

⁴ For further recent comments on the Amarna letters and their significance, see Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000-323 BC* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 143-146.

of the diverse nature of these sources and the extent to which their inevitable biases distort the picture of Western Asia “existing as an international arena of states fully integrated in a system based on interdependence and power balancing” (421). Our information about the Battle of Megiddo comes from the military Annals of Thutmose III,⁵ about the Battle of Qadesh from the flamboyant, rhetorically charged, publicly displayed records of Ramesses II,⁶ and about the Battle of Nihriya from a letter written by the victorious king to a Hittite vassal, king of the wealthy Syrian state Ugarit, very likely exaggerating the magnitude of his victory in order persuade the vassal to defect. Whether or not this battle had a significant impact on the international balance of power in the Near East remains another matter for speculation.⁷

Some fifteen years passed between the battle of Qadesh and the conclusion of the Egyptian-Hittite peace treaty. The intervening years saw some important changes, particularly in the internal affairs of Hatti, resulting in the accession of Hattusili III after unseating in a coup the rightful heir, his nephew Urhi Teshub.⁸ Even if fear of a third unnamed party, Assyria, was and continued to be a main prompt for the treaty, the coup in Hatti provided the Hittite treaty-partner with a more immediate and more explicit motive for coming to term with Ramesses. The pharaoh’s endorsement of his royal authority, particularly after his rebuffs by the kings of Assyria and Babylon,⁹ was almost certainly regarded as essential to his credibility among his own subjects, who were divided in their support for him. This provides an important dimension to the power-balancing thesis, though it plays no part in the author’s analysis. The sometimes acrimonious exchanges of correspondence between the royal courts in the years leading up to the treaty are highly instructive in this regard—though they are not mentioned by the author.¹⁰ Also instructive are the different perspectives on the future relationships between Hatti and Egypt provided by the two versions, Egyptian and Hittite, of the treaty.¹¹

Often described as the crossroads of the ancient Near East, Syria, and the states constituting it, played a major role throughout the Middle and Late Bronze Age in bringing about and helping maintain a balance of power between the great powers of the age. Control of at least part of the Syrian region was essential to these powers for both strategic and commercial reasons. Trade routes from Mesopotamia and regions further east passed through various Syrian cities and ports, conveying a wide range of goods to Egypt and Anatolia and other western regions. For the Hittites, one of the most

⁵ For further discussion of the battle and its results, see Anthony Spalinger, *War in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 83-100.

⁶ The text is translated by Alan Gardiner, *The Kadesh Inscriptions of Ramesses II* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1975), and in an improved version by Kenneth Kitchen in William Hallo and K. Lawson Younger (eds), *The Context of Scripture Vol. II* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 32-41. For the lead-up to the battle, the battle itself, and its aftermath, see Kitchen, *Pharaoh Triumphant. The Life and Times of Ramesses II* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1982), 43-95, Spalinger, *War in Ancient Egypt*, 209-234.

⁷ For further context on the battle and its significance, see Bryce, *Kingdom*, 316-318.

⁸ The author gives the misleading impression that Muwattalli II, Ramesses’ opponent at Qadesh, was still king of Hatti at the time of the treaty. On the internal changes in Hatti following the battle of Qadesh, see Bryce, *Kingdom*, 246-265.

⁹ See Bryce, *Kingdom*, 274, 276.

¹⁰ The letters have been transcribed, translated, and edited by Elmar Edel, *Die ägyptisch-hethitische Korrespondenz aus Boghazköi in babylonischer und hethitischer Sprache* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994). Selections of the correspondence have also been translated by Beckman, *Diplomatic Texts*, 128-138.

¹¹ On this, see Samuel Jackson, “Contrasting representations and the Egypto-Hittite treaty” in H. Keimer and G. Davis, eds., *Registers and Modes of Communication in the Ancient Near East*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 43-58. The reference to the relevant page numbers given by the author to Beckman in his n. 62 should be amended to 96-100.

important commodities was tin, essential for the manufacture of bronze. So far, only small finds of possible sources of tin in Bronze Age Anatolia suggest that almost all supplies of this material came from regions to the east of Syria.

The reduction of the Syrian city-states and petty kingdoms to vassal status was therefore a prime objective of the great powers of the age, notably the Anatolian-based kingdom of Hatti, the northern-Mesopotamian based Hurrian kingdom of Mittani, and the Egyptian-based kingdom of the pharaohs. Two hundred years of almost incessant warfare between Hittites and Hurrians ruled out any prospect of a diplomatic settlement between the two, or a balance-of-power sharing arrangement. The aggressive encroachment of Hatti into Syrian territory did, however, lead to a possible treaty-alliance between the Mittanian king and the pharaoh Amenhotep II (ca 1427-1400 BCE), as noted by the author (429). Such a treaty, if it did exist, served not only to hold Hatti's imperialist ambitions in check, but was probably designed primarily to establish a power-sharing arrangement between the two kingdoms in the Syrian region. Egypt gained control of Qadesh on the Orontes River, along with the Syrian coastal states of Amurru and Ugarit. All territory beyond in northern Syria was conceded to Mittani.

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That situation changed with the Hittite destruction of the Mittanian kingdom in the third quarter of the fourteenth century. During his conflict with Mittani, the Hittite king Suppiluliuma I had studiously avoided overt military action against Egypt's Syrian vassals, but Mittani's removal from the international arena left the Hittite king free to turn his attention to these vassals. A (hardly unforeseen) consequence of the Hittite victory was that it left Assyria free once more to pursue its own imperialist ambitions, on both sides of the Euphrates and southwards into Babylonia. This set the stage, after a period of increasing tensions between Egypt and Hatti which culminated in the battle of Qadesh, for the establishment, via the treaty agreement between the two powers, of a new balance of power settlement. But the treaty was concerned primarily with establishing a military alliance between the contracting parties. Any balance of power between them, involving questions of sovereignty over territories to which both had laid claim, plays no part in the terms of the treaty, and can only be inferred from other information. The looming threat of Assyria may have been the elephant in the room. But the treaty contains no reference to any third party as a reason for concluding the alliance.

In the course of his discussion, the author has raised a number of important issues regarding the conduct of diplomatic activities in the ancient Near East, as a contribution to a broader study of International Relations in world history—and drawn some questionable conclusions. Among these is his claim that “Western Asia existed as an international arena of states fully integrated in a system based on interdependence and power balancing” (421). This, I think, may be going too far. Unless I have misunderstood what the author is trying to say, it seems to me very difficult to come up with a pattern of international diplomatic activity in the ancient Near East, which is such a complex, multifaceted conglomerate of political and social entities, that can be comfortably accommodated within such a system. But overall, the author has provided many valuable insights into the world of ancient Near Eastern diplomatic activities, political relationships, and above all the ability of a group of just five men (only four at any one time), what has been called a ‘Club of Royal Brothers,’¹² to exercise between them dominion over such a vast area, extending from the Aegean coast of Anatolia, through Syria down through the Land of the Nile, and across the Euphrates to the easternmost fringes of Mesopotamia. Though as the author points out, many of their wars were fought by proxies—petty kingdoms and city-states subject to their control—the Great Kings were remarkably successful in ensuring a high degree of stability in the Near East throughout the periods they held power. For this reason in particular, a study of ancient Near Eastern diplomacy deserves an important place in the history of international affairs throughout the ages. The author's essay is a commendable step towards recognition of this.

Trevor Bryce began his academic career at the University of Queensland, Australia, with a BA (Hons) degree in Latin Language and Literature (1962) followed by an MA in the same area (1969) before switching his research interests to ancient Near Eastern history and civilization. He completed a Ph.D. on the Lycian civilization of southwestern Turkey in

¹² See Trevor Bryce, *Letters of the Great Kings of the Ancient Near East* (London: Routledge, 2003, reissued in paperback, 2014, 76-94), Van De Mieroop, *Ancient Near East*, 137-158.

1975, and has henceforth specialised in Hittite studies in particular. He has written approx. 130 articles, book chapters, and reviews on the ancient Near East, and twenty books (several co-authored). Included amongst his books are *The Kingdom of the Hittites* (Oxford University Press, 1975), *The Routledge Handbook of the Peoples and Places of Ancient Western Asia* (Routledge, 2012 [2009]), and *Ancient Syria. A Three thousand Year History* (Oxford University Press, 2019 [2014]). In 2010, he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Letters (D. Litt) by the University of Queensland. He is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities (FAHA). His academic posts include the positions of Lecturer-Senior Lecturer-Reader in the University of Queensland, Professor of Classics and Ancient History in the University of New England, Australia, and Deputy Vice Chancellor of Lincoln University, New Zealand. He has held Visiting Scholarships or Fellowships at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, USA, Wolfson College, Oxford UK, Macquarie University, Australia, Australian National University, Canberra, Dept. of Classics, Leeds University, UK, Institute of Archaeology, Tel Aviv University. He is currently Emeritus Professor, University of New England, and Honorary Professor, University of Queensland.