

Jodi Magness

The Archaeology of the Holy Land: From the Destruction of Solomon's Temple to the Muslim Conquest. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Paper.

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Jodi Magness sets herself a seemingly impossible task with this book—but she succeeds admirably! This excellent textbook on the history and archaeology of the Holy Land impressively covers a period of over a thousand years, a daunting undertaking by any measure. Magness takes readers on a wonderful journey of discovery, through which they experience the transformation of ancient Palestine from a relative backwater to one of the most important and contested places on earth. The book is amply illustrated with helpful maps and images, and it is written in the lucid, readable style characteristic of Magness.

The introduction conveniently covers some basics, such as chronology, terminology, and principles of archaeology. Chapter 2 is devoted to a history of Jerusalem, starting from the early Bronze Age up to 586 B.C.E. It also serves to introduce readers to the topography of Jerusalem, which occupies a key role throughout Magness's book. One of the strengths of this chapter is how it highlights the multi-layered history of Jerusalem, evinced not only through archaeology and written sources but also by the multitude of toponyms attached to the city's various locations. Subsequent chapters explore the history and archaeology of the Babylonian and Persian periods (chapter 3), the early Hellenistic period (chapter 4), and the late Hellenistic or Hasmonaean period (chapter 5). Chapter 6 discusses the archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Chapters 7–10 trace the history and archaeology of the early Roman period, up to 70 C.E., with each chapter focusing on one or more major sites, namely Jerusalem (chapter 7); Caesarea Maritima, Samaria-Sebaste, Herodian Jericho, and Herodium (chapter 8); the Galilee (chapter 9); and Masada (chapter 10). Chapter 11 presents an overview on tombs and burial customs, and includes a discussion of the burial of Jesus and James as well as of the relatively recent controversies regarding the Talpiyot tomb and the so-called James ossuary. Chapter 12 moves ahead to the period between the two Jewish revolts, whereas chapter 13 focuses on Jerusalem, or Aelia Capitolina, from 135–300 C.E. Chapter 14 treats the question of synagogues, from debates about origins to the development of the synagogue in the Roman period. Here, Magness discusses and challenges the traditional typology of synagogues and summarizes her views on the much debated issue concerning the date of monumental synagogues in the Galilee. The chapter also includes a discussion on the Helios and zodiac cycle which features in some synagogue mosaics. The last three chapters cover the history and archaeology of the Byzantine and Islamic

periods. Chapter 15 focuses on the Christian remains in Jerusalem, while chapter 16 presents an outline of Christian sites elsewhere in Palestine. Chapter 17, which serves also as the book's epilogue, traces briefly the Islamic expansion in Palestine in the 7th century C.E. and the archaeology of early Islamic Jerusalem. This is followed by a glossary of key terms, a timeline, and an index.

There is much to commend about this book. First of all, this is an excellent introduction to the archaeology of ancient Palestine—thanks to this textbook, students should have a good grasp of the salient points of the history and archaeology of the region. Moreover, the book provides a solid basis for further exploration of any of the periods or themes that it covers. However, this volume is not just a popular synthesis, but a mine of information for scholars. Non-archaeologist scholars in particular will find a highly accessible overview and appreciate Magness's presentation and analysis of large amounts of disparate data—the result of innumerable archaeological expeditions in the Holy Land—in a concise and clear manner. For non-specialist readers (but possibly also for scholars), Magness is also careful to highlight aspects about the past that might not be immediately obvious. For instance, she notes that, in antiquity, the largest part of the population would never have seen the king in their lifetime, meaning that their only visual encounter with him would have come through coins (66–67). For modern readers born in a culture of twenty-four-hour news cycles and immersed in the ever ubiquitous social media, this may come as a surprise.

Inevitably, the book suffers from the textbook format, which calls for a general approach to the material at the expense of details and references. Sometimes, this results in statements that are somewhat inaccurate. For example, Magness states that the Phoenician building technique that alternates between ashlar and fieldstones has “so far been found in the eastern Mediterranean only at Tel Dor” (56). However, similar building techniques have been exposed at other sites from the Hellenistic period (although it must be said that it is unclear whether Magness is here referring only to the Persian period). At times, because of its succinct style, important concepts are treated all too briefly. One such example is the much debated issue of John Hyrcanus I's and Aristobulus I's policies of forced ‘conversion’ or Judaization (95). Perhaps the major issue is the uneven treatment of the different periods. About two thirds of the book (up to page 255) deals with the Second Temple period (with five chapters on the early Roman period alone), meaning that the period between the late 1st century C.E. and the 7th century C.E. gets much less attention. Also, a more sustained focus on rural Palestine and a more detailed treatment of portable material culture would have been welcome. All too often (but understandably) the spotlight is cast on the major sites (e.g., Jerusalem,

Jericho, Caesarea Maritima, Sepphoris, Gamla) or monuments, whereas other settlement types (e.g., villages, farmsteads, and rural estates) and some aspects of material culture either go unmentioned or receive a summary treatment. But none of this takes anything away from the book—it is completely understandable that a textbook necessitates the omission of certain details and information.

In her preface, Magness notes that she has wanted to write this book for more than twenty years. We should all be glad that this project has finally come to fruition. I envision this textbook to be on most reading lists of courses dealing with the archaeology of ancient Palestine—teachers and students alike will be well-served. Here, we have a very learned, highly accessible, and authoritative introduction to one of the most archaeologically rich fields. Anyone remotely interested in the history and archaeology of the Holy Land should acquire a copy.

Dennis Mizzi

University of Malta