

BOOK REVIEWS

GOMBÁR, Eduard, PECHA, Lukáš. *Dějiny Iráku*. [The History of Iraq] Praha: Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, 2013. 701 p. ISBN 978-80-7422-249-8. In Czech.

As a part of the long-running and successful “History of States” (*dějiny států*) series of publications, the Lidové noviny publishing house in Prague published a work in November 2013 dealing with the history of Iraq. It is a rule that works that are originally written by leading local specialists in the field – and which are not translations of books previously published abroad – better capture the imagination and needs of the Czech (and Slovak) readership. As the authors state, the lowlands between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers in prehistoric times became a place of fundamental transformations which gradually led towards the formation of developed civilization and significantly influenced the subsequent development of the whole region. And this civilization, whose axis of life was formed by rivers (like in China, India and Egypt) has one of the longest continual histories in the world, going back to the very beginnings of human history. Similarly to Egypt, where written expression in the forms of hieroglyphics captured the spoken word, in Mesopotamia a sophisticated form of writing was developed which initially only served for the keeping of everyday accounts, but which later on proved capable of recording and conveying complex abstract thoughts. The authors of this impressive historical work are two Czech historians specializing in Oriental affairs: Dr Lukáš Pecha from the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen and Prof. Eduard Gombár, the current director of the Institute of Near Eastern and African Studies at Charles University in Prague. The book has nearly 600 pages of text in addition to various supplements and is divided into four parts.

The first part, written by Lukáš Pecha and amounting to 200 pages, deals with the prehistorical and ancient periods. Pecha examines the period of the formation and development of city states in Mesopotamia where the Sumerians made their mark. Political unification on a broader scale was achieved by one city state imposing its hegemony over other ones. In Sumerian history this occurred in the 24th century BC, when the ruler of the city of Umma subdued all the other Sumerian city states and in doing so unified southern Mesopotamia. The political unification of society, which had been used to living in the pluralistic setting of city states, was not just a matter of armed force. It required the adjustment of internal social and political structures and a suitable religious coverage. Then there was the Akkadian period, which lasted for over 200 years. The Akkadians were the first larger known wave of Semitic migration to civilized Mesopotamia. Around 2300 BC the Akkadian king Sargon I defeated the Sumerians and merged their confederation into his own larger empire (p. 51). Pecha convincingly documents the reasons why the power of the dynasty was exhausted and led to its collapse. After this there was a 100-year long ruling dynasty from Ur during which the integration of Sumerians and Akkadians was completed. The Sumerian

language continued to be used for liturgical purposes, but Akkadian became the generally used language all over the realm of the Sumerian-Akkadian Empire and was even used by neighbouring states as a common language of understanding.

At the beginning of the second millennium BC the Semitic Amorites started to penetrate into Mesopotamia and settled there, acquiring the Sumerian-Akkadian culture and way of life. Under Hammurabi, the most important ruler of the first Babylonian Dynasty, the Akkadian city of Babylon became a centre of a new Mesopotamian integration. In connection with this ruler, Pecha succinctly states that Hammurabi made his mark on history not only through his exploits as a conqueror but also because of his code (the Hammurabi Code), which is the best work on legal matters to have been preserved from ancient Mesopotamia (p. 96). From the middle of the second millennium BC to 600 BC, Mesopotamia was a battlefield of three major nations using cuneiform script: the Babylonians in the south, the Assyrians in the north and the Elamites in the east. Pecha confidently describes the mixture of nations, states and cultures, which is surely new information for readers as tuition about the ancient world in secondary education is very limited.

The largest part of the book is written by Prof. Gombár, who wrote the second, third and fourth parts. The second part, which deals with the Middle Ages, is characterized by a modern approach. Before the Arab period, Gombár untraditionally includes the history of the Persian Sasanian Dynasty, which ruled Mesopotamia from the third to the sixth century. Mesopotamia was the most important economic part of the empire and therefore was where the struggle for superiority between the superpowers of Rome (later on Byzantium) and the Persian Empire took place; in this period the first states led by Arab dynasties were formed, which allowed for the success of the first wave of Arab-Islamic expansion in the first half of the seventh century (p. 202). Gombár also takes an untraditional approach to dealing with the period after the emergence of Islam in putting a particular focus on tribal relations, which in Arab societies play an important role even in the present day. Tribal affiliation played an important role not only in the life of the Prophet Muhammad but also in the development of the Islamic caliphate, be that the period of the four “Rightly Guided” Caliphs (632 – 660) or the dynastic Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates (661 – 1258).

At first glance it may appear that Gombár is presenting the history of the entire Islamic empire, but it is important to note that the area of today’s Iraq was an integral part of this empire. Upon the basis of his many years of teaching, Gombár correctly states that without understanding the wider context it is difficult to orientate oneself in religious matters (Sunnis and Shi’a) as well as the problems involving the co-existence of Muslims with other religions and ethnicities. Importantly Gombár examines the culture of medieval Iraq as well as the development of Arab scientific thought and philosophy, Arabic linguistics, Islamic historiography and geography.

The third part of the book is entitled “Modern Iraq” and Prof. Gombár presents a history of Iraq through to the middle of the 18th century and stresses that the geopolitical positioning of the area changed in relation to dramatic developments in international relations (p. 367). The victory of Catherine II’s forces over the Ottoman army in 1774 brought about the emergence of an international problem known as the “Eastern Question”, which was resolved only with the fall of the Ottoman Empire after

the First World War. Upon the basis of his broad knowledge of history as well as international relations, Gombár describes developments from the outbreak of the First World War to the entry of Iraq into the League of Nations in 1932. He deals with the military operations in the Middle East as well as the questions of back-door diplomacy and secret treaties which influenced the destiny of Arabs after the war. He then covers the formation of modern Iraq as a constitutional monarchy and the number of British attempts to force Iraq into an unequal treaty of alliance which played out in the background of the establishment of a new Iraqi statehood, which had not existed beforehand.

This part of the book also comments on the Iraqi monarchy from 1932 to 1958. Prof. Gombár safely guides the reader through the important events of this period. Iraq was deprived of an experienced and talented when King Faisal I died and his 21-year old son was a barely capable replacement. In these shifting times the position of the army was strengthened, and the army's officer corps was sooner influenced by the authoritative regime of Turkey's Mustafa Kemal Atatürk than by liberal democracy. In the autumn of 1936 Iraq experienced the first military coup in the Middle East. Even though the coup regime lasted less than a year, this event further strengthened the role of the army in society. On the political scene there was a struggle between pro-British and nationalist factions which reached a climax in April 1939 with the unnatural death of the young King Ghazi. After this event four leading officers took a decisive role in the army and refused to support an unreservedly pro-British political stance, which led to armed conflict with the British in May 1941, the defeat of nationalist forces and a new British occupation of Iraq. Post-war political development was marked by a strongly pro-British and anti-popular form of politics headed by Nuri as-Said, a man who had been the head of the government a number of times. Another armed military coup heralded the end of this "black regime" in July 1958, overthrew the monarchy and established a republic (p. 447). In this part of the book, interested readers will learn new facts regarding the demographic development of modern Iraq, its economic problems and its cultural and spiritual life.

In the fourth and final part of the book entitled "Contemporary Iraq", Gombár offers an interpretation of history from 1958 to the present day. This part of the book is divided into a number of periods. The dictatorship of Abd al-Karim Qasim did not even last five years and was brutally finished with a bloody uprising organized by the Ba'ath Party leadership. The party was in power for less than a year and was replaced by the army dictatorships of Abdul Salam Arif and his brother Abdul Rahman Arif. In another section Gombár examines the subsequent Ba'ath uprising in July 1968 under the leadership of Ahmed al-Bakr and follows how the power of Saddam Hussein grew in his shadow. In this period there was a nationalization of oil reserves and society was negatively affected by the issue of the Kurds and disputes with Iran. In the summer of 1979 Saddam Hussein forced his predecessor to abdicate and became the president of the republic. His dictatorship was marked by a pointless 8-year war with Iran in which Iraq emerged as the victor thanks to massive support from the West. In the subsequent period Saddam Hussein overestimated his position and his occupation of Kuwait caused a crisis in the Gulf which ended with the defeat of the Iraqi army and led to the defeat of the Iraqi army and the introduction of UN sanctions against Iraq lasting 12 years.

Under the unproven claim that Iraq had nuclear weapons, an American and British invasion took place in March 2003 and an occupation of the country followed which lasted until December 2011. A useful addition to this part of the book is a chapter entitled “Czech-Iraqi Relations”. In his work Prof. Gombár discusses problems of internal development (modernization, secularization, nationalism and Islamization, among other things) in the periods under study alongside foreign political issues determining this development (the politics of the European powers and later on the superpowers of the USA and USSR) into a fluent and balanced text.

A good aid can be found in the “Supplements” part of the book containing the basic statistical information, a chronological overview of important events, a genealogy of the rulers and an overview of state leaders, a note on language, a list of maps and an index. The bibliography is described as a select one, yet it offers an extensive list of sources and literature, which is evident enough in the remarkably broad collection of authors, and is a reliable guide for those interested in similar works which are available to a greater or lesser degree. Even though the nature of a work such as this cannot answer every question that may arise, the book offers clear points of departure for further study. Despite its wide scope – an overview of Iraqi history over more than 5000 years – the book has been expertly and logically divided into 34 chapters. It is undoubtedly the result of a successful symbiosis of the teaching and scholarly work of both authors. Thanks to various periods spent in the Middle East, both authors present herein a highly reliable knowledge of history, life and customs in the field being presented. In this erudite and well-argued work, which is based upon a remarkably wide range of sources, the authors successfully lead readers through the tangle of complex historical events, allowing them to gain a reliable overview of the historical development of Iraq, which despite its geographical proximity to Europe is a place which readers know little about. With its high academic level and expert handling of the topic, this book is clearly one of the core texts of Czech historiography.

Karol Sorby

SORBY, Karol R. *Arabský východ, 1918 – 1945*. [The Arab East, 1918 – 1945] Bratislava: Slovak Academic Press, 2013. 468 p. ISBN 978-80-89607-15-0 In Slovak.

At the start of the 21st century, we live in a world that has not yet fully overcome the consequences of the fall of those once-mighty empires back in 1917 and 1918. The Balkan wars in the 1990s, the Gulf War in 1991, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the endless Israeli-Palestinian dispute, can all be directly traced back to the gradual decline of the Ottoman Empire. This decline stretched from Napoleon’s successful attack on Egypt in 1798 to the defeat of the Turks in 1918. The ethnic problems that the peacemakers could not solve after the First World War did not end with the Allied victory in the Second World War. In the 21st century we still live in a world that was created early in the 20th century by Woodrow Wilson, David Lloyd George, Georges