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The Economy of Late Achaemenid and Seleucid Babylonia by
Reinhard Pirngruber (review)

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Admittedly, I found the earlier part of the book, where she lays out the case for the analogy and defines her terms, more consistently interesting than the detailed analysis of the *Iliad* that follows. Nonetheless, the careful analysis demonstrates the value of her approach. This part of the book may be better digested in small pieces by those teaching, or writing about, individual parts of the poem.

Kozak's writing is delightfully clear, though characterized more by enthusiasm than elegance. The old-fashioned philologist in me did cringe at a couple of lapses ("it peaks interest," 35; "*in medium res*," 43) that will support curmudgeonly suspicions that watching a lot of TV erodes traditional forms of literacy. A good copy editor could have prevented these minor errors from marring what is generally an enjoyable venture into a new way of looking at this very old poem.

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Reinhard Pirngruber. *The Economy of Late Achaemenid and Seleucid Babylonia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. xiii, 249. \$99.99. ISBN 978-1-107-10606-2.

New Institutional Economics (NIE), a system of analysis developed by the Nobel laureate in economics Douglass C. North, is all the rage in the study of the ancient economy, and this book, too, explicitly invokes the approach as its guiding principle. The method has the advantage of getting us away from the tired formalist–substantivist debate, which contrasts caricatures of the ancient economy as market-driven and essentially modern to its diametrical opposite, where centralized distribution and barter dominated. NIE argues reasonably that economies are embedded in social institutions that explain performance and structure. The disadvantage for its use in ancient history is that it focuses on market performance, a very modern interest, at the expense of concerns about production, and that it ignores other means of exchange.

Scholars of Greece and Rome promoted the application of NIE in ancient studies, and it is interesting to see it applied here to the ancient Near East, both before the region was part of the Hellenistic world and during that era. Probably unbeknownst to most nonspecialists, there exists an unparalleled database on prices of six commodities, most importantly barley and dates, the primary sources of nutrition in Babylonia and crops that produce yields at different times in the year. These prices are inserted in the *Astronomical Diaries*, a corpus with observations of astronomical (especially lunar) and meteorological occurrences, that was compiled from the mid-seventh to the mid-first centuries B.C.E. and is especially well preserved for the late Achaemenid and Seleucid periods. Since these texts are precisely dated and occasionally refer to historical events such as the battle of Gaugamela, they are ideal sources of information on how market prices react to noneconomic factors. Together with additional sources on prices and political history, these allow the author to present a detailed price history of Babylonia from c. 400 to c. 140 B.C.E., the end date set by the Parthian conquest of the region (93–163). Pirngruber is well aware of the danger that this is *cum hoc ergo propter hoc* reasoning, and in another chapter he applies statistical methods

(which, I admit, are beyond my ability to evaluate) to determine how much specific categories of incidents had repercussions on market prices. It becomes clear that military actions inside and outside Babylonia and local rebellions had different consequences for individual commodities, but whether these episodes are “institutions” in the way NIE uses the term remains a question. In the final chapter, however, Pirngruber tries to explain the relatively weak ability of the Babylonian economy to deal with unexpected supply and demand shocks by taking institutional factors, such as the organization of land management, into account.

For a typical reader of *Classical World*, chiefly interested in the Greco-Roman world, this book offers a fine demonstration of how rich in data the Babylonian material is, and that it can be more suitable for economic analysis than classical sources, which are often heterogeneous and geographically dispersed. The parts of this book that outline the economic developments in first-millennium Babylonia, based on research by Michael Jursa and his team in Vienna (Pirngruber is a member of that team), show how important it is for the ancient economic historian to take the entire Mediterranean region into account, including the Near East. The economic efflorescence visible there, with its population growth and increased household wealth starting in the late seventh century, sheds serious doubts on Josiah Ober’s recent explanation that the “Greek miracle” resulted from that region’s adherence to self-government, equality, and fairness (*The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece* [Princeton 2015]). And this exposes one of the problems of NIE, in that it seeks explanations in local institutions (at least when applied to ancient history), while transregional factors, such as climate change, may have played crucial roles. Pirngruber does not address this issue; nevertheless, his work shows clearly how informative Near Eastern materials can be and that ancient historians should not continue to ignore them. Because of this, the book is an important contribution not only to the study of ancient Babylonia but to ancient history in general.

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Laurel Fulkerson and Tim Stover (eds.). *Repeat Performances: Ovidian Repetition and the Metamorphoses*. Wisconsin Studies in Classics. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2016. Pp. vii, 328. \$75.00. ISBN 978-0-299-30750-9.

This edited volume, consisting of an introduction and ten chapters by different authors, examines repetition as an intrinsic element of Ovidian poetics. Acknowledging the importance of repetition throughout Greek and Latin literature, especially epic, *Repeat Performances* emphasizes its unusually pervasive presence in the *Metamorphoses*.

Andrew Feldherr discusses repetition in the Phaethon episode. He suggests that by repeating earlier works, the ekphrasis of the Sun’s palace reflects an ambiguous relation between the narrative and the cosmos. Feldherr illuminates the relation of image to reality in the representation of the marine divinities and in repeated images of circularity by the Sun and heavenly bodies, in contrast to the linearity associated with Phaethon.