

Paul J. Kosmin, *The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA–London 2014, pp. 423, b/w ill., 9 maps, ISBN 978-0-674-72882-0

After many years of stagnation, we are observing a huge interest in the history of the Seleucid Empire. This revival can be attributed to at least several factors, including the publication of Babylonian astronomical diaries written in the Hellenistic period and containing information about previously unknown historical events in Mesopotamia,¹ as well as finds of new inscriptions,² numerous studies on the numismatics of the Seleucids³ and, to a limited extent, archaeological discoveries. To these, we should also add scholars' extensive interest in the political history of the Hellenistic world and those aspects of its past which had previously not been the object of much attention: the structure of power and its operation, the role of social elites, ideology and propaganda in the service of the Hellenistic rulers, the place of the cultural legacy of the civilisations that the Greeks conquered in the structures of the states they created, etc.⁴

Owing to these factors, the history of the Greeks in Central Asia, Mesopotamia and Iran also came to interest scholars. This interest is shown by the rapidly growing number of publications in recent years. One of the latest of these is Paul J. Kosmin's book, which tackles a problem previously given scant attention in studies on the Seleucids.

¹ A.J. Sachs, H. Hunger, *Astronomical Diaries and Related Texts from Babylonia*, vol. 1–3, Wien 1988–1996; G. del Monte, *Testi dalla Babilonia Ellenistica*, vol. 1: *Testi cronografici*, Pisa–Roma 1997.

² See H.M. Cotton, M. Wörle, Seleucus IV to Heliodoros. A New Dossier of Royal Correspondence from Israel, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 159, 2007, 191–205; D. Gera, Olympiodoros, Heliodoros and the Temples of Koile Syria and Phoinike, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 169, 2009, 125–155; C.P. Jones, The Inscription from Tel Maresha for Olympiodoros, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 171, 2009, 100–104.

³ See A. Houghton, C. Lorber, *Seleucid Coins. A Comprehensive Catalogue*, Part I: *Seleucus I through Antiochus III*, 2 vols., New York–Lancaster, PA–London 2002; A. Houghton, C. Lorber, O. Hoover, *Seleucid Coins. A Comprehensive Catalogue*, Part II: *Seleucus IV through Antiochus XIII*, 2 vols., New York–Lancaster, PA–London 2008.

⁴ Cf. G.G. Aperghis, *The Seleucid Royal Economy. The Finances and Financial Administration of the Seleucid Empire*, Cambridge 2004; V. Chankowski, F. Duryat (eds.), *Le roi et l'économie. Autonomies locales et structures royales dans l'économie de l'empire séleucide. Actes des rencontres de Lille (23 juin 2003) et d'Orléans (29–30 janvier 2004)* (= Topoi. Orient – Occident, Suppl. 6), Lyon 2004; L. Capdetrey, *Le pouvoir séleucide. Territoire, administration, finances d'un royaume hellénistique (312–129 avant J.-C.)*, Rennes 2007; A. Primo, *La storiografia sui Seleucidi. Da Megastene a Eusebio di Cesarea*, Pisa–Roma 2009; Chr. Feyel, L. Grraslin-Thomé, *Le projet politique d'Antiochos IV*, Nancy 2014; R. Strootman, *Courts and Elites in the Hellenistic Empires: The Near East after the Achaemenids, c. 330 to 30 BCE*, Edinburgh 2014.

In what way, the author asks, did they build the foundations of their rule in areas that were extremely diverse culturally and geographically? He is interested in the symbols and propaganda tools they used to legitimise their government and in how they used the geographical realities of the various lands and organised the space over which they ruled (pp. 4–5), taking as his starting point Megasthenes' work *Indica*. Kosmin is aware that the conclusions his research leads to only refer to the limited geographical area that constitutes the object of his interest.⁵

Notably, the author uses interesting and innovative research methodology, in which he combines the historical approach standard in most previous studies of the Hellenistic era with an anthropological one that allows him to look at the problems that interest him from a different research perspective. The book is divided into four parts, titled "Border", "Homeland", "Movement" and "Colony", each of them containing two chapters. These are complemented by a fairly extensive introduction (pp. 1–27) with information designed to familiarise readers with the sources, geography and history of the region to make it easier to follow the arguments made in the various chapters.

In the section entitled "Border" (pp. 31–76), Kosmin demonstrates how important a place in the policy of the first Seleucids was held by the question of marking the borders of their state, and how this fundamentally changed the way in which the Greeks perceived the world that surrounded them. He uses two examples to discuss this issue: the stretch of the border between the Seleucid territory and the dominions of the Maurya kingdom, and the northern border in Central Asia. Kosmin argues that marking the border with the Maurya kingdom, which took place under the rule of the first Seleucids, meant that from this time the Greeks began to perceive the country of their eastern neighbour in terms of real political geography, rather than, as had previously been the case, legendary and utopian reality. The Seleucids encountered much greater difficulties in their efforts to delineate the border of their influences in Central Asia. Owing to the lack of major political partners, they were forced to employ a different strategy there, marking the symbolic – religious – border of their dominions and the world of the barbarians. According to the author, the expedition of Demodamas and Patrocles to Central Asia and towards the Caspian Sea, supported by the Seleucids, served to demarcate this border. Bearing in mind the actions that accompanied the marking of the eastern and northern borders of their state by the first rulers from the Seleucid dynasty, it is hard to disagree with his conclusion that they contributed to a thorough test of the Greeks' knowledge of the geography of significant areas of Central Asia. Confirmed facts filled the place previously occupied by fantastic ideas and untested information.

Kosmin uses the "Homeland" section (pp. 79–125) to discuss the formation of the western borders of the Seleucid state. His thesis is that Seleucus I's expedition to Europe was not dictated exclusively by his personal ambitions, but was an endeavour to attain an important part of his ideological conception – to regain power over his homeland. Rule over this homeland was of fundamental significance for the shape of the state that he was building. The failure of Seleucus I's plans forced his successors to create another justification for the rule of the Seleucids over the East, which, even though it disassociated

⁵ "The work has its particular focus – the land of elephant kings – and makes no claim to being a total history of the Seleucid empire" (p. 6).

itself from their claims to rule over Macedonia, still contained many references to the dynasty's Macedonian lineage. The complex ideological programme they created served to justify and legitimise the Seleucids' claims to call themselves rulers of Asia, and their own state the "kingdom of Asia."

The section titled "Movement" (pp. 129–180) employs an array of examples concerning the first Seleucids' internal policy and diplomatic relations with their neighbours to demonstrate how they treated the borders of their state as an indicator of the range of the authority they exercised. Kosmin also uses this section to explore the issue of the Syrian rulers' travels through the territory of their state and the importance of these journeys for propaganda purposes. Considering the role of the royal trips, he writes, "In part, the answer may lie in the language of displacement, peregrination, and journeying that rose to a general prominence in the Hellenistic period. More directly, traveling kings were integral to a coherent and specifically Seleucid system of kingship ideology and governmental practice" (p. 176). He also notes that the vastness of the Seleucid Empire, and its ethnic and cultural diversity, made it a necessity for the rulers to have direct contact with their subjects, in order to secure their loyalty. The importance of these personal relations between the Seleucids and the population is proven by the fact that as many as nine of the dynasty's rulers bore the title Epiphanes. This was justified by the unexpected "revelation" to the subjects. Aptly, Kosmin also notes that this name was also often used by the rulers of those states that grew from the ruins of the Seleucid state, including the kings of the Greco-Bactrian state and the Arsacids, the rulers of Parthia. Their imitation of the practice created by the rulers of Syria means that they appreciated its huge political and propaganda importance (cf. pp. 176–180).

The final section of the book, "Colony" (pp. 183–251), examines the colonising activity of the Seleucids within Asia, understood as a useful tool for transforming the landscape of various regions. The urbanisation that resulted from this activity was a visible testimony to the Seleucids' suzerainty, but it also led to the establishment of the standard administrative structures, for which it was easier to administer efficiently and control effectively. The author emphasises the fact that this colonisation had a distinct ideological objective. This can be perceived through the system by which the new colonies were named. The names they received usually referred either to the names of Macedonian cities or to those of members of the ruling family. In this way, the Seleucids transformed the "spear-won" territories into their own dynastic heritage. The assimilation was also helped by legends and founding narratives invoking the figures founder kings fabricated by writers living in the royal court. This practice was exercised both for entirely new colonies and for earlier ones that resulted from the activity of other diadochi.

Notably, Kosmin does not restrict himself entirely to showing the ways in which the Seleucids influenced their subjects, but also looks at the attitudes of the latter towards their rulers. The picture of this stance painted by the sources suggests that their interests were frequently rather different, and this explains the basis of the decentralist tendencies in the Seleucid Empire that ultimately led to its collapse. There were many reasons for this dissatisfaction, including the process of interference in the public space from the rulers, manifested by the building of palace and administrative complexes closed to the royal subjects which led to sometimes insurmountable barriers in the mutual relations. The opposition towards the policy of the rulers that came from the inhabitants of the old

cities transformed into colonies was opposition to the official founding legends from earlier traditions. The subjects' emancipation from the influence of the ideological contents imposed by the Seleucids was very much aided by the numerous dynastic conflicts, which allowed various cities to secure greater autonomy from the central authorities, as demonstrated by their minting (pp. 221–251).

These issues are meant only to draw the attention of readers of Kosmin's book to selected matters among the many presented in it. In the space of just a few pages, it is no easy task to discuss even the author's main conclusions, not to mention evaluate or critique the interpretations of various detailed questions that he proposes. Yet there is no doubt that Kosmin's work offers a new perspective on many questions essential to the understanding of the history of the Seleucid Empire. For example, his innovative methodology means that he can demonstrate convincingly that the monarchical ideology created by the first Seleucids is a very complex creature, full of various hitherto undetected subtle nuances. One of the book's most important strengths is the fact that it not only includes many interesting interpretations and valuable observations, but that the image of the history of the Seleucid state that it depicts differs so much from the familiar one that numerous scholars are likely to be tempted to follow in its tracks.

Edward Dąbrowa (Jagiellonian University)