

**Sitta von Reden (ed.) [in collaboration with Lara Fabian and Eli J. S. Weaverdyck], *Handbook of Ancient Afro-Eurasian Economies. Volume 2: Local, Regional, and Imperial Economies*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2021, 843 pp. [ISBN 9783110604528].**

Two years after the publication of a ponderous and stimulating introductory volume, Sitta von Reden and the research group she leads have succeeded in the uncommon enterprise of making available to the public (both interested laymen and specialists of each of the disciplinary areas involved) a monumental, documented, stimulating and at the same time extremely readable overview of the economic dynamics, and of the actors involved and underlying them, that over almost a millennium have contributed to the shaping of the boundless space of Afroeurasia between 300 BCE and 300 AD. Once again entirely accessible from the publisher's website (a fact that cannot be overlooked and that must be praised as much as it deserves), this new compendium, which is an authoritative candidate for the role of reference introduction to different areas of study, from economic to global history, opens with two introductory chapters whose clarity of exposition and painstaking work of conceptualization (of the terms used, of the methodology underlying the entire book, of the concepts recurring in the course of the discussion) provides a paradigmatic example of that scientific rigor that too often in overviews of this kind is sacrificed to the advantage of a - perhaps - more attractive but - certainly - less valuable overpowering great narrative carried out, one example of all, under the auspices of terms such as *Silk Road* or something of the kind.

The discussion then unravels along fifteen, very dense chapters according to a geographical partition already familiar to those who have even superficially leafed through the first volume of this monumental project. These chapters are divided into three parts, respectively dedicated to the *actors* (from the ruling élites, emperors and courts to peasants and pastoral groups, pp. 61-300), to the *tools* (in the sense of the term deriving from the theories of the new institutional economy, pp. 339-588), and to the *processes* (pp. 590-818) of the economic life of the areas under investigation, from the Mediterranean to China.

If, for example, Lauren Morris' three contributions on Central Asia embracing the time span between Alexander's campaign and the rise of the Sasanians (pp. 159-208, 449-490, 695-744) have for all intents and purposes the potential to lay the foundations (of a new season) of the economic history of this space, Eli Weaverdyck and Lara Fabian's treatment of the Roman world and Hellenistic empires (pp. 63-146, 341-422, 631-694) stand out for their uncommon ability to synthesize a mass of sources, not to mention the secondary literature on the subject, both in absolute and relative terms with respect to the other areas covered in the volume which cannot be described as other than daunting. At the same time, the two authors succeed in not giving up on laying down innovative and stimulating interpretation of the evidence available (see in this regard Fabian's discussion of the economic dynamics characteristic of the Arsakid empire, an actor too often trivialized, if not entirely neglected, in works similar in scope and theme to the *Handbook*).

In turn, the chapters by Kathrin Leese-Messing and Mamta Dwivedi, respectively devoted to the Indian subcontinent and to China, serve the dual purpose, on the one hand, of significantly broadening the comparative horizon of all those who, not least by virtue of the inevitable, but not always beneficial, increasing partitioned nature of

academic research, have little or no familiarity with these worlds and with the scholarly discourse in which the research thereof is embedded; on the other, they can be enjoyed as original contributions in their own rights even according to the parameters of specialist research. This marks another outstanding feature of the project directed by von Reden, namely the fact that the research in *each* of the areas under scrutiny was entrusted to brilliant (young) specialists: this may seem obvious, but it suffices to have a look at works of similar scope on the same subject to realize that this is by no means the case.

Pride of place and special mention deserves, moreover, the masterful chapter (pp. 301-338) devoted to the *constitution of imperial landscapes* (mind the plural). This is a collection of enlightening case studies that introduces the natural landscape as a historical actor in its own right and not simply, as is rather too often the case, as an unresponsive backdrop for the staging of (the narrative of) human events.

The end result is a work of exceptional breadth, erudition and originality, just waiting to be even more enriched by the publication, hopefully soon forthcoming, of the third volume of this ambitious project. *Stay (further) tuned.*

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