
Rachel Mairs (ed.), *The Graeco Bactrian and Indo-Greek World*, London, Routledge, 2020, 712 pp. [ISBN 9781138090699].

Only few years after the publication of *The Hellenistic Far East* (2014), which can be righteously be considered the first attempt at sketching an outline of the *cultural* (instead of (only) *political*) history of Central Asia from the *Last Days* of Achaemenid rule in Bactria and Sogdiana to the demise of Greek power in the region (as well as further South), Rachel Mairs has brought out another landmark contribution to the field by coordinating an international team of some 30 among the most authoritative scholars (as well as a couple of the most talented and promising among young researchers) in order to provide, at the same time, 1. an up-to-date handbook that is going to be the unavoidable starting point for those approaching this space and its history for the first time and 2. an astonishing useful research tool for specialists of almost every branch of scholarship engaged with Central Asia during the Hellenistic period (and beyond).

The Graeco-Bactrian and the Indo Greek World is made out of 7 sections, each illuminating the other and therefore substantially contributing in releasing Bactria from the long standing (and highly mischievous) τόπος of the “Crossroad of Civilizations”, making instead abundantly clear why Central Asia has to be studied as a space in and of its own – and what are the implications of such a standpoint – without denying, and in fact very much highlighting, the complex links connecting the neighboring spaces (and empires, and peoples) with Central Asia as well as the other way round. This can at best be sensed in part 1 – not by chance titled *Interactions* (p. 11-125): from the Seleukid to Arsakid Parthia and from South Asia to China through the steppe (the latter a too often overlooked space with which Central Asia had however been in close contact for *centuries* before the Achaemenid takeover), the contributors carefully show how the history of the first Central Asian Empire(s) has to be understood from the viewpoint of a dialectical relationship between 1. the global power struggling for political and economic hegemony on the Eurasian stage and 2. the *multiple* local actors those (aspiring) global powers had to face in regions such as Bactria, Sogdiana, in the plain and marshes of Margiana or in the highlands of Gandhara. To mention but one example, both Alexander’s campaign and Antiochos’ *anabasis* clearly demonstrate, as argued by Rolf Strootman in his chapter (1, p. 11-37), both how the “globalized” warfare of the Hellenistic age impacted on Bactrian society and how local powerbrokers skillfully adapted to the rapidly changing political scenario in order to exploit in the best way possible the huge opportunities that came along with the no less considerable risks brought about by the participation within a polity such as an empire.

Among the many problems faced by scholarship over the course of almost three centuries, language barriers as well as remarkably different theoretical (and more often than not ideological or even political) backgrounds have hampered a proper understanding of the peculiarities of Central Asian history and societies the most. This is why part 2 (*History of Scholarship*, p. 127-215) should quickly become a must-read both for students and more experienced researchers. If Omar Coloru (cf. 7, p. 127-141) sums up the history behind the three classics of the field (Bayer’s *Historia Regni Graecorum Bactriani*, Tarn’s *The Greeks in Bactria and India* and Narain’s *The Indo Greeks*), to Annick Fenet (ch. 8, p. 142-170) goes the remarkable merit of having written a very accessible and incredibly well researched short history of French

excavations in Afghanistan, which if on the one hand goes a long way in putting into the proper perspective the work carried out by the French Archaeological Delegation (DAFA) over the course of an entire century, on the other is able to show how crucial collaborative enterprises are in such a challenging environment, which can seem a rather obvious take-away message, but it is not, especially in a context where it is not always straightforward to distinguish between scientific research, geopolitical interests and the use of the region's past as a tool for contemporary mythmaking. As for the third chapter in this section (p. 171-214), Svetlana M. Goršenina and Claude Rapin's study of Russian (and Soviet) perspective on ancient Central Asian history can be seen as one of the best way to become familiar with a very peculiar scholarly tradition, which is however extremely important to know, not lastly because of the overwhelming amount of materials collected during many decades of extensive (and by no means always so flawed as it has become known on this side of the Iron Curtain) fieldwork through the whole of Central Asia.

The two sections dedicated to the written (Part 4, p. 419-464) as well as to the numismatic (Part 5, p. 465-546) record skillfully complete the basic research toolkit that is needed to make sense of a body of evidence which is *not* so scanty as it has sometimes been claimed (and this goes especially for the written sources), as it is difficult to interpret. Special mention is due here to Olga Kubica's chapter (18, p. 430-445) on the *Milindapañha* as it provides an extremely interesting case study in textual criticism, which is all the more vital in a context, as that of Central Asia, where *emic* (that is to say, internal to the world that is been described) narrative accounts are lacking, thus forcing us to see this space through external eyes, as well as to Simon Glenn's (ch. 20, p. 467-486) and Olivier Bordeaux's (ch. 23, p. 510-519) contributions on how to properly work with coins, by far the most abundant evidence we have for the period covered by this handbook, which is especially to be welcomed given the highly expertise numismatic analysis requires today, thus more often than not making difficult for neophytes to properly assess the huge amount of information that can be gained from this evidence.

Every piece of information, however, can be rather useless (and in the worst cases even lead to considerable misunderstandings) without a proper theoretical framework. This is why section 6 (*Culture and Identity*, p. 537-593) stands out as one of the greatest achievements of the *Graeco-Bactrian and the Indo-Greek World*. Particularly worth mentioning are two chapters here. First comes Milinda Hoo's lucid analysis (ch. 26, p. 553-569) of previously adopted approaches to material culture in Central Asian studies, whose deficiencies are clearly teased out, as well as her plead for a thoroughly paradigmatic shift (coming from globalization studies and dubbed *Translocalism* in the chapter) which really has the potential to move away – once and for all – from dichotomies such as “East/West” or “Local/Foreign” which although of little use in order to properly assess the complexities of Central Asian societies are still widely used in the scholarly discourse (to say nothing of what is to be heard outside academia, for example as it comes to catching, but flawed, sweeping accounts of *Silk Road(s)* exchanges, just to quote but one (in)famous case). Second, but no less important, is Lauren Morris' masterly assessment of some of the rich material discovered within the so-called Begram-hoard (ch. 28, p. 580-595). Among the many reasons why this contribution stands out, the most remarkable is the author's use of a concept such as that of social memory in order to understand Kušan's purchase of luxury ware coming from as distant places as Egypt around the 3rd century CE.

However, the very treasure of the whole book is without question represented by the 7 chapters out of which section 3 is made out (p. 215-416). From Afghan Bactria to

Southern Uzbekistan, from Arachosia and Drangiana to Northwest India and the much overlooked but very important Southern Tajikistan, each of the authors provide a detailed account of settlement patterns, subsistence strategies, monuments, temples and much more in almost every region of Central Asia from the late Achaemenid down to the last Indo-Greek rulers, thus contributing the by far most important English language summary of archaeological evidence on this space ever written until now. In a last section (*Beyond the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek Worlds*, p. 593-677), three dense chapters give insight, on the one hand, into the Achaemenid precedents in Bactria-Sogdiana as well as South of the Hindukush, while on the other Joe Cribb (ch. 31, p. 653-677) inquires how the legacy of Greek power was appropriated, and to what uses, by those who after Alexander's and Seleukos' heirs claimed possession over Central Asia.

Long story short, as the back-cover of the book aptly summarizes, Rachel Mairs' edited volume "fulfils a serious need for an accessible, but also thorough and critically-informed, volume on the Graeco-Bactrian and Indo Greek-Kingdoms", and it provides indeed "an invaluable resource" for *anyone*, and not just for those "interested in the Hellenistic East".

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