

## SELEUCID SPACE AND IDEOLOGY

**KOSMIN (P. J.)** *The Land of the Elephant Kings. Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire*. Pp. xv + 423, 9 maps, 15 figures. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2014. US\$49.95 / £36.95 / €45.00. ISBN: 9780674728820.

This impressive work, a revised version of K.'s doctoral thesis, is an important contribution to the recent boom in Seleucid studies. The author applies spatial theory to the Seleucid kingdom, employing 'an understanding of space as relational and relative, historically contingent and culturally constructed, with the capacity both to discipline social behaviors and to be molded, manipulated, and resisted by historical agents' (p.6). In short, K. explores how the Seleucid kings transformed their vast, disparate kingdom into a coherent, manageable space, bounding their territory through rituals and treaties and articulating its interior through royal movement and colonisation. In so doing, he moves away from reductive questions about the Seleucid empire's structural 'strength' or 'weakness' to excavate the kingdom's ideological underpinnings. The study spans the whole chronological scope of the empire and exploits a remarkably wide range of archaeological and textual evidence throughout.

After a clear introduction, which lays the framework for K.'s project and offers helpful surveys of Seleucid geography, history and primary sources, the meat of the book falls into four main parts, of two chapters each.

The first, 'Border', explores the demarcation of the Seleucid empire's eastern and northern boundaries. Chapter 1 examines how Seleucus I established his eastern border through the 'Treaty of the Indus' with Chandragupta, a renunciation of territory which was legitimised by Megasthenes' *Indica* and acknowledged in the edicts of Chandragupta's grandson, Ashoka. This chapter should be read with the Appendix, which convincingly refutes A. B. Bosworth's earlier dating of the *Indica*. Chapter 2 then quarries the works of Demodamas of Miletus and Patrocles for evidence of similar attempts to fashion a northern boundary in Central Asia through religious dedications, geographic invention, and anthropological theory.

The second part of the book, 'Homeland', turns to the empire's western frontier and shifting relationship with its original homeland of Macedonia. Chapter 3 investigates Seleucus I's failed attempt to conquer Macedonia in 281, presented as a *nostos* by the court, and the establishment of European Thrace as the kingdom's marginal western border. Chapter 4 examines the results of Macedonia's consequent externality: the *Seleucus Romance* presented Macedonia as a divinely-prohibited forbidden land, authorising the king's failed *nostos*, while the empire's new homeland was established in northern Syria through the invention of a continuous year-count, the burial of Seleucus I in Seleucia-in-Pieria, and the (re-)founding of cities with Macedonian and Imperial names.

At the half-way point comes a five-page Interlude on 'The Kingdom of Asia', the brevity of which belies its significance. Discussion of the Seleucids' unfixed and fiercely-contested southern border with Egypt precedes an argument that the Seleucids conceived of their kingdom as a coherent territorial block, drawing on both Near Eastern and Greek traditions.

The third part, 'Movement', addresses how royal travel actively expressed Seleucid spatial ideology. Chapter 5 examines the ideological significance of the empire's boundaries, able to bestow

legitimacy on arriving or departing kings. The acquisition of external territory, meanwhile, required rituals of integration (Antiochus III's 'marriage' to Euboea and Antiochus IV's coronation as pharaoh). Rituals are also prominent in Chapter 6, which investigates the Seleucid monarch's progression through his own territory and his various ceremonial interactions with urban settlements.

The final part, 'Colony', explores the impact of the Seleucids' large-scale colonisation process on the landscape of Asia. In Chapter 7, K. examines the relocation of the empire's political centre to northern Syria, the reconfiguration of population groups, and the reflection of official ideology in colonial onomastics and foundation narratives. The final chapter moves away from K.'s largely top-down approach to trace the development of a non-Seleucid civic identity in these colonies, through the division of cities into royal and civic zones, the colonies' invention of mythological origins to displace their historical founders, and their increasing independence as the monarchy's power fragmented through dynastic strife. This focus on the kingdom's downfall takes centre stage in the conclusion, in which K. notes that many features of the Seleucids' spatial ideology contributed directly to the empire's collapse.

One of K.'s major successes is his exposition of the Seleucids' own concept of space: the very decision to place limits on their territory is a stark departure from the universalist pretensions of both the Achaemenid kingdom and Alexander the Great (as well as from the Roman *imperium sine fine* that would follow). K.'s reading of Megasthenes' *Indica* as an 'apology' for this policy (pp.37-53) is one of the most illuminating parts of the book (though I wonder whether more explicit comparison with other Hellenistic kingdoms' territorial ambitions would have helped establish what was distinctively 'Seleucid' here). Other highlights include instructive 'traffic-flow' maps which illustrate the frequency and shifting priorities of the Seleucid kings' movements (pp.144-7), illumination of the civic self-fashioning detectable in quasi-municipal coinage (pp.238-42), and probing discussions of inverted royal behaviour (kings in chains/retreat, pp.173-175; Demetrius I's excessively distant and Antiochus IV's overly familiar styles of rule, pp.227-30). The book is extremely well-written in a lively style, and K. displays an enviable ability to encapsulate broad concepts in simple, recurring phrases (e.g. 'Homeward Bound' for Seleucus' *nostos*). A further strength is K.'s familiarity with modern comparative evidence, such as his comparison of the Seleucids' onomastic practices to those of New York's Chasidic Jews (pp.109-10).

One issue which could perhaps have received more focused discussion, however, is the Seleucids' conception of their relationship with historical and mythical predecessors. K. frequently talks of the Seleucids emulating earlier paradigms: Seleucus I's decision not to invade India is validated by Megasthenes' list of previous failed invasions (pp.51-2); Demodamas' erection of an altar follows a tradition set by Heracles, Cyrus, Alexander and others (pp.61-2); and the foundation narrative of Antioch-by-Daphne connects the Seleucids with both Greek and Asian precedent (pp.231-2). Set against such suggestions of continuity, however, is K.'s discussion of colonial onomastics and other *ktiseis*, which appear to stress Seleucid novelty, 'the Seleucid monarch forging, not inheriting, an empire' (p.210). This echoes one of K.'s opening claims that 'early Seleucid imperial ideology...denied any connection to the preceding regimes' (p.4). The Seleucids' relationship with their past thus emerges from K.'s study as complicated and contradictory. Nowhere is this clearer than in the Seleucids' interactions with their Achaemenid predecessors. For although the Seleucids abandoned the Persian Kohna Qala in favour of their new foundation of Ai Khanoum (p.193) and renamed Achaemenid foundations (e.g. Susa to Seleucia-on-the-Eulaeus, p.210), K. also notes how the

Seleucids self-consciously acknowledged their debt to their Persian forebears: by assigning a Caspian periplus to Patrocles, for example, Seleucus I and Antiochus I were 'locating themselves within an established royal and Persian tradition of maritime exploration' (p.69; cf. pp.86, 124-5). More focused attention to such apparent ambivalences would only have enriched K.'s study. Yet this is also an example of the wealth of detail to be found in his work, which others will doubtless use as a starting point to draw differing or complementary conclusions.

After the Appendix on Megasthenes' date, the book is rounded off with endnotes (frustratingly disruptive for the reader, especially given how many merely provide references for ancient passages quoted in the main text – I would have preferred footnotes), a handy glossary of key terms and names, an up-to-date bibliography, acknowledgements, and a thorough index. The book itself is very well-produced; I found no misprints. Given the work's accessibility (with its generous introduction, glossary, maps, tables, and translation of all ancient languages), it would make a good choice for a newcomer to the Seleucid empire, but it will also greatly reward the attention of any Seleucid veteran. I cannot recommend it highly enough to any scholar of Ancient History or the Hellenistic period more generally, all of whom will be able to learn much from its content and methodology. Spatial theory, it is abundantly clear from this showing, is very 'good to think with.'

*Trinity College, Cambridge*

THOMAS J. NELSON  
[tjn28@cam.ac.uk](mailto:tjn28@cam.ac.uk)