

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Hellenistic Age*. By PETER THONEMANN. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xiii + 152. Hardcover, \$17.95. ISBN 978-0-19-875901-0.

Those looking to find a concise and stimulating introduction to the Hellenistic world need look no further than this excellent pocket-sized volume written by Peter Thonemann. Coming in at a trim 133 pages of chapter text, Thonemann has pulled off the impressive feat of writing an accessible, up-to-date treatment of that portion of the classical world created by the trans-continental conquests of Alexander the Great and characterized by the combination of elite Greek and native cultures across the splintered kingdoms of Alexander's former domain. The goal of the book is not to provide a chronological historical narrative of the period (although chapter 2 does offer a cursory outline) but rather to convey through a selection of well-chosen examples a more tangible sense of what that world was like. The book is thus aimed at non-specialists who are interested in the ancient world generally, but anybody can find something useful here. Thonemann unapologetically declares that the three centuries between Alexander and the fall of Ptolemaic Egypt "are perhaps the most thrilling of all periods of ancient history" (vii), and he succeeds admirably in communicating his infectious enthusiasm.

Over six chapters, Thonemann provides his readers with an effective orientation to the ideological, political, intellectual, and diverse geographical dimensions that make up the Hellenistic age. He opens his first chapter, a reflection on "The Idea of the Hellenistic," by considering the travels of Clearchus of Soli—born in Cyprus, studied in Athens, dedicated an inscription in distant Bactria (modern Afghanistan)—as an enticing example of the kind of new world of opportunities that Alexander's conquests had opened up. Such a journey highlights not only the diversity of the Hellenistic world, an important point that recurs throughout the volume, but also the fluid nature of the term "Hellenistic" itself. Thonemann rightly emphasizes the need to acknowledge the fuzzy boundaries of the Hellenistic world while still seeing as meaningful the common threads that connected the various successor kingdoms from Macedonia to Egypt to central Asia.

Chapter 2 provides a concise survey of Hellenistic history down to Augustus' annexation of Egypt. As a basic orientation only, it inevitably glosses over many of the period's infamously numerous historical difficulties. It succeeds, however, in offering an engaging and highly accessible story of the rise and fall of the various kingdoms that came from the division of Alexander's empire. Chapter 3 covers the ideological underpinnings of Hellenistic kingship, using Demetrius "the Besieger" as a representative example for understanding the evolving nature of the competing rulers' self-presentation (and thus identity) from military general to king to a "godlike" person worthy of veneration and sacrifice. The centrality of (success in) warfare is emphasized here, for conquest was perhaps the most tangible evidence of kingly authority in the absence of any constitutional tradition. Although Rome is not mentioned here, this chapter would serve as excellent background material for anyone interested in understanding the Hellenistic influences upon later Roman practices, especially in the areas of imperial victory ideology and ruler veneration.

Chapter 4 treats broadly the intellectual climate as well as the scientific, cultural, and literary achievements of the age, viewed in terms of humanity's changing understanding of its place in the world. The scientific activity of Eratosthenes and Archimedes are the chapter's main examples of the Hellenistic spirit of innovation that pushed the boundaries of geography, astronomy, mathematics, and engineering. What is striking here is the way in which Thonemann leverages advancements in science as a way to introduce his brief treatment of Hellenistic literature and philosophy. The choice succeeds in contextualizing these fields (which are too often studied in isolation) within the wider trends of intellectual boundary-pushing that marked this period, but the result is unfortunately at times too superficial for understanding the age's rich literary and philosophical developments.

Chapter 5 is in contrast perhaps the book's strongest chapter, providing a fascinating tour of the various boundary zones of the Hellenistic world where cultural contact flourished with those outside. In four case studies, Thonemann heads east to the ruins of Ai Khanoum (where Clearchus left his name on the Greek inscription mentioned in the first chapter), south to the Red Sea and the pioneering sea voyages of Eudoxus that united the Mediterranean with India in maritime trade, north to the Black Sea colony of Olbia on the edge of Scythian territory, and finally west to the Villa of the Papyri in the Bay of Naples. While this last is usually encountered in the context of Roman Italy, the primarily Greek

contents of its famous library is a reminder that of all these encounters between the Hellenistic world and strangers outside “none was more fertile (or complex) than the love affair between Roman Italy and the Greek East” (106). Chapter 6 concludes the book by focusing on the evolving fortunes of the single city of Priene in western Asia Minor. Here Thonemann builds off of his expertise in the area from his earlier study *The Maeander Valley: A Historical Geography from Antiquity to Byzantium* (Cambridge 2011), introducing readers to a taste of daily life and the city’s evolving relationship with its wealthy benefactors. Rounding out the book are a helpful timeline of major events, subject index, and short essays with suggestions for further reading.

The volume is attractively produced and well edited with good binding, supported by a handful of b/w photographs. What Thonemann has managed to pack into this small book is impressive. While a short introduction can only cover so much ground, Thonemann takes an effective approach by writing like a tour guide who is passionate about his subject, bringing meaningful highlights of the Hellenistic age into view and infecting the reader with greater enthusiasm to study this rich period of classical multiculturalism and innovation.

MARK THORNE

*Brigham Young University* (Mark\_Thorne@byu.edu)