

BOOK REVIEW

The Greek Experience of India: From Alexander to the Indo-Greeks. By RICHARD STONEMAN. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. xx + 528. Hardback, \$39.95. ISBN: 978-0-691-15403-9.

Richard Stoneman has a long experience on the matter of the Greek presence and contacts with India, and this book adds to his previous scholarly works. The book counts 16 chapters, unequally divided into three parts.

Part I consists of four chapters. Chapter 1 opens addressing the topic of the difficulty of writing about India from outside, because of the ageless problem of the “alterity of India” that originates in antiquity but it is very well present in more modern authors. A short history of the perception of India in the West follows, which touches many authorities, including James Mill, Engels, Said and many others, including the Beatles. The second part of Chapter 1 is devoted to the ancient Greek scholarship on India before Alexander the Great: Scylax, Herodotus, Ctesias. In this section, Stoneman accepts the hypothesis put forward by Panchenko¹, who claims that Scylax navigated on the Ganges, not on the Indus, like most scholars believe. This would imply that the Greeks had a larger knowledge of India than it is normally assumed. Chapter 2 deals with the topic of Alexander’s campaign in India. Stoneman does not offer a clear interpretation of it, but he refuses the idea that it was done for scientific purposes. Also, Stoneman somehow downplays the scale of Alexander’s crossing of the Indus, interpreting it as a simple scouting mission. Chapter 3 analyzes the myths of Heracles and Dionysus in the context of Alexander’s endeavor. According to Stoneman, Alexander was looking for the traces of the two Greek deities in India, therefore overlooking the features of the local religion. Chapter 4 is on the natural history of India. Here Stoneman summarizes the accounts of Indian flora and fauna in the works of the Greek historians.

¹ D. Panchenko, ‘Scylax’ Circumnavigation of India and Its Interpretation in Early Greek Geography, Ethnography and Cosmography, I, *Hyperboreus* Vol. 4 (1998), Fasc. 2, 211-242.

Part 2 counts six chapters, all focusing on Megasthenes and his work, the *Indika*. Chapter 5 serves as an introduction to Megasthenes. According to Stoneman, he lived from 350 to 290 BC, while he visited India after 304-303 BC and started writing his account immediately afterwards. Chapter 6 synthetically addresses the structure of Megasthenes' book, trying to reconstruct it on the ground of the surviving works of Diodorus, Strabo, Arrian, Curtius and Dionysius Periegetes. Stoneman maintains that the first three of them reproduced in their own works the same structure of that of Megasthenes. Chapter 7 is on geography and ancient history. It is again a rather brief chapter, focusing on those two subjects in Megasthenes' *Indika*. Again, Stoneman investigates the relationship between the information on India in Diodorus', Arrian's and Strabo's works, and that of Megasthenes. Stoneman therefore lists all the geographical elements that, in his opinion, the later writers took after Megasthenes. Chapter 8 is an extremely interesting essay on Megasthenes' understanding of the Indian culture and society. "The main question that arises here is the relation between Megasthenes and the *Arthaśāstra* of Kautilya" (198), which is generally considered later than Megasthenes' work. The comparison precedes examining "each individual topic [of the two works] in turn and see whether there is a fit or a mismatch" (202). Chapter 9 deals with the subject of Utopia in both Greek and Indian societies. Stoneman seems to be critical toward the idea that India was the place of Utopia for Greek writers: "the information about India that percolated back to the Greek world was very influential in the construction of several later utopias, but that does not mean that those who wrote books about India, notably Onesicritus and Megasthenes, were importing pre-existing ideas of utopia into the societies they observed" (253). Chapter 10 closes Part 2 and describes Megasthenes' view on the natural world. Here Stoneman lists the flora and fauna described in the *Indika* and tries to identify them.

Part 3 includes six chapters, all engaging with the subject of relations between Greeks and Indians on Indian soil. Chapter 11 is on the philosophical interactions between Greeks and Indians. Here the gymnosophists (or "naked philosophers") are the main subject of investigation, both regarding their encounters with Alexander himself and Onesicritus' opinion about Indian philosophy. Chapter 12 is a very complex one, entitled "Two Hundred Years of Debate: Greek and Indian Thought." In Stoneman's words, "the evident fascination that the Greeks felt for the Indian 'philosophers' they encountered reflects the fact that both peoples had a strong tradition of speculative thought" (332). Stoneman rightly points out that Greek thinkers were "frequently explicitly concerned to identify

the 'sources' of their own ideas, customs and religious practice" (332) and, consequently, he analyzes a number of case studies where Greek and Indian thoughts developed similar ideas. He comes to the conclusion that despite the similarities, Greeks and Indians achieved their ideas independently, therefore excluding any possible influence of one culture over the other. Chapter 13 covers the period of the "co-existence" between Greeks and Indians (323-135 BC). It is very interesting in analyzing how some cultural elements of the Indian world entered into Greek culture and vice versa. Chapter 14 explores the possibility of the influence of Greek theatre and poetry over Indians, which Stoneman finds to be extremely limited. Chapter 15 instead focuses on the relationship between the visual arts of both cultures and their possible connections. Here the situation is more nuanced and Stoneman does not come to a neat conclusion, allowing some degree of intertwining between the two traditions. Chapter 16 focuses on Philostratus' description of Apollonius of Tyana's travels to India. In Stoneman's opinion, this is a sort of "summation of the Greek experience of India" (470)

Oddly, the book does not have a concluding chapter. In summary, this is a very interesting book, with many useful insights on the (mostly cultural) relationship between the Greek world and India and it will probably enrich the scholarly debate about this important topic.

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