BOOK REVIEW


Although this book appeared in 2016, it has received little attention from review bodies. As the rich volume deserves more attention, I volunteer my thoughts on it here.

Sørensen’s book, which started as a dissertation, grapples with limited but tantalizing evidence from Roman imperial Pontos. This region’s early interactions with the Roman state involved such figures as Mithridates, Pompey and Pythodoris, but its later integration into the Roman Empire has garnered less attention in English-language scholarship. This volume thus explores the process by which the region developed Hellenistic-style poleis which were then incorporated into a Roman province (1st century BCE – early 3rd century CE). Neapolis/Neoklaudiopolis is the primary case study.

The book consists of six chapters plus a short introduction and conclusion. The first chapter focuses on an inscribed imperial oath and the following five largely concentrate on institutions of various scales (e.g., koinon, polis, province). In short, Sørensen seeks to answer how a region with a famous history of antagonism towards Rome reached the point that its inhabitants celebrated the cult of Roman emperors, held Roman citizenship and did not rebel against Roman authority (13-15). The volume traces transitions of areas from kingdom to province to client kingdom back to province (107-108). As the title suggests, a major part of this story is the koinon, glossed as “league” but left largely untranslated (which makes sense given the imperfections of the common translation “provincial council”). Sørensen considers the koinon as a primary instrument of the concomitant Hellenization and provincialization of Pontos. He follows the argument of Marek that the region hosted multiple koina (versus the “unitary” theory of Deininger). In other parts of the empire, a former ruling class often held onto power during the transition to Roman power. However, based on onomastic study, Sørensen proposes that the Hellenized bouleutic class holding Roman
citizenship that established itself through the new civic and federal institutions of Pontos was a foreign one, as in nearby Bithynia (176-177).

The questions and concerns of the book will look familiar to those used to reading about “Romanization.” Here, however, the stress is fittingly on Hellenization and institutions, given the role granted to the koinon. The book also consistently employs the term “provincialization” to describe the ultimate outcome of this process. This choice of language makes sense given trends in Roman imperial studies to treat the creation of a province as a process—and a non-linear one at that—rather than an event. The koinon-ization (please forgive the clunky neologism) of the region serves as an intermediary step on the way to provincialization. The implications of this intermediary step could use more teasing out, especially given that the book recognizes that a province and koinon are not the same thing. Indeed, I suspect that the koinon was more real than the province for local groups. The process of forming more locally oriented koina thus had different valences than forming a Roman administrative province, even if Rome imposed the koinon. The “commonness” expressed in the term koinon (and recognized by Sorenson briefly, 172) seems especially fitting for Roman stakes in the coherence of this region. Indeed, Roman stakes in the koinon-ization of Pontos arguably set the region apart from other parts of the empire where koina existed.

Understandably, as its expressed intent, the volume is very focused on the Pontic region. Yet, its conclusions raise intriguing comparisons with other regions. In Pontos, Sorensen sees a close connection between the koinon and Roman power, and he consistently defines the primary purpose of the koinon as the organization of provincial-level imperial cult (e.g., 11, 13, 54, 57). It is worth noting that recent scholarship has expanded the purposes of koina across the eastern Mediterranean. Notably, Babett Edelmann-Singer’s Koina und Concilia (2015) de-centered imperial cult from the functions of the koinon, and it considered the koinon as a more holistic socio-economic institution. While Sorensen cites Edelmann-Singer’s work, the publication timing may have been such that he could not fully grapple with its reworkings of Deininger’s model for the koinon. If the Pontic koina indeed had closer ties to Roman authority than did others then the koinon may have operated differently in Pontos compared to elsewhere.

In this regard, I wonder if more could have been made of Pontos’ peripheral position within the Roman world. Arguably, Roman officials had much at stake to Hellenize and koinon-ize (and not just provincialize) this region. Elsewhere, such as in the Greek mainland and in Asia, a longer legacy of Hellenism existed and the initiative of forming a koinon may have resided more with local groups.
than with the imperial power. In more central areas, Romans may not have wanted a koinon and its constituent Hellenes to be too cohesive, since that could pose a challenge to the Senate at Rome. Comparatively, in Pontos, Sorensen implies that cohesion may have been a goal to integrate the region into the Empire. Hellenization and the koinon-ization that accompanied it could foster Pontos’ connections to regions to its west, rather than its east.

Of course, the scant available evidence (and realities of the local epigraphic habit) obscures the view of what the koinon accomplished more broadly in this region. For instance, I am also intrigued about how the more constant presence of the Roman military on the doorsteps of Pontos might have shaped the functions of a koinon in this region. Did local koina have any sort of relationship with the Roman military? Sorensen poignantly reminds the audience of the violence of Roman conquest in his account of what happened to traditional local temple states under Pompey (110-113) and in his following “excursus” to Judaea (113-116). He later briefly mentions the presence of legions in Cappadocia (177). To what extent was the presence of troops, alongside memories of earlier violence, a driver for the conformity sketched in the concluding chapters of the book?

The book often refers to various cities and it takes pains to delineate shifting political boundaries. As someone not as familiar with Pontos as other regions of the Empire, I would have appreciated more maps to help follow these arguments. In this regard and others, the book is aimed primarily at a specialized audience of ancient historians. Helpfully, it exposes Anglophone audiences to ongoing debates of French and German scholarship. Having come out in 2016, it has already set the stage for further scholarship on the region. For example, I draw interested readers’ attention to the work of Chingyuan Wu, who has built on its arguments. Indeed, those steeped in scholarship of Pontos, the koinon, processes of provincialization and Strabo will find Sorensen’s book a valuable and necessary reference.

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