

Rachel Mairs, *The Hellenistic Far East: archaeology, language and identity in Greek Central Asia*. Oakland, California; University of California Press, 2014. pp. 256. ISBN 9780520281271. \$85.00, £59.00

In her second book Rachel Mairs covers what is for her familiar ground. She writes articulately and eloquently about the identity, language and archaeology of an often neglected part of the ancient world: Hellenistic Arachosia (modern southern Afghanistan), Gandhara (south-western Pakistan), Central India and primarily Bactria-Sogdiana (now northern Afghanistan, southern Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), a locus of interaction between Greek, Iranian and Indian art, religion, philosophy, ideas and culture. For more than a decade the study of Greek presence and Greek culture in Central Asia has become increasingly popular in modern scholarship, reinvigorated by the return of a modicum of political stability in Afghanistan and especially by the efforts of international collaborative archaeological projects in Uzbekistan, Pakistan and elsewhere. Numerous artifacts, coins and inscriptions procured via the illicit market of antiquities (the majority of which subsequently disappeared in private collections) have advanced our knowledge significantly.

Two major themes dominate scholarship on Hellenistic Bactria: the reconstruction of the region's political history and the nature of Bactrian Hellenism. Mairs states in her introduction that her purpose is not to write "a general or comprehensive history of the Hellenistic Far East" and omits from her discourse several topics (the campaigns of Alexander the Great, the coinage of the Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kings etc.), which are discussed in all recent monographs on Hellenistic Bactria. She proceeds to divide her research questions into four major thematic units (see the chapters below). The introduction also offers a concise and very illuminating summary of the history of archaeology in Central Asia.

Chapter 1 'Administering Bactria' examines the administration of Bactria in the *longue durée* from the Achaemenid period to the Greco-Bactrian kingdom(s) drawing mainly from archaeological (eastern Bactria survey, irrigation system) and epigraphic sources (economic inscriptions from Ai Khanoum, Aramaic documents,¹ the 'Asangorna' parchment² etc.). The chapter focuses on the continuity of institutions and personnel rather than the intricate administration mechanisms.

¹ Naveh, J. and Shaked, S. (2012), *Aramaic Documents from Ancient Bactria (Fourth Century B.C.E) from the Khalili Collections*, London; the Khalili Family Trust.

² Rougemont, G. (2012), *Inscriptions grecques d'Iran et d'Asie centrale*, with the contribution of P. Bernard, London; published on behalf of Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum by the School of Oriental and African studies, no 92.

Chapter 2 ‘Ai Khanoum’ is devoted to the exposition of the Hellenistic city’s institutions, inscriptions, architecture and material culture. In addition to a vivid account of Ai Khanoum’s urban plan, its various buildings (houses, palace, temples, mausolea etc.), domestic architecture and defensive structures, Mairs offers a thorough critical analysis of the city’s ethnographic, cultural and religious background. Considering that the available bibliography on Ai Khanoum is massive, deserving of its own special monograph, this chapter is an impressive feat. Mairs delivers successfully a distilled and compact account of Ai Khanoum, underlining that the city “must be understood first and foremost on its own terms”.

Chapter 3 ‘Self-Representation in the Inscriptions of Sōphytos (Arachosia) and Heliodoros (India)’ is a thorough exposition and analysis of the two aforementioned inscriptions (the first is written in Greek and the latter in Prakrit with some Sanskritic spellings). Another set of Greek inscriptions, written by Paccius Maximus, a Nubian Roman soldier and originating from Lower Nubia, is also discussed due to their similar ethnographic context. All these texts are examined not as Greek curios in the fringes of the Hellenistic and Roman worlds, but within the context of their respective communities, where Greek and Indian (or Nubian in the case of Maximus) culture interacted dynamically.

Chapter 4 ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’ takes as its subject the end of Greco-Bactrian political dominance in Western Central Asia. Contrary to scholarly tradition, the focus is shifted from the Greco-Bactrian kingdom(s) to their Central Asian nomadic successors. Mairs disentangles the available textual sources (Greek, Latin and Chinese) from the notion of ‘great nomadic invasions’ – which, according to earlier scholarship, were responsible for the Greco-Bactrians’ demise – and offers new perspectives by incorporating in her discourse current methodological trends on population mobility. The relationship between sedentary and nomadic populations in Bactria and Sogdiana is examined in the *longue durée* with a comparative analysis of the situation in the Chinese borders in the second century BCE. The extensive investigation of the archaeological evidence reveals that the nomad conquests were indeed part of migratory movement taking place over several decades.

In conclusion, Mairs uses a wide range of diverse evidence, focusing on archaeological and epigraphic material, examined via the recent trends in the study of Hellenistic Bactria (identity, ethnicity, cultural interaction etc.). *The Hellenistic Far East* is a very well written book offering welcomed insight on various aspects of ‘Greek’ culture and civilisation in the fringes of the Hellenistic world. However, since Mairs does not provide a thorough account of the region’s historical past and the

various methodological problems one encounters while studying Bactria (but this is not her intention), the present book might seem somewhat overwhelming to those unfamiliar with Bactria and India in the Achaemenid and Hellenistic eras. Yet the high quality of writing and scholarship hopefully will act as a starting point for further study on a frequently overlook area of the ancient world. It will be essential reading for scholars studying Hellenistic Bactria and India and anyone interested in Hellenistic history and cultural interactions of different peoples.

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