

**Paul J. Kosmin, *Time and its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire*.** Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018. 392 pp. \$55.00 USD.

According to an anonymous Syriac chronicler and eye witness from later Roman Mesopotamia, the year 811 was filled with portents of disaster.<sup>1</sup> First, in October, there was an eclipse of the sun. Shortly after, a part of the city wall at Edessa collapsed. Then several upside-down rainbows appeared in the sky, along with a spear-like object some months later. It was in March or so that the portended disaster struck. Locusts swarmed, and famine ensued. Scarcity and starvation lasted deep into the following year, 812. The account is vivid testimony of the hardships endured amid serious climate change.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, also noticeable is how the chronicler measured time. His era count begins in 311 BCE and simply adds year upon year to a cumulative total, as opposed to referring to annual consuls, reigning emperors, or taxation cycles. Ascribing the portents and disasters of 499-500 CE to year 811, the chronicle thus serves as a remarkable late ancient witness for one of the Seleucid empire's most longstanding legacies: a system of universal and linear dating established by Seleucus I in 305 BCE. Long after his empire was defunct, the years of his dating system would continue to accumulate in the Middle East, and throughout Asia, in numerous languages.

This dating system is front and center in Paul Kosmin's book, *Time and its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire*. It foremost demonstrates that the dating system had a pervasive impact on how the Seleucid empire's diverse inhabitants experienced time and history and became a potent site for compliance or resistance to its mechanisms of governance. Previous modes of dating were overwhelmingly cyclical or lacked fixity. The Seleucid dating system, quite revolutionary, reflected a conception of time with a stark beginning and no real end. While we now take this type of dating for granted, in the ancient past it had to be invented and implemented. Seleucus I devised the first such system to take root and have universal application in an ancient state, and even beyond.

The book is an impressive interdisciplinary feat. Along with its reflections on theories of time, it weaves together three disciplines that have bearing on the Seleucid regime: Hellenistic history, biblical studies, and Near Eastern studies. The source base marshalled is dazzlingly multilingual and reflects the experiences of the Seleucid empire's diverse inhabitants, especially those of Jews, Babylonians, and Persians. Such well-known diversity stands in stark contrast to the temporal

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<sup>1</sup> The *Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite*, in J.-B. Chabot, *Chronicon anonymum Pseudo-Dionysianum vulgo dictum*, vol. 1, CSCO 91, 262–70 (esp. 262–63). For English translation and commentary, Frank Trombley and John W. Watt, *The Chronicle of Pseudo-Joshua the Stylite* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), 34–46 (esp. 34–38). I reproduce their conversion into Roman months.

<sup>2</sup> Kyle Harper, *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 174–75.

homogeneity at the heart of *Time and its Adversaries*. As Kosmin shows, a common experience of time foremost tethered these varied populations to the unrelenting logistics of the Seleucid state apparatus. The Seleucid empire arguably managed diversity through intricate relationships of reciprocity with local populations (3–7), but without otherwise contriving a single shared civic or cultural identity.<sup>3</sup> Even so, this common experience of time prompted these heterogeneous populations to fashion a shared imperial subjectivity, while also inciting varied responses and even resistance.

*Time and its Adversaries* is divided into two distinct parts. Part I treats the dating system largely from the perspective of the state structure or where it engaged with imperial subjects. Chapter 1 demonstrates how the Seleucid dating system represented a definitive rupture from what had preceded it. Babylonian cuneiform documents had measured time by kings and their years of rule; the diadochs used this system while vying for control over Alexander's territories (19–30). But in 305, Seleucus I established 311 as year 1, and the current year as year 7. The innovation commemorated his return to satrapal authority in Babylon and situated his reign within longstanding cosmological traditions there. The Babylonian New Year festival thus came to celebrate the dynastic family and the temporality that it managed (30–35, 37–44). Even so, since the Macedonian and Babylonian calendars marked new years at roughly 6 months apart, two distinct forms of Seleucus' era found use in his empire (35–37).

Chapter 2 treats Seleucid governmentality and how its temporal reckoning pervaded the lives of its subjects. With Greek letters representing numbers, Seleucid years were innovatively rendered backwards (right to left), thus distinguishing them from other enumerations with remarkable efficacy. They so appeared on civil documents, coins, weights, ceramics, bowls, buildings, tombstones, and clay *bullae* at archival buildings (45–59). The Hasmonaean-period destruction at the archival building at Kedesh may even reflect a physical resistance to the empire's governmental logic (59–65). The Seleucid dating system and temporality penetrated markets and defined the temporal spatiality of a Seleucid imperial landscape (65–75).<sup>4</sup>

Chapter 3 emphasizes the link between Seleucid dating and dynastic continuity. Embodying an accretive time that relentlessly accumulated, the Seleucid monarchs, in a sense, never really died. When one king perished, another simply embodied the passage of an unceasing universal time. In this temporal system, even

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<sup>3</sup> On these issues, Myles Lavan, Richard E. Payne, and John Weisweiler, *Cosmopolitanism and Empire: Universal Rule, Local Elites, and Cultural Integration in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Kosmin, of course, has already treated the spatial rationality and logistics of the Seleucid state in *The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

the deeds of Alexander the Great were marginal to the historical framework centered on Seleucus I and his dynastic successors (77–92). So pervasive was this temporality that usurpers or insurgents, like Diodotus Tryphon and the Hasmonaeans of Judaea, ostentatiously measured time by their own regnal years to position themselves outside the traditional regime (93–98). Likewise, farther east the dynasties that consolidated authority in Iran, central Asia, or north India started their own eras, thus appropriating the ingenious innovation of Seleucus I (98–100).

Part II of the book gives voice to indigenous engagements with the Seleucid dating system. It shows how the Seleucid state's reckoning of a universal time shaped the temporalities of its subjects and how their discursive and political resistance to Seleucid rule (including apocalyptic thought) was often indebted to its ideological framework. Chapter 4 examines how indigenous parties, like the Babylonian historian Berossus, formulated universal histories for their ethnic pasts that abruptly ended with the arrival of the Greco-Macedonians (109–23). The Jews of Judaea famously conceived of their ancestral past and period of prophecy as moving forward in a linear fashion, until Alexander the Great and his Seleucid successors ruled the Near East (123–33).

Chapter 5 shows how indigenous populations envisioned a universal historical future for their people, one in which a future divine kingdom with a timeless present displaces the contemporary Seleucid regime and all prior empires. The apocalyptic and eschatological literature of the Jews predictably plays a vital role here, and as expected, the Book of Daniel is exemplary.<sup>5</sup> Composed during the reign of Antiochus IV and shortly after his desecration of the Jewish temple, it consistently echoes the contemporary Seleucid context despite its being set in Babylonian and Persian times. It also communicates many famous prophecies that purport to be predictions of imperial succession, particularly the collapse of Seleucid rule (139–163). Yet, as Kosmin argues, relatively neglected texts produced by Jews (namely Enochic literature), Babylonians, or Persians demonstrate that similar temporal perspectives were forged by various indigenous parties throughout the Seleucid state (163–81).

The final chapter shifts to how indigenous elites generated ancestral links to pre-Seleucid times in cultic documents or monumental topographies, particularly during key phases of the Seleucid empire's 2<sup>nd</sup>-century BCE collapse in Mesopotamia and Iran. In Babylon, priests crafted textual and material connections to ancient rites, and even a dissident boatman joined the act by preaching the return of Nanaya and Bel-Marduk to Babylon (188–97). At nearby Girsu, a local dynast built a palace complex from the mudbricks and statues of one that had existed millennia prior and may have found inspiration in artifacts from the period. In Fars and Armenia, various governors (*frataraka*) or kings established links to Achaemenid or even more remote notional ancestors through their management of ancient ruins or coin production

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<sup>5</sup> On this topic, Anthea Portier-Young, *Apocalypse of Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

(203–19). In the most famous example, the Hasmonaeans of Judaea modelled themselves on biblical figures that maintained Israelite sovereignty and defined exemplary ancestral traditions that preceded Seleucid governance, like the use of Hebrew (and paleo-Hebrew script) (219–28).<sup>6</sup>

It cannot be denied that *Time and its Adversaries* is an impressive scholarly feat, one that defies deeply entrenched disciplinary boundaries at every turn. I found myself not only admiring the book but also oftentimes wishing that I had vision to write it. The theoretical basis for Kosmin's research is vast, and it demands from the reader a somewhat exacting capacity for abstraction. Even so, the prose is lucid and grounded in the empirical evidence; the theoretical concepts are delicately and concisely woven into it. Despite the serious challenges posed by the nature of the evidence, which tends to be dispersed (both regionally and epistemically), lacunose, and minimalist in what it communicates (the Jewish literature is an arguable exception), I found even the premises that the author signposted as speculative to be compelling and persuasive. The book is essential reading for all Hellenistic historians, and, I would venture, for all historians who study the mechanisms of ancient states and empires.

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<sup>6</sup> Recently, on this topic, Katell Berthelot, *In Search of the Promised Land? The Hasmonaean Dynasty between Biblical Models and Hellenistic Diplomacy* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018).