

**Richard Stoneman** *The Greek Experience of India: from Alexander to the Indo-Greeks*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. xx, 525. ISBN 9780691154039. \$39.95 HB; 9780691217475. \$29.95 PB; also available as an e-book.

Do ancient Indian tales about cities captured through the use of mechanical elephants have origins in Greek epic? How might these relate to a relief from Gandhara portraying the Trojan horse and a lamenting Cassandra? Why is it significant that a Greek named Heliodoros dedicated a pillar to the god Vishnu and inscribed it in Prakrit in c. 110 BCE at Besnagar? In *The Greek Experience of India*, Richard Stoneman addresses questions like these while guiding his readers through cultural exchanges that spanned from the Greek Mediterranean to India, and back again.

When done thoroughly, histories of societies and peoples in the orbit of the Hellenistic world are challenging and intricate. Depending on the regional focus, they demand deep knowledge of the ancient societies of Egypt, Anatolia, the Near East (including the Jews), central Asia, or India. Scholars have long interpreted Ptolemaic Egyptian society in light of sustained Egyptian social trends, not just Greek ones. In general, work on southwest, central, and south Asian societies has been more siloed into academic units determined by different linguistic and cultural canons or related technical expertise. This tendency is not universal. Some past scholarship has emphatically crossed disciplinary boundaries and cultural canons.<sup>1</sup> Numismatists do this by necessity.<sup>2</sup> Even so, the last decade or so has clearly witnessed an impressive surge in efforts to treat different cultural canons as voices framed by common historical contexts.<sup>3</sup> As part of this wave, Richard Stoneman, who has long amplified our knowledge of Hellenism in Asia, provides a real service by bringing an immense cross-disciplinary expertise to bear in *The Greek Experience of India*.

Despite what the title implies, *Greek Experience* is not merely about how Greek texts represent India, a topic often addressed in scholarship. Much attention is devoted to how Indian peoples experienced Greek presences and their impact on cultural and religious exchanges. In this sense, the book invites immediate comparison to Klaus Karttunen's *India and the Hellenistic World* (1997), still a valuable text. Both works focus

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<sup>1</sup> Over the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and into the 21<sup>st</sup>), the work of W.W. Tarn, A.K. Narain, Susan Sherwin-White and Amélie Kuhrt, Klaus Karttunen, Frank Holt, Stanley Burstein, and Paul Bernard (himself heavily involved with the excavations at Ai-Khanum) provided some notable examples for such enterprises.

<sup>2</sup> Examples are Osmund Bopearachchi, *Indo-Greek, Indo-Scythian, and Indo-Parthian Coins in the Smithsonian Institution* (Washington, DC: National Numismatic Collection, Smithsonian Institution) and R. C. Senior, *Indo-Scythian Coins and History*, 4 vols (Lancaster, PA: Classical Numismatic Group, 2001-2006), as well as many publications by Joe Cribb.

<sup>3</sup> Just a few examples are Omar Coloru, *Da Alessandro a Menandro: il regno di Battriana* (Pisa: Serra, 2008); Paul Kosmin, *The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014) and *Time and its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2018) and Rachel Mairs, *The Hellenistic Far East: Archaeology, Language, and Identity in Greek Central Asia* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014) and *The Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).

on defining the actual India that Greeks encountered through cross-disciplinary approaches and share many points of topical overlap, particularly on the natural world of India. But *Greek Experience* is much better illustrated, has a more extensive introduction to Megasthenes, and is less focused on political history and surveys of the onomastics, numismatics, and epigraphy. It also dwells more on where (or how) Greek information about India originated and the cultural exchanges that potentially had longstanding impact in either the Greek Mediterranean or the Indian subcontinent.

The overall enterprise of *Greek Experience* offers many challenges, on which the author consistently comments. One obvious challenge is that for the last 2000 years, writers originating from the Greek Mediterranean, medieval Europe, the Islamic Middle East, and various periods of Central and East Asia have imposed layers of mystification. British imperialism in India, its relationship with the field of classics, and the desires of westerners to find enlightenment in Indian philosophies in the post-war era have added others (summarized on pp. 5–33).<sup>4</sup> Another challenge is that our earliest surviving first-hand descriptions of India were not produced by longstanding Indian peoples. They were written by Greeks who encountered parts of it after Alexander's conquests or during the formation of the Seleucid and Mauryan empires. Historians of ancient India have long relied on their observations, while acknowledging that most ancient existing Indian texts were written after them (33–34). Finally, the societies of India experienced vast political, cultural, and religious transitions between the arrival of Alexander and the rise and fall of the Indo-Greek polities.<sup>5</sup> Various regions were inclining to Brahmanism and Vedic culture, Buddhism, or a persisting substrate of traditional religion (45–48, 146–156). After the reign of Chandragupta and the formation of the Mauryan state, large kingdoms held greater sway; previous polities were smaller and sometimes oligarchical (45–48). Finally, Indian ascetics of the times were philosophically diverse and are often hard to classify doctrinally (289–331). Amid such challenges, modern historians of Hellenistic Greece and ancient India have only rarely been engaged in close dialogues. A real accomplishment of *Greek Experience* is that it puts the ancient texts and the modern scholarship in such a dialogue.

To produce an accurate assessment of ancient India, Greek settlement, and the ensuing cultural exchanges, Stoneman reads Megasthenes and other Greek authors (or their surviving traces) against the testimony of subsequent Indian authors. Yet, he does so while constantly guarding against our misconceptions and those of our sources (and those of their sources). Occasionally, recourse is made to practices observed in India in recent centuries by both Indian and foreign writers, or even by the author. The narrative generated by this research approach comes with substantial groundwork. A large portion of *Greek Experience* focuses on the India that Alexander himself encountered, the

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<sup>4</sup> The colonial legacy of the classics in India, addressed by Phiroze Vasunia, *The Classics and Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) is relevant to this issue.

<sup>5</sup> The publications of Romila Thapar and Himanshu Ray on this period of India have been pivotal in recent decades.

correlation between Heracles or Dionysos and Indian gods that it inspired, and the impact of Alexander's expedition on the knowledge of its natural history. Another introduces Megasthenes, assesses past scholarly reconstructions of his lost account of India, and probes his reliability as an observer of Indian societies. The material on Megasthenes, in isolation, is quite valuable for navigating the complications of interpreting this important witness and the Greek writers who preceded or succeeded him. By reading Megasthenes alongside the *Arthashastra* and the Indian texts (but without using them to "fill out" one another; p. 201–202), Stoneman's narrative establishes controls on what we can infer from Megasthenes' treatment of various matters and lays the foundation for the questions of cultural interaction, exchange, and influence that the book tackles. Some pertain to the periods preceding Alexander's expedition. But the focus, predictably, is on the following centuries that witnessed the initial phases of Greek settlement and the formation of the Mauryan and subsequent Indo-Greek kingdoms.

The result is an array of fascinating conclusions and inferences that will probably continue to inspire debate but are generally compelling. The following is a selection of what we learn. Megasthenes' division of Indian society into seven different "parts" (Greek: *mere*) was based on Brahmanic sources but conflated their conception of *varna* (caste) and the seven limbs of the "body politic" (212–217). His comments on the (socially acceptable) polyandry of Indian women, while paralleled in other Greek texts, have a basis in practices attested in north India/Pakistan, Tibet, and adjacent regions (232–237). Aspects of Megasthenes' account that appear to be utopian fantasies, including his denial of slavery in India, either reflect the formulations of his informants (for example, regarding Uttarakuru, or "the land beyond the north") or the fact that Indian forms of "unfreedom" were distinct from Greek models of slavery (217–221, 238–253). Megasthenes' description of gold-digging ants (preceded by Herodotus) may refer to grains of gold collected from burrows of marmots (271–274). His concept of Dog-headed peoples originates from Indian conceptualizations of central Asian foreigners (281–285). The comments of Onesicritus and Megasthenes on ascetics and "naked philosophers" and practices of immolation/suicide are very much rooted in north Indian practices and debates about them (290–329), as is material from the *Alexander Romance* (329–331). Classical Greek and Indian views on reincarnation, the tri-partite soul, and the soul chariot are probably not connected (333–346). The Sceptic philosopher Pyrrho was legitimately influenced by Buddhism (346–357).<sup>6</sup> Indian ascetics adopted from Cynic philosophies (357–361). One of the most remarkable surviving works of ancient Buddhist philosophy is a dialogue between the Indo-Greek king Menander (a practitioner himself) and various renowned masters. Yet, we have to recognize that Indians had longstanding traditions of philosophical debate and disputation and did not have to get them from antecedents in Greek literature (365–374). Greek epic themes like that of the Trojan horse surface in subsequent Indian epic (with variations), and Greek practices of writing probably did have an impact on the rise of literate culture in India. But the

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<sup>6</sup> For detailed treatment, Christopher Beckwith, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

overall picture, exemplified by the pillar of Heliodoros at Besnagar and king Menander, is that of Greeks assimilating into cultural mainstreams of Indian societies. In a stark contrast to the eastern Mediterranean under Roman rule, Greeks came as conquerors but were not culturally dominant, in part (but not solely due) to Brahmanic opposition to foreign practices (375–404). Indian peoples had their own traditions of drama and epic literature and did not need Greek antecedents for them (405–426). Even outside Gandhara, Greek settlement probably had an impact on sculpture and wall painting (436–460).

My one general criticism of *Greek Experience* is that it does not provide much introductory foregrounding of the relevant Indian texts. The accounts of European, Islamic, and east Asian travelers receive treatment in the introduction. Megasthenes and other Hellenistic Greek authors have a large section devoted to them. Yet, beyond a brief summary (33–35), texts produced by peoples of ancient India usually appear only when they become strictly relevant, perhaps (but not always) with some brief background. The author's introductory treatment of the *Arthashastra* and the scholarship on it, which for obvious reasons is folded into the material on Megasthenes (198–202), is both helpful and exceptional. In general, there are immense challenges in dating many of the Indian texts, extracting historical or periodized information from them, and determining whether they owed debts to Greek cultural life (or vice versa). These issues, widely debated, are handled deftly by the author at every turn. But it would have been helpful for less expert readers to have some sort of comparable foregrounding of the most relevant Indian works.<sup>7</sup> Otherwise, I would have loved to have learned the author's opinions about the theories that link Greek athletics with the rise of East Asian martial arts, through Greek settlement in central Asia and India and the activity of Buddhist intermediaries.<sup>8</sup>

*Greek Experience* has a vast array of maps, city plans, and illustrations of objects or people from a variety of periods, a true testament to the wide range of ancient evidence (and comparison to modern India) that it covers. I wish that it had more maps, particularly for the polities that took shape after the activity of Megasthenes and the Mauryan dynasty. A useful appendix collates the collected fragments of Megasthenes edited by Schwanbeck and Jacoby (479–480). Altogether, the book is an immensely valuable resource and a cornerstone for scholarship on ancient India and its Greek encounters. We are very fortunate to have it.

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<sup>7</sup> Compare Karttunen, *India and the Hellenistic World* (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society), 10–15.

<sup>8</sup> Lucas Christopoulos, "Greek Combat Sports and their Transmission to Central and East Asia," *The Classical World* 106.3 (2013), 431–459.