

REVIEW

THE GREEK EXPERIENCE OF INDIA

Richard Stoneman, *The Greek Experience of India: From Alexander to the Indo-Greeks*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. xx + 528. Hardback, \$39.95/£34.00. ISBN 978-0-691-15403-9.

Modern Indology began in the late eighteenth century, when the renowned scholar William Jones founded the Asiatic Society of Calcutta.¹ In 1793 Jones discovered that the ancient Indian king Candragupta was no other than king Sandrokottos mentioned in the ancient Greek sources. This gave Indologists a first chronological anchor point from which to further investigate ancient Indian history. Even though Greek historiography and Indology are closely connected to each other, scholars who master both the sources of ancient India and Greece are few. Richard Stoneman, Honorary Visiting Professor at the University of Exeter, has now delivered an impressive work on the contacts between Greece and India in the period during and after Alexander's conquests—the period when contacts between the two cultures were most intense. It is the first comprehensive monograph on the subject since Klaus Karttunen's *India and the Hellenistic World* (1997) and the result of years of scholarly investigations. Stoneman worked previously on Alexander the Great, the Alexander Romance, and the stories of the naked Indian ascetics, but he has extended his scope by delving deeper into the ancient Indian sources.

The contacts between Greece and India provide demanding material. Most of the Greek historiographical works on India are only fragmentarily preserved and hence hard to interpret. The Indian sources were written in different languages such as Pāli, Prākṛit, and Sanskrit and are not historiographical in nature, hence requiring a wholly different methodology. Furthermore, the dating of most of the ancient Indian works remains problematical. Due to the great gaps in our knowledge, many scholars have fallen for the temptation of *Hineininterpretierung* of our limited sources, most famously so W. W. Tarn in his colourful work on the Greeks in Bactria and India.²

¹ In the book under review, Stoneman writes (332) that Jones founded the Royal Asiatic Society in 1823, but by then Jones had been dead for twenty years already. Jones founded the Asiatic Society in Calcutta in 1784; the Royal Asiatic Society was founded in 1823 by Henry Thomas Colebrooke in London.

² Tarn (1938).

Stoneman has managed to avoid these pitfalls not only through his meticulous analysis of both Greek and Indian sources, but also thanks to his awareness of the ‘curtains’ (in his own words) that prevent us, as well as earlier writers, from seeing India as clearly as we could.

Stoneman’s introduction to his book is therefore an overview of earlier views on India expounded by travellers, historiographers, and conquerors in reverse chronological order, from today back to antiquity. British imperialists, German romantics, Muslim conquerors, European medieval scholars, Chinese pilgrims, and finally Greek and Roman writers all appear in revue. This chapter is extremely valuable, as it reminds us of the clichés and stereotypes that have shaped western interpretations of India up to this day. It is lacking in any other work I have read on this subject. Furthermore, the many references to poems and novels make this chapter (as well as many others) a pleasant read, and readers who have ever visited India will be irresistibly drawn back to the subcontinent in their minds.

The second chapter of the book deals with Alexander’s invasion of India, which initiated intensive cross-cultural contacts between Greeks and Indians. A lot has already been written on this subject, but Stoneman’s account is by no means dull or repetitious. On several points, he draws on Indian sources to complement the Greek ones, for instance in his discussion of the political entities in India at the time of Alexander’s invasion (45–8). I have one reservation, however, on his discussion of the battle of the Hydaspes. Stoneman agrees with Buddha Prakash that Meroes (Μερόης), the man who according to Arrian negotiated with the Indian king Porus after the Macedonian victory, can be equated to Candragupta Maurya himself (62). Karttunen already remarked that the identification is etymologically strained.³ Furthermore, Meroes is described by Arrian as an old friend of Porus’, while Candragupta must have been quite young at the time, as the Indian sources tell us.⁴ Stoneman links the anecdote of Meroes to Candragupta’s supposed meeting with Alexander described by Plutarch.⁵ However, as I have argued elsewhere, the meeting between Alexander and Candragupta should not be taken at face value, but rather seen as a literary construct that associated, in Greco-Roman minds, the most famous Indian king to the most famous conqueror of India.⁶

The core of Stoneman’s book (Chs 5 to 10) revolve around Megasthenes, Greek ambassador at Candragupta’s court in Pāṭaliputra and writer of the fragmentarily preserved *Indika*. These chapters are much more than just an up-to-date overview of what we know of Megasthenes. Stoneman uses the

³ Karttunen (1997) 259.

⁴ Arr. *Anab.* 5.18.7–8; e.g. Mahāvamsa 5.21: ‘a glorious youth’.

⁵ Plut. *Alex.* 62.9.

⁶ Fauconnier (2015) 124–5.

fragments as a steppingstone to explore various aspects of ancient Indian history: the development of Indian civilisation in the Indus and Ganges valleys, geography, kingship, caste, slavery, administration, morality, customs, and the natural world, including stories of ‘monstrous races’. His discussions are exhaustive, using not only ancient Greek and Indian sources, but also a broad range of medieval, early modern, and modern material. Too much to discuss in detail here; I will limit myself to some aspects I found noteworthy. First, Stoneman argues strongly for the traditional dating of Megasthenes, seeing him as the ambassador of Seleucus I to Candragupta’s court at the end of the last decade of the fourth century BC (131–4). He rejects the arguments of Bosworth, who argued in 1996 that Megasthenes’ diplomatic mission should be dated to 319/18, when Porus was still ruling in the Punjab.⁷ In my own article I followed Bosworth’s line of reasoning, but I now find Stoneman’s arguments more solid and convincing.⁸

Second, Stoneman gives an interesting overview of ancient Indian history from the Indus civilisation (c. 2600–1900 BC) until the founding of the Maurya Empire, the first political entity that spanned almost the entire Indian subcontinent (147–63). Stoneman rightly stresses the different developments in the Indus and Ganges valleys, respectively: the former more Vedic and Brahmanised, the latter sticking more strongly to non-Brahmanical sects such as the Buddhists and Jains. This difference explains the divergences between the works of Nearchus and Onesicritus, on the one hand, and Megasthenes, on the other: the former two wrote on the Indus region, the latter on the Magadhan heartland of the Maurya empire on the Ganges. Still, I have some reservations concerning other claims put forward in this part of the book. I was surprised to read that ‘by the seventh century the Aryans were established in the north-west of India and the Punjab, which became their home and the locus of Vedic culture’ (149). The seventh century BC is much too late for the arrival of Vedic culture in India. The dating of the ṛgveda, the earliest exponent of Vedic culture in India, is still a matter of controversy, but most scholars date it to the middle of the second millennium BC.⁹ In the discussion of Candragupta’s rise to power, it is not entirely clear whether he first conquered the north-west of India or whether he first overthrew the Nanda dynasty in the Ganges valley and subsequently made his push towards the Indus. On pp. 161–2 he seems to argue for the first option; on p. 378, however, the Punjab was later added to Candragupta’s empire. On the basis of a close

⁷ Bosworth (1996).

⁸ Stoneman’s arguments build on those of Kosmin (2014) 265–71.

⁹ E.g. Anthony (2007) 49–50, 408.

reading of Justin's account of Candragupta's rise to power (*Epit.* 15.4), I have argued for the second option.¹⁰

In the same discussion, Stoneman summarises the plot of a seventh-century play, the *Mudrārākṣasa*, which deals with Candragupta's rise to power and the intrigues of his Machiavellan advisor Cāṇakya. At a certain point in the play, Porus is considered mightier than Candragupta, which leads Stoneman to conclude that 'the author is clearly familiar with the opinion recorded by Megasthenes that Porus was greater than Candragupta' (159). However, on p. 133 Stoneman considers the phrase about Porus being greater than Candragupta as a gloss by a medieval copyist.

Third, Stoneman manages to shed new light on some fragments of Megasthenes by linking them to previously unnoticed Indian parallels. For instance, Megasthenes' description of elephant hunts in the Maurya empire bears a striking similarity to a Sanskrit manual of unknown date, written by a certain Nīlakaṇṭha. This and other examples reveal that Megasthenes was not only an avid observer but also that he was well informed by Indians in Pāṭaliputra. As such, Megasthenes, who was branded by Strabo as a liar and regarded by some modern scholars as a writer of a utopian fantasy, is rehabilitated by Stoneman as an honest and serious writer who did his best to describe what he saw. Stoneman tantalisingly evokes the social environment of Pāṭaliputra in which Megasthenes lived by drawing a parallel with a description of the man-about-town from Vatsyayana's *Kāmasūtra*. Diplomatic duties and gathering information on India would have gone hand-in-hand with parties, salons, picnics, and swimming in pools. 'If this was Megasthenes' life as a highly-regarded diplomat', Stoneman writes, 'he was having a wonderful time' (176).

The last six chapters of the book explore the cross-cultural exchanges between Greeks and Indians in the three centuries after Alexander's conquests. In Chapter 11, Stoneman focuses on the interactions between the Indian philosophers and the Greeks. Stoneman has been working on this subject since the 1990s, and it is interesting to see how his interpretations have evolved as he has delved deeper into the Indian sources. Like many other scholars, for instance, Stoneman originally believed that Onesicritus' report of the naked philosophers of Taxila essentially propagated his own Cynic views, but now he argues that a good deal of what he reported is genuine Indian material. The same holds true for the fictitious meeting between Alexander and the naked philosophers in the *Alexander Romance*. Indeed, the *gymnosophistai* have much in common with the sadhus that are familiar to any traveller who spent time in India. Further delving into the realm of philosophy, Chapter 12 critically examines assertions about the influence of Indian ideas on Greek thought.

¹⁰ Fauconnier (2015) 123–4, 155 n. 171.

Stoneman rejects the idea that Pythagorean ideas of reincarnation or Plato's tripartite soul stem from India, but agrees with Christopher Beckwith that the sceptical thinker Pyrrho of Elis was strongly influenced by Buddhism.¹¹ Conversely, he argues that Greek cynicism may have influenced an Indian sect, the Pāśupatas. The chapter ends with a valuable discussion of the *Milinda Pañha* ('the Questions of Milinda'), a famous Buddhist dialogue between the Indo-Greek king Menander and the Buddhist sage Nāgasena.

Chapter 13 deals with the political presence of Greeks in India in the Hellenistic age, focusing on the Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms. This is a fascinating part of the history of Hellenism which is unfortunately almost completely unknown to us. If only the *Parthika* of Apollodorus of Artemita had survived the ravages of time! Stoneman wisely evades the discussions on the dynastic chronology of these kingdoms, as earlier reconstructions were often based on subjective interpretations of numismatic evidence.¹² Rather, he concentrates on the sources containing information about tangible contacts: the pillar with the inscription of Heliodorus in Vidiśā, Buddhist cave inscriptions left by people who styled themselves 'Yavanas' (Greeks), and condescending remarks in Brahmanical literature about Yavana foreigners. I have but some small remarks here. First, Stoneman argues that the Śuṅga king Puṣyamitra succeeded in repelling Menander from the walls of Pāṭaliputra, but there is no evidence for this in the sources. We only know from Strabo (15.1.27) that Indo-Greeks managed to reach Pāṭaliputra, but it is not certain that they were led by Menander, nor do we know that Puṣyamitra repelled them there. Second, there is still discussion about the identification of place names in the Indian and Greek sources: for instance, Sāgalā, the capital of Menander according to the *Milinda Pañha*, is not necessarily Sialkot, nor can Alexandria on the Indus be identified as the birthplace of Menander.¹³

Chapters 14 and 15 examine interactions between Greek and Indian art and literature. Again, Stoneman carefully analyses the available sources and balances different arguments to come to a nuanced conclusion. As for literature, there are notable similarities between Greek and Indian drama, as well as between the great Greek epics by Homer and the Indian *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana*. Stoneman shows, however, that the differences are more numerous than the similarities, and convincingly concludes that the two traditions developed independently of each other. In Indian art, on the other hand, Greek influence is more difficult to deny. It is true that many art

¹¹ Beckwith (2015). Stoneman takes the criticism of Bronkhorst (2016) 483–9 into consideration, but in my eyes justifiably sticks to the general thesis of Buddhist influence on Pyrrhonism.

¹² As for Greco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek chronology, valuable additions to Stoneman's bibliography are Guillaume (1987) and Seldeslachts (2004).

¹³ Seldeslachts (2004) 257–9.

historians in the British imperial period were too quick in taking Greek influence for granted when observing Indian art, but in some recent works the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction: ‘the dominant mode in scholarship on Indian art is to be “Greek-blind”’ (440). Stoneman takes a sensible middle position by arguing that Greek art and/or artists indeed left their trace in art of Sānchi, Mathurā, and Gandhāra as well as in the earliest paintings of the Ajantā caves, without losing sight of indigenous idiosyncrasies and developments.

The book ends with a chapter on the (fictional?) Indian journey of the first-century sage Apollonius of Tyana, described by Philostratus (*c.* AD 170–250). Strictly speaking, Apollonius of Tyana does not belong to the period covered in this book. Still, Philostratus’ description brings together many aspects of the Greek experience of India in the Hellenistic age. It is interesting to see that literati in the Roman imperial age fell back on the Alexander historians and Megasthenes to describe India, while largely ignoring new information deriving from the intensive trade contacts between the Roman empire and the subcontinent: ‘Megasthenes’ description of India quickly became a classic, and no later author tried to add any significant new data to it’ (476). In this way, the Greek experience of India during and after Alexander’s conquests made a decisive impact on generations of Western scholars up to the age of discovery. There was great need for a book that unlocked the complex sources and discussions pertaining to this crucial period to a larger public. Well written and erudite, Stoneman’s magisterial work unquestioningly succeeds in that.

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