

REVIEW

PUTTING MEGASTHENES IN HIS PLACE

Josef Wiesehöfer, Horst Brinkhaus, and Reinhold Bichler, edd., *Megasthenes und seine Zeit / Megasthenes and his Time*. *Classica et Orientalia* 13. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016. Pp. vi + 230. Hardback, €58.00. ISBN 978-3-447-10624-5.

This volume presents the proceedings of the conference ‘Bilder des Orients: Megasthenes, Apollodoros von Artemita und Isidoros von Charax’, held in 2012 at the Christian-Albrechts-Universität (Kiel). As a set, the twelve contributions are notable for their range and interdisciplinarity, and several contain important new insights.

The volume begins with a brief foreword which offers a series of incentives for studying Megasthenes; the absence of a fuller introduction is unfortunate, since this could have provided a means of marshalling the diverse constellation of papers that follow into a more coherent set by highlighting points of intersection and divergence for the reader. The first paper, by Reinhold Bichler, takes up the topic of political mastery and organisation in India as presented by the Alexander historians. A survey of Greek ideas about India before Alexander’s campaigns reveals a general lack of information: while marvel stories about the land and its human and animal inhabitants abounded, Greek writers before the Hellenistic period had little knowledge about India’s political and cultural organisation (5–8). After Alexander, we see a split in the tradition. The vulgate authors develop utopian themes, seeing democratic elements and other features designed to check or curb monarchic power. By contrast, Arrian (presumably following Ptolemy) avoids these idealising elements, instead presenting a picture of aristocratic local rule with Alexander as supreme king above the local Indian rulers; indeed, the latter are given titles that reflect subordination (*satrap*, *nomarch*, etc.) with what seems to be deliberate avoidance of the term *basileus* (8–14).

Horst Brinkhaus examines the state of scholarship on the *Arthaśāstra*, a Sanskrit didactic treatise dealing with political statecraft, and by extension its relationship (or lack thereof) to Megasthenes’ work. The first part of the paper offers a summary of key contributions to the debate over the date and authorship of the *Arthaśāstra* (in particular, the question of whether its author was Kauṭilya, the minister of Chandragupta). Recent work by Mark McClish on the textual history of the *Arthaśāstra* has set these questions on a new footing. In Brinkhaus’ view, McClish has proved conclusively that most of the verse

section of the text, including the eighty-three Kauṭilya dialogues, was added in the Christian era (31). The implications for the relationship between *Arthaśāstra* and the *Indika* are both negative and positive. On the one hand, since the text-internal references to Kauṭilya all belong to the later recension, this eliminates much of the ‘evidence’ previously used to draw a connection with Megasthenes (34). On the other, a long-discussed ‘contradiction’ between Megasthenes and ancient Indian literature is removed: although the seven-tier social system presented in the *Indika* conflicts with the four-tier Varṇa system found in the *Arthaśāstra* and other Sanskrit literature, the original recension as reconstructed by McClish suggests that the Varṇa system played little role at the time of the *Arthaśāstra*’s first composition, bringing the text closer to Megasthenes’ work (33–4).

Veronica Bucciantini’s paper turns back to Megasthenes’ relationship with Greek authors, this time those writing in the genre of travel literature. After an overview of this tradition, Bucciantini examines Megasthenes’ place within it. She agrees with Zambrini’s defence of the dating of Megasthenes’ work to the time of Chandragupta (*c.* 305/4 BC), against Bosworth’s revisionist hypothesis based on F 5b that links him to Poros (45–7). Nonetheless, Bosworth’s theory is useful for prompting consideration of the relationship between Megasthenes’ *Indika* and accounts written by explorers serving under Alexander and the diadochi. Despite differences in form and perspective resulting from the differing types of underlying expedition, Bucciantini argues that certain elements link Megasthenes’ writing with these predecessors, especially Nearchos: these include his astronomical observations, his description of the seventh class of Indians, and his discussion of the gold-digging ants. Megasthenes’ more detailed treatment of these topics reflects his access to more and better-quality information than was available to those who explored the region under Alexander. However, his engagement with them also shows that the India of the Alexandrographers was an essential point of reference for his work (50–2). At the same time, Megasthenes innovated in the genre of travel literature: the breadth of themes covered in the *Indika* fragments is greater than in pre-existing travel accounts, while his unusual degree of attention to India’s hydrology reflects a need to furnish Seleukos I with detailed information about the region’s geography. Overall, Megasthenes’ *Indika* should be seen as belonging to a subgenre within the broader genre of travel writing: reports for (and commissioned by) rulers and political authorities (56), which only rarely present observations that reflect the personal impressions of the author. On the other hand, Megasthenes does engage with the *mirabilia* characteristic of the broader tradition of Greek writings about India and the East, most prominently Herodotos and Ktesias, and can be seen, like other writers in this tradition, to ‘Hellenise’ his description to make it more comprehensible to a Greek audience (57).

Bruno Jacobs' excellent and helpfully illustrated paper turns to the beginnings of stone architecture in the Mauryan capital Palibothra/Pāṭaliputra (modern Patna), and the question of external cultural influences. Jacobs first presents the sources for Megasthenes' description of the Mauryan royal capital and sets this description against the excavated finds from Patna, in particular the hall with stone pillars at Kūmrāhār which, to the excavators, seemed to recall Achaemenid hypostyle halls (64–5). The earliest securely datable stone architecture from the Mauryan kingdom comes from the reign of Aśoka (the inscribed pillars and other stone monuments), which, coupled with Megasthenes' failure to mention stone buildings at Palibothra, has often led scholars to posit that stoneworking began in Aśoka's reign. However, the high degree of technical mastery displayed by the Aśokan monuments presupposes a considerable pre-existing tradition (66). If one links the finds at Kūmrāhār with Megasthenes' account (which does fit other structures found at Patna) then the beginning of stone architecture could be pushed back to the time of Chandragupta (67–8).

Dating the beginning of this tradition is also key for the question of potential external influence on Mauryan stone architecture, in particular from Achaemenid models. Although the stone monuments from the Maurya dynasty exhibit clear differences from Persian stone architecture in terms of techniques, there are also some close similarities in motifs and designs which suggest Achaemenid influence (69–70). However, the hypothesis which attributes this influence to the arrival of wandering craftsmen dispersed by the fall of the Persian empire runs into the problem of a time gap of at least thirty years, and nearly one hundred if the Mauryan examples really do begin with Aśoka (67–8). Furthermore, this theory does not fully account for the fact that some of the Achaemenid elements appear integrated with Greek elements in the Mauryan monuments (71). An alternative approach, which also avoids the pitfall of a one-way, centre-periphery model of cultural transfer, is not to look for a single point of transmission but simply to acknowledge that through contact with the west in the time of Alexander and his successors, the Maurya rulers gained knowledge of Persian and Greek architecture. Without assuming an unbroken line of craftsmanship, we can see that Mauryan stone architecture developed an eclectic array of forms which cited both Greek and Persian precedents—an observation that foregrounds the role and agency of the receiving culture in selecting and integrating elements from a wide variety of models (71, 74–5).

In a stimulating contribution which illustrates the rewards of a multi-disciplinary perspective, Sushma Jansari and Richard Ricot re-examine Megasthenes' account of the *Astomoi*, 'mouthless ones', in the light of South Asian sources for the early history of Jainism—one of the competing religious sects in India during the rule of the Maurya dynasty. Detecting similarities

between Megasthenes' presentation of the *Astomoi* (a title which, the authors note, may not derive from his own work—the only source to use it is Pliny) and the practices of the Jains, Jansari and Ricot suggest that Megasthenes encountered Jains at Chandragupta's court (89–92). This in turn might provide evidence that the engagement of later Maurya kings with diverse religious groups began already under Chandragupta (95). As the authors acknowledge, the material presents many challenges. The relevant South Asian sources are much later, and it is not clear when the Jains began wearing the gauze masks (*muhpattī*) that the authors suggest could lie behind the idea of 'mouthless' people who inhaled their food. Regardless of whether we can equate the *Astomoi* with early practitioners of Jainism, this paper shows how much progress can be made by refusing to dismiss paradoxographical material as resistant to any kind of historical analysis, and opens up new avenues for comparative work on Megasthenes and other writers on India.

Grant Parker explores the Megasthenes that survives to us as a product of specifically *Roman* receptions, in particular through the themes of conquest and commodities. Strabo, Arrian, and Pliny used Alexander's experiences in India as presented by Megasthenes to explore the nature and limitations of conquest—issues that were very much live in their own time. Meanwhile, the Roman conception of (and concerns over) India as a source of luxury commodities provided an extra incentive for imperial writers to engage with Megasthenes' account (103–4). The latter's association with Alexander's expedition gave him more currency than the traders who visited the region in the time of Strabo and Arrian, whose accounts were tainted by their lower status in the Roman social hierarchy (104–5). Although the figure of Alexander is undoubtedly key to understanding Roman treatments of Megasthenes, one wonders how far the latter's Seleukid connections also affected his reception by Roman authors.

Daniel Potts offers a *longue durée* perspective on maritime connections between the Gulf, Mesopotamia, and India before Alexander, focusing particularly on the late third millennium BC. The lands known to the inhabitants of Mesopotamia as Dilmun (Bahrain), Magan (Oman), and Meluhha (the Indus Valley) were linked through a 'deeply articulated economic and social network' (117) based on the sea. Although this glimpse at the temporal depth of maritime networks in the region provides an important reminder of the degree of inter-regional connectivity that existed before Alexander, the relevance of this contribution to the volume's main subject is somewhat tangential.

Duane Roller's paper on 'Megasthenes' Life and Work' offers a clear and concise summary of what is known (and not known) about Megasthenes himself, followed by a summary of the contents of the surviving fragments of the *Indika* and some brief notes on transmission and modern editions. Placed at the start of the volume, this would have served as a helpful orientation for the non-specialist, but sits somewhat oddly at the halfway point.

Robert Rollinger's chapter represents an important addition to existing work (by Rollinger himself and others) on the way in which Megasthenes, like Berossos, presented the world through a Seleukid lens, both spatially and temporally. Displaying characteristic flair in his handling of the Mesopotamian and Persian material as well as the Greek sources, Rollinger focuses here on the figure of Nebuchadnezzar, who appears (ahistorically) in the surviving fragments of the *Indika* as a heroic conqueror who surpassed even Herakles in his western campaigns. Rollinger argues that this presentation is not only shaped by specifically Hellenistic concerns (presenting Alexander, and in turn Seleukos, as successors to these models of conquest) but also reflects specific motifs and mental maps characteristic of Ancient Near Eastern royal ideology. Megasthenes' emphasis on Nebuchadnezzar outdoing Herakles can be linked to the topos of outdoing one's predecessors which is ubiquitous in Assyrian, Babylonian, and Achaemenid royal inscriptions (130–7). Meanwhile, his Nebuchadnezzar who subdues Iberia and Libya, like Berossos' Nebuchadnezzar who controls Egypt, should be viewed not as an ahistorical lapse but as an ideologically laden figure, shaped by a Near Eastern royal tradition of totalising claims to world dominion that was characteristic of Mesopotamian and Persian kings and inherited by Alexander and the Seleukids (142–52).

Kai Ruffing offers a retrospective on the image of India in Greek literary sources before Megasthenes. He begins with Skylax of Karyanda, whose work established certain ideas about India that had a long life in later Greek tradition, including the especially intense heat and mythical peoples with fantastic features adapted to it. The chapter proceeds chronologically through successive Greek writers on India, exploring the ways in which each developed the central *topoi* to suit their purposes. Herodotos' treatment is particularly distinctive in omitting the mythical peoples and focusing instead on India's wondrous plants and animals (170–1), while Ktesias returns to and develops Skylax's theme of outlandish peoples inhabiting the edges of the known world. The writers of the Alexander period, although they introduced new and realistic elements based on their own experience, were still heavily indebted to the literary image of the past. The new information of the late fourth and early third centuries was shaped by literary convention and authorial intention, so that while these accounts acquired greater authority through their claim to autopsy, they still represented a discourse that was essentially literary, rather than an exposition of the realities of India (187).

Oskar von Hinüber re-examines the question of connections between the Mauryan court and the Greek world in the time of Aśoka. Although in contrast to Aśoka's predecessors there is no direct evidence for Greek embassies at his court, the surviving texts of his Edicts (which include one Greek and one Greek–Aramaic bilingual) provide numerous indications of ongoing political and cultural exchange with the Hellenistic kingdoms, including a report of messages sent to the diadochoi (Rock Edict 13) and the knowledge that

Buddhism was not practised in the Greek world (Rock Edicts 2 and 13). The fact that the translation of Aśoka's name in the Greek text from Kandahar reflects 'chancellery style' rather than the local dialect form attested in other edicts from the northwest suggests that these translations were produced centrally, perhaps with collaboration from Greeks at court (193–5). It is also possible that Aśoka availed himself of Greek epistolary models for disseminating his edicts (198–201), although the similarities (in the greeting formulae, the inclusion of the 'covering letter' in the inscription, and references to the publication of the text on stone) are sometimes at such a high level of generality that certainty remains out of reach.

The final contribution, by Josef Wiesehöfer, restates the case for viewing relations between the Seleukids and Maurya as bilateral rather than looking for a single 'winner' from the treaty of the Indus. Both the terms of the treaty (significant gains/concessions on each side) and the form of subsequent relations (embassies) reflect a relationship of peers rather than subordination, and the fact that both Seleukos I and Chandragupta emphasised their victories simply reflects common ideological strategies for rulers of the time. This reconstruction is fully persuasive, but the zero-sum interpretations of the Seleukid–Maurya relationship presented by Wiesehöfer as characteristic of previous work reflect a rather partial view of the scholarship. A significant omission (perhaps not available before the volume went to press?) is Paul Kosmin's *Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., 2014) which offers a sustained treatment of the treaty and Megasthenes' ideological work for Seleukos in terms of 'a cooperative and mutual process of delineation' (Kosmin (2014) 58), but the bilateral picture is also presented in earlier works, e.g. Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White's *From Samarkhand to Sardis* (London, 1995).

Overall, this volume is an important addition to the literature: while some contributions are rather tangential or have been superseded by more recent work, others shed significant new light on Megasthenes and his writings, especially those which range beyond the Greek material. There was a missed opportunity in terms of the shaping of the volume: a firmer editorial hand and thematic rather than alphabetical structure would have resulted in a more coherent reading experience and afforded an opportunity to bring out connections and dialogues between the contributions. Nonetheless, the book succeeds in being more than the sum of its parts, and the diversity of perspectives and expertise on display means that all those working on Megasthenes or his time will find something of relevance here.