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Book Review: Time and Its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire by Paul Kosmin

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Kosmin, Paul J. *Time and Its Adversaries in the Seleucid Empire*. Harvard University Press, 2018. 379 pages. Cloth, \$55.00.

Paul Kosmin's ambitious work aims to persuade classicists and social scientists in equal measure. The author suggests that an innovatively transcendent temporal reckoning system was embodied in the "Seleucid Era epoch" (p. 26) and this caused a seismic shift in world history. Our near-ubiquitous assumption of a universal, standard, measurable, linear time is (in Kosmin's estimation) a condition derived from Seleucid appropriation of Babylonian creation mythology in the service of Hellenistic statecraft. Any individual monarch's reigns and deeds could previously have been the key reference points in historical chronologies, which allowed the transient political concerns of scribes to rhetorically shape their descriptions of the passage of time in complex and irregular ways. Beginning with the Seleucids, individual political regimes (and/or sub-regimes) no longer altered the texture of recorded time in such a haphazard way. One might suggest that the 'current' of time began to pass unimpeded over the surface of historical events rather than being refracted and distorted through the rhetorical frameworks built by scribes around those various events. The state's totalizing efforts proved expedient for conceptualizing a more 'regular' timeflow at the grassroots level, and this helped to fix historical events into a linear sequence throughout the domain. This "panimperial synchronicity" became second nature (according to Kosmin) and formed the precursory template for the current international Common Era dating system (p. 48).

Also, the concept of an impending apocalyptic eschatology (i.e. an 'end of days') in Abrahamic and Zoroastrian cosmology is allegedly a reaction against Seleucid hegemony by the indigenous cultures of Babylon and Judea. Local reactions against Seleucid power thus served (somewhat ironically) to instantiate the very temporal system the Seleucids imposed, and then to

spread it far beyond its diasporic Greek roots. A work grounded in analysis of ancient primary sources, Kosmin nonetheless frames his analysis with citations of canonical postmodern critical theory and postcolonial theory as embodied by Jacques Derrida, Dipak Chakrabarty, and others.

It is somewhat surprising that Kosmin did not do more to address the many obvious implications with respect to classical and contemporary social theory more broadly. For example, Chapter two opens with a discussion of the new time-reckoning system as a stabilizing force guiding the empire's growth from chaotic roots. As Kosmin states, "The Seleucid Era epoch was a function of royal charisma.... But the Era that it unfurled—the onward and regular passage of numbered years—routinized this charismatic origin" (p. 45). Kosmin never cites Max Weber, but any student of sociology should notice a strong resonance with Weber's bureaucratization theory, where routinization is a means to institutionalize the power of a charismatic authority.¹ Contemporary anthropology takes bureaucratization theory a step further than Weber. Some of David Graeber's recent books have broad themes in common with the present work. For example, Kosmin suggests the Seleucids inspired a "new idiom of temporal commodification" (p. 143) where time itself could be bought or sold, as illustrated by a vignette in the Book of Daniel. The commodification of time is a subject that Graeber addresses at length in his recent anthropological study of bureaucracy.² Kosmin's invaluable insights should ideally be read in conjunction with other cutting-edge theoretical texts. This will stimulate lively debate and could reframe discussions of ancient historiography in relation to social theory, helping to move theory into new practical domains.

The audacity of this book is inspiring and will enhance my own teaching and research. My only major complaint is that it gives short shrift to the farthest eastern portion of the Seleucid

Empire, namely Greek Central Asia. The entire portion devoted to Greek Central Asia is a mere 2.5 pages (pp. 99-101), which includes hand-waving dismissals of possible insights from this region. Certainly, the volume of surviving evidence on the Western Seleucid domains is much, much greater, but the passing disregard of the eastern frontier is rooted more in the author's specialist moorings than anything else. Referring to this region, Kosmin dismissively writes: "A single new discovery may well blow the whole house down" (p. 99). Kosmin has not been nearly comprehensive enough in his survey of the literature about this region to be confidently justified that bold assertion. At a quick-reading 236 pages (excluding notes) it could have been easily expanded with some cursory research.

It is only natural that a discipline of ancient history dominated by Near East specialists, and the Western orientation of the historical discipline as a whole, would lead to the neglect of those portions of Afghanistan and Pakistan governed by the Seleucids (however briefly that was in terms of discreet linear chronology). Kosmin recognizes this deficiency when he writes "Judea's prominence in this book is a necessary anachronism, over enlarged with respect to Hellenistic realities, yet fit to the proportion of our evidence and the future scale of the Judaism and Christianity that would preserve it" (p. 10). There is much merit to this rationalization rooted in the author's specialized focus. But nonetheless he misses several important opportunities "with respect to Hellenistic realities," to buttress the central claims of the book and expand the argument beyond the West (and to support his thesis's relevance to world history and social theory in general).

It is generally recognized that the Seleucid Empire was a crucial sociopolitical context for the formation of early Rabbinical Judaism (hence also early Christianity) and the

institutionalization of Zoroastrianism as we know it. However fewer Western scholars fully appreciate that this empire also included key territories in the nascent institutionalization and internationalization of Buddhism. The oldest Buddhist iconographies appear in a culturally and linguistically Greek context in the post-Seleucid Central Asian regions. Kosmin's discussion of this evidence is cursory to say the least. Foundational Hellenistic influence on Buddhist art is commonly recognized by art historians and is deeply embedded in the scholarship of Buddhist iconography. The evidences presented in this volume urgently suggest that other fundamental issues need to be explored in this context, beyond the domain of art history.

Other twenty-first century scholarship has provocatively suggested parallels between Greek, Zoroastrian, and Buddhist eschatology.³ Early Buddhism was established in the former-Seleucid domains before the emergence of the sectarian schools which later came to define the faith. The emergence of the early cult of Maitreya (a future Buddha associated with an impending apocalypse) also seems to be deeply rooted in these regions, and this fact closely dovetails with Kosmin's compelling arguments about apocalyptic eschatology. Kosmin suggests the withering prostration of a pagan statue in the Book of Daniel is not merely a topic of esoteric interest in studies Judaic iconoclasm, but is closely tied to an "eschatological trope," and a sublime illustration of "the developed Hellenistic political culture of statues, their unmaking and the self-periodizing of communal histories" (p. 145). Early Central Asian Buddhist Vinaya texts portray the child who will become the Buddha spontaneously inverting religious protocols and prompting a statue of a venerable god to bend his knee and prostrate himself before the newborn Lord, rather than the reverse (the infant bowing toward a statue of a god) as is customary.⁴ This

scene has profound resonance within the context of Ksomin's arguments. Certainly, the absence of a full chapter devoted to Central Asia in this book is an unfortunate oversight.

Nonetheless, this text is a great leap forward in ancient history and social theory and deserves wide acclaim. In an era of scholarship dedicated to timid minor revisions of decades-old received wisdom, this book pushes the envelope mightily. This work has the potential to redefine the landscape of ancient history and social theory in unexpected ways.

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Notes

¹ Max Weber, "Bureaucracy" from *Weber's Rationalism and Modern Society: New Translations on Politics, Bureaucracy, and Social Stratification*. Tony Waters and Dagmar Waters, eds. (London: Palgrave MacMillan 2015) 73-128.

² David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*. (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2015).

³ Christopher I. Beckwith, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015) & Gananath Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma: Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

⁴ W. Woodville Rockhill, *The Life of the Buddha and the Early History of His Order Derived from Tibetan Works*. (London: Trübner & Co, 1884) 17.