

Julian Degen, *Alexander III. zwischen Ost und West. Indigene Traditionen und Herrschaftsinszenierung im makedonischen Weltimperium, (Oriens et Occidens – 39)*, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart 2022, 489 pp.; ISBN 978-3-515-13283-1

Such a great volume of books and studies have been devoted to Alexander of Macedon and his times that it would seem that hardly anything new can be added to the body of the research; however, such a superficial conclusion cannot be justified. New research methods and new sources, as well as the growing capacity to identify research-worthy problems, constantly contribute to our ever-expanding knowledge of the past. Such factors are also at play in regard to the Macedonian ruler's life, times and deeds, continuously attracting keen scholarly interest. The sheer scope of that interest is made evident by J. Degen's comprehensive monograph, a printed version of his doctoral dissertation (defended in 2020 at the University of Innsbruck).

Although Alexander's reign has been repeatedly covered and analysed by generations of scholars, Julian Degen proposes to examine it from a slightly different perspective, focusing on the methods and policies Alexander employed to rule and administer the empire he created, and on the manner in which Alexander used local customs to build relations with the subjects living across his dominion (p. 29). The specific topics that fell within Degen's research scope were: the methods and practices of governance, as shown through different types of testimony ("Herrschaftsverständnis," pp. 29–30), the behaviour of the ruler, as aimed at different groups of subjects ("Symbolhandlungen," pp. 30–31), the roles that Alexander performed in different contexts to legitimise his leadership ("Rollenverständnis," p. 31), the way in which Alexander crafted his own image through public speeches, the language used during such speeches ("Positionierungsstrategie," p. 31)¹ and the language used by his officials, as well as the content of official propaganda ("Außendarstellung, Herrschersprache, offizielle Sprache und ‚Propaganda‘," p. 32). At the same time, the author avers that his study does not address events related to the person and era of Alexander in the Near East and Egypt, due to the author's lack of proficiency in the languages in which the sources produced in these areas were written (p. 33).

The work comprises a fairly extensive introduction ("Einleitung," pp. 11–51), three chapters and a conclusion. It is supplemented by a very substantial bibliography (pp. 419–476) and three types of indexes ("Ortsregister"; "Register der Personen-, Götternamen und Ethnonyme"; "Sach-, Institutionen-, Titel-Ämterregister, historische Ereignisse").

¹ "Unter Positionierungsstrategie wird hier die Summe spezifischer Maßnahmen verstanden, die der junge Argeade zur Anwendung brachte, um vor einem bestimmten Zielpublikum Herrschaftsvergewisserung herzustellen" (p. 31).

In the first chapter (“Alexander als Hegemon des Korinthischen Bundes,” pp. 52–249), the most voluminous in the entire work, the author describes and analyses Alexander’s actions and attitudes from his assumption of leadership of the League of Corinth until the capture of Persepolis, that is, until the soldiers supplied by the League’s states were sent back to Greece. Degen’s selection of such a chronological framework for this chapter is motivated by the fact that, during this part of his reign, Alexander was primarily interested in consolidating his leadership in the Greek world in order to mount an expedition against the Achaemenid state. Although he was the League’s leader, the expedition was formally launched under the League’s banner, with the professed aim of liberating the Greeks from the Persian rule. Only after accomplishing this mission did Alexander proceed to implement his own plans. During the first period of his reign, and later also during the expedition itself, Alexander’s political stance and the manner in which he acted were constantly evolving. The author convincingly shows how skilfully Alexander was able to adapt to a variety of situations in order to exploit them to his advantage by using the most appropriate means of action mentioned above.

With the subjugation of the western satrapies of the Achaemenid Empire, Babylon came under the rule of the king of Macedon. The clout and social authority of the priestly elite in this city made it imperative for any conqueror of Babylon to seek their favour: Alexander behaved in a similar fashion. His relations with the priestly elite of Babylon and the ideological messaging used by the king to consolidate his position in that city are presented in the second chapter (“Alexander und das babylonische Königtum,” pp. 250–301). The pattern of his actions followed the practice of his predecessors, the rulers of the Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian and Persian states. This was made evident through Alexander’s priorities in his policy towards the city: care for the temple needs (including the reconstruction of destroyed ones), respect for the customs and religious practices of the inhabitants of Babylon, and the development of the city to emphasise its great importance within Alexander’s state (pp. 278–301). Another significant aspect of the conqueror’s relationship with the local social elite was his emulation of the style of governance of the kings of the Neo-Babylonian state.² However, the ancient sources do not mention that Alexander claimed the title of king of Babylonia, with contemporary scholars being in agreement with their account. In the author’s opinion, Alexander’s choice not to claim the kingship may have had a significant political purpose.³

The third chapter (“Alexander und das achaimenidische Imperium,” pp. 302–408) deals with Alexander’s policies and actions while continuing his conquest of the Persian

² The importance and longevity of this tradition for the people of Babylon is demonstrated by the Seleucids also emulating the rulers of the Neo-Babylonian state, cf. A. Mehl, How to understand Seleukids as Babylonian “Great Kings”, in: E. Anagnostou-Laoutides, S. Pfeiffer (eds.), *Culture and Ideology under the Seleukids: Unframing a Dynasty*, Berlin–New York 2022, 187–202; P. M. Michel, M. Widmer, Au sujet de la puissance symbolique des vêtements du souverain en Babylonie et dans l’Orient hellénistique, in: E. Anagnostou-Laoutides, S. Pfeiffer (eds.), op. cit., 202–226.

³ “Wenn die Alexander-Autoren hauptsächlich Alexanders Positionierungsstrategien in Babylon reflektieren, bedeutet dies allerdings nicht, dass in seiner späten Lebensphase das babylonische Königtum sein Vertsändnis von Herrschaft dominierte. Vielmehr gewinnen wir durch die sorgfältige Kontextualisierung der Herrschaft Alexanders über Babylon als Bild eines Eroberers, der großes Feingespür für indigene Traditionen zeigte, um Akzeptanz seiner Herrschaft herzustellen mit dem Zweck, seine Machtposition in gefestigte Herrschaft zu transformieren” (p. 301).

empire after the death of King Darius III. One major aspect of the Macedonian king's social policy was his attitude towards the Persian elite (pp. 312–332), giving rise to disputes among scholars regarding the aims of this policy. In addressing this issue, the author first outlines the characteristics of these elites over time, from Darius I to Darius III, and then presents his own interpretation of Alexander's social policy. In Degen's view, the king consciously sought to create a new social elite that would suit the needs of the empire he had created. His promoted policy of uniting the Macedonian and Iranian elites, which provoked unrest and met with great resistance in Alexander's entourage, was intended to bring about the formation of a new intercultural elite for this empire, the creation of which would serve to consolidate it politically (cf. pp. 329–332). During this phase of Alexander's expedition, a particular place in his propaganda and actions was given to conduct that emulated the patterns of Achaemenid imperial ideology, since Alexander sought to demonstrate that he was their worthy successor. Analysing the accounts of ancient authors who criticised the Macedonian ruler for his pursuit of new and more conquests, Degen notes that such an assessment bears witness to these authors' lack of understanding of how this hunger for conquest came to be.⁴ Another prominent element of Alexander's propaganda and actions, linked to both the dynastic ideology of the Argeads and that of the Achaemenids, was his use of the characters Hercules and Dionysus during his expedition to India (pp. 382–402). The conclusion of the work ("Zusammenfassung," pp. 409–417), which closes the work, revisits all the major conclusions of the author's research. One of them is that Alexander, through his actions and policies, consistently and skilfully used the political tools available to him to build his position as ruler of an ethnically and culturally diverse empire. The author calls such a policy a cultural dialogue between the East and the West, the fruits of which also enriched the Hellenistic world.⁵


The lecture of Degen's work brings considerable pleasure to the reader, thanks to its clear language, well-formulated arguments and informed interpretations. These qualities aside, the monograph stands for an essential contribution towards our better understanding of Alexander's motives and actions during the period from his ascension to power until his death. The author's use of an original research method (through the simultaneous application of a wide range of concepts from political sciences and thorough grounding in source accounts) has allowed him to offer a coherent explanation of the Macedonian king's decisions and actions, highlighting both his great military talent and his exceptional political instinct. Thanks to such instinct, Alexander was able to skilfully exploit every opportunity (even of seemingly marginal importance in the context of great politics of the day) to strengthen his political position in relation to the various social groups

⁴ "Bei genauer Betrachtung der Eroberungslust Alexanders fällt auf, dass die Primär-Autoren in jedem der hier untersuchten Fälle in musterhafter Weise ein Bild des jüngeren Herrschers entwarfen, der die Leistungen der Großkönige in den Schatten stellt, ohne dass seine Orientierung an jenen zur Sprache kommt. Der Anspruch, die Taten der vormaligen Herrscher zu übertreffen, ist ein wesentliches Ideologem der altorientalischen Herrscherrepräsentation und kann daher auch als Positionierungsbemühung Alexanders gegenüber den asiatischen Kontexten seines Imperium betrachtet werden" (p. 382).

⁵ "... am Ende der intensive Dialog zwischen ‚Ost‘ und ‚West‘ und dessen Übersetzung in unterschiedliche kulturelle Kontexte das prägende Element der Herrschaft Alexanders, die einen bestehenden Dialog zwischen den Kulturen Eurasiens dynamisierte und in die pluralistische Welt des Hellenismus überleitete" (p. 417).

of the empire he was building. The novelty and originality of the author's findings are encouragement enough for the broad range of scholars of the period to familiarise themselves with this book.

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