



The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire

By Paul J. Kosmin

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The Seleucid Empire (311-64 BCE) was unlike anything the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds had seen. Stretching from present-day Bulgaria to Tajikistan--the bulk of Alexander the Great's Asian conquests--the kingdom encompassed a territory of remarkable ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity; yet it did not include Macedonia, the ancestral homeland of the dynasty. *The Land of the Elephant Kings* investigates how the Seleucid kings, ruling over lands to which they had no historic claim, attempted to transform this territory into a coherent and meaningful space.

Based on recent archaeological evidence and ancient primary sources, Paul J. Kosmin's multidisciplinary approach treats the Seleucid Empire not as a mosaic of regions but as a land unified in imperial ideology and articulated by spatial practices. Kosmin uncovers how Seleucid geographers and ethnographers worked to naturalize the kingdom's borders with India and Central Asia in ways that shaped Roman and later medieval understandings of "the East." In the West, Seleucid rulers turned their backs on Macedonia, shifting their sense of homeland to Syria. By mapping the Seleucid kings' travels and studying the cities they founded--an ambitious colonial policy that has influenced the Near East to this day--Kosmin shows how the empire's territorial identity was constructed on the ground. In the empire's final century, with enemies pressing harder and central power disintegrating, we see that the very modes by which Seleucid territory had been formed determined the way in which it fell apart.

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Editorial Review

Review

This fresh and thoroughly enjoyable account of the Seleucid kingdom is dedicated to understanding how one of the great states of the Hellenistic world was formed and how it actually worked. Although often understood as little more than a placeholder existing in time between Alexander's conquest of the east and the coming of Rome some three centuries later, **Kosmin** dispels such facile notions and breathes considerable new life into Seleucid history. Deeply researched and engagingly written, Kosmin's book will be required reading for all those interested in understanding the history of this crucially important and still relevant part of the world that stretches from present-day Syria to Afghanistan. (Joseph Manning, Yale University)

The Land of the Elephant Kings is unusual and original, and I have no doubt that it will find a large and appreciative audience. It is a lively addition to the literature on the Seleucids. (Nicholas Purcell, Oxford University)

About the Author

Paul J. Kosmin is John L. Loeb Associate Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University.

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