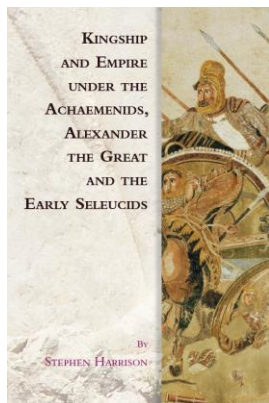


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Stephen Harrison, *Kingship and Empire under the Achaemenids, Alexander the Great and the Early Seleucids*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025, ISBN: 9781474466387

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The book by Stephen H(arrison), based on his PhD thesis at the University of Cambridge, however just as the Author states himself “it has been entirely reconceptualised and rewritten” (X).

The Author attempts to redefine the “Achaemenid inheritance”, the attempt which results in deep analysis of this phenomenon which avoids limiting to merely “to identify continuities and changes” (2). The basis for broader conclusions drawn by H. is a comparative examination of all three empires, namely the Achaemenid Empire, the empire of Alexander the Great, and the Early Seleucid Empire, undertaken with the aim of isolating the ideas and ideological features characteristic of each polity. What unites all three monarchies is the fact that they emerged as a result of conquest. This circumstance forced their rulers to adopt specific political and ideological strategies in order to legitimize their authority within multiethnic imperial structures. Consequently, the research subject selected by H. must be regarded as both justified and methodologically sound. Somewhat tangentially to his main line of argument, H. also focuses on “a new way to understand how Persian ideas were transferred to the Macedonians” (3).

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Introduction contains, on top of the definitions of the research goals: a historiographical sketch supported with the short discussion of the new research regarding all three empires (4–8); the Achaemenid heirs (8–14); a brief overview of the available evidence (18–29) as well as the methodological implications their interpretation (29–31).

It is of great surprise that, given the title and research problem, of the book, the Author omitted Matthew Canepa's *The Iranian Expanse: Transforming Royal Identity through Architecture, Landscape, and the Built Environment, 550 BCE–642 CE*.¹ The book of Canepa in great instance thematically overlaps with the research carried by H., often with different observations leading to almost opposite conclusions. Having two scholars writing on the similar topic from different perspectives, it would be important to learn the arguments in discussion and not merely statement of positions. Another important book of very similar research field missed is Marek Olbrycht's *Alexander the Great and the Iranian World*,² however this could be excused as Olbrycht has not decided to publish an English version of his work.

The main part of the monograph was divided into 5 chapters and conclusion (260–268). The chapters are divided into smaller sections and subsections, with the presented research problems being the factor governing the division. All of them begin with methodological introduction and four end with brief summary. The second chapter is an exception here as its last subsection are the considerations regarding Seleucid's legitimization in comparative perspective (124–126).

The chapter "Legitimizing Conquest" (ch. 1, 32–75), presents two main problems in chronological order. The first one is an analysis of the actions undertaken by the victors in order to enforce recognition of their authority by the former enemies just after the conquest ("Legitimizing Persian and Macedonian Conquests", ch. 1, 35–68). In regard of the Persians H. describes two case studies, which are the actions of "Cyrus the Great in Babylon" (35–40) and "Cambyses II and Darius I in Egypt" (40–49). Next H. attempts to reconsider the Cyrus Cylinder ("Cyrus and Babylon Revisited", 49–54). The Author suggests that "we should avoid seeing this as a straightforward royal proclamation" (50) and supports the idea of Caroline Waerzeggers,³ according to which the Cyrus Cylinder could be understood as a trace of a kind of specific settlement between the king and the local elites and not as a statement of the conqueror (50).

With regard to actions of Alexander, H. bases his conclusions on only two case studies, "Alexander and Persepolis" (54–61) and "Alexander and Persia after Persepolis" (61–68), an approach that is justified given the vast scholarly literature devoted to the Macedonian conqueror. In the first case, he himself acknowledges that

¹ Canepa, 2018.

² Olbrycht, 2004, 2022.

³ Waerzeggers, 2015.

the “discussion inevitably becomes rather speculative” (60). In the second, H. focuses primarily on the evidence concerning Alexander’s adoption of elements of Persian dress (61–65). It is evident that “Alexander was attempting to demonstrate that he, and not Bessus, was the proper successor to Darius” (61). However, H. could have strengthened his argument here by engaging more directly with Persian royal ideology. The king’s military victories were regarded as signs of the favour of Ahura Mazda, the supreme deity of Zoroastrianism, and as confirmation of his legitimate claim to the Persian throne through the divinely bestowed *xwarrah*. According to this ideological framework, Darius lost the war because he had forfeited divine favour and, consequently, his right to rule. It also seems that H. should have developed more fully his suggestion that the use of a bow and hunting spear (65) may have functioned as a distinctive form of legitimization, reinforcing Alexander’s claim to authority as the king of Persia.

Of another character is a section dedicated to the early Seleucids (“Seleucus I and Syria”, ch. 1, 68–74). H. analyzes there iconography of the coinage and concludes that the royal message contains “Greek and Macedonian religious motifs” (69) and associations to Alexander, was directed first of all to the Macedonian soldiers. It must be noted that H. points out the fact that a thunderbolt on royal coinage could have a specific meaning in Syria, but decides not to develop this observation. It seems that it would be justified to refer by the Author to iconography of Hadad, the Syrian Gods of Hierapolis, which would be a further development of the mention of the local goddess Atargatis in the same section (73).

In the second chapter (“Legitimizing Royal Authority”, ch. 2, 76–126) the Author discusses the concepts of divinity of the royal authority. H. asks the question “how kings in this period positioned themselves relative to the gods” (79)?

Following the methodological introduction (76–81) H. continues the discussion in two sections. The first (“Establishing royal authority: Darius I and Seleucus I”, ch. 2, 81–112) is a comparison of the ways in which both rulers justified their usurpations of the power. The evidential basis for H.’s analysis of Darius’ actions is his interpretation of the monumental Bisitun inscription (82–90). In the case of Seleucus’ justification of his claims to power, H. relies on a passage from Appian (Syr. 57), which describes Seleucus’ struggle with a bull. This episode is examined in conjunction with numismatic evidence, particularly coin issues depicting the same motif.

It is obvious that H.’s idea that “Predicating their claims to royalty on different grounds represents a clear divergence in Achaemenid and Seleucid monarchical ideology” (79), because both rulers originated in absolutely different cultural environments. Darius (Persian) emphasised his allegedly divine origin and special bond with the god Ahura-Mazda, while Seleucus (Graeco-Macedonian) claimed that his personal characteristics predestined him to the throne.

It must be emphasised that H. rightly observes, based on the interpretation of the final verses of the Bisitun inscription and iconographic examples (“Creating the Ideal King: Implicit Legitimation”, 90–95), that “Darius suggests that his personal qualities made him well-suited to kingship” (90). My impression is however that the interpretation of H. to perceive the bow as “symbolic of the king’s military might” (92) is too narrow. It seems that the idea of the bow symbolism, as an insignia of power proposed by Patryk Skupniewicz remains better argued.⁴ It is surprising that the Author refrained from developing of the motif of the bow concluding it with a statement “The bow was also the dominant image on Achaemenid royal coinage ..., emphasising its importance as the principal attribute of the monarch” (92), and referring to only to the research Margaret Cool Root.⁵ The conclusion drawn by H. that Darius was responsible for preserving cosmological order of Ahura-Mazda (93) is somehow obvious.

In the subsection “Seleucus I and the Qualities of Kingship in the Early Hellenistic World” (95–100) H. concludes through juxtaposition of the interpretation of the bull symbolism in Near Eastern and Graeco-Macedonian understanding from the text of Appian, that Seleucus “taps into the monarchical traditions of the Argeads and Achaemenids” (100).

In the following subsection (“Coincidence or Policy?”, 100–110) H. concerns the purpose of the policy of Seleucus which is ideologically founded on the relationship between the Seleucids and one of the Olympian deities – Apollo. At the beginning the Author deliberates whether the motif of Medusa on the Seleucid’s coins could be considered an example designed with a multicultural audience in mind (100–110).

The last subsection (“Darius and Seleucus: ‘Cosmic’ and ‘Heroic’ Kingship”, 110–112) summaries the differences in which both rulers approached the legitimisation their authority. In this place H. employs the approach created by Alan Strathern.⁶

In the second section (“Legitimizing dynastic succession: Xerxes I and Antiochus I”, ch. 2, 112–126) the Author compares the strategies employed by Xerxes I and Antiochus I in legitimizing their respective dynasties. H. highlights a fundamental difference between the two rulers: whereas Xerxes was able to situate himself within an already established dynastic framework and sought to legitimize his rule through methods similar to those employed by his father (“Xerxes and the Later Achaemenids,” 113–116), Antiochus faced a markedly different challenge. Particularly thought-provoking are H.’s observations on Antiochus’ efforts, discussed in the subsection “Antiochus I and the Creation of Dynastic Mythology” (116–124). Although the Author emphasizes the role of Hellenistic royal women in

⁴ Skupniewicz, 2021.

⁵ Root, 1979: 116–118.

⁶ Strathern, 2019.

the legitimation of Seleucid rule (116–117), the central element of Antiochus' redefined Seleucid conception of legitimacy was the establishment of a connection between the dynasty and Apollo (118–124). H. draws attention to the coinage of Antiochus I, the reverse of which depicts Apollo seated on an omphalos, with one hand resting on a grounded bow and the other holding one or more arrows (120). This imagery may have been inspired by the coinage of the Achaemenid satrap Datames (121). H. further argues that the Seleucid appeal to divine descent coincided with the development of ruler cults during the Hellenistic period (123). In the final subsection of the chapter, "The Limitations of Seleucid Legitimation: A Comparative Perspective" (124–126), H. demonstrates that Antiochus developed a new dynastic mythology portraying Seleucus as the son of Apollo in order to elevate the Seleucid line above potential rivals. According to H., the key motifs appearing on Seleucid coinage, notably the bull and Apollo as an archer, were deliberately selected because of their significance across the diverse cultural traditions of the empire.

The third chapter ("Defining Empire", ch. 3, 127–167) is dedicated to considerations on the modes of definitions of the geography of the empire and how did that special factor affect ideology of the monarchs.

In the first section, "The Limits of Empire: Borders and Universalism" (Chapter 3, 129–154), the Author advances the argument that claims to universal rule were primarily motivated by internal considerations and were aimed above all at fostering cohesion and stability within the empire itself, rather than securing an advantage over external rivals. According to H., it therefore follows that all empires claiming universality were compelled to reconcile such ideological aspirations with the practical reality of territorial boundaries (130).

H. discusses the differences in approach between the Achaemenids and Seleucids towards defining of the "empire" ("Universalism in the Achaemenid and Seleucid Empires", 131–137). The claim to universalism by the Achaemenids is obvious and clearly evidenced by the words of Darius the Great from the inscription on his tomb at Naqsh-e Rostam. The Persian king is the appointee of the god which in itself is a claim of Darius to the universal rule (132). H. notices Achaemenids' universalism also in their titulature, as they did not adopt direct Mesopotamian patterns but introduced new formulae delimiting the range of their power (132–135).

According to H. "the Antiochus Cylinder provides a clear enough attestation of a claim to universal empire by a Seleucid king" (137) however in case of this artifact, the argumentation presented by H. is rather speculative, yet remains inspiring.

Discussing understanding of the frontiers in Achaemenid and Seleucid kingdoms, in wider perspective, H. argues that both monarchies had very similar understanding of the borders ("Bounding the Achaemenid and Seleucid Empires", 138–143, and "Borders and Universality", 143–154).

The second section of this chapter (“Creating Imperial Centres”, ch. 3, 154–167) is dedicated to understanding of the center of the empire by both the Achaemenids and the Seleucids. As much as Achaemenid official sources clearly point Persis as the center of the realm (154–157), the situation is by far more complicated in case of the Seleucids. H. presents extremely interesting studies of the cylinder from Borsippa in context of the Macedonian heritage of the Seleucids (157–158). Further H. comes forth with the thesis, which one should agree with, that “Syria may well have emerged as a focal point for the Seleucids by the middle of the second century BCE, but this was not always the case” (166). The idea is preceeded by the scrupulous analysis of the sources possibly associated with the possible imperial centers of the Seleucid dynasty (159–166).

The chapter “Visions of Empire” (ch. 4, 168–212) examines the ways in which rulers attempted to forge a coherent imperial image that could integrate ethnically and culturally heterogeneous populations and provide their empires with a unified identity and ideological foundation.

The section “Conceptualising Empire” (ch. 4, 169–190) was divided into two parts. In this extensive study, H. first examines the Achaemenid concept of the empire (“The Achaemenid Conceptualisation of Empire,” 169–185). His conclusions regarding the Persian dynasty largely synthesize earlier scholarship based on royal inscriptions and reliefs. What emerges from these official representations is an image of conquered peoples integrated into a harmonious imperial order. The Author focuses primarily on the depiction of imperial geography, analyzing the positioning and sequence of individual satrapies in various royal inscriptions.

Owing to the nature of the available source material, the second subsection, “The Seleucid Conceptualisation of Empire” (185–190), necessarily adopts a somewhat different approach. H. argues that, through an ambitious policy of colonization and, above all, through the practice of naming newly founded cities after members of the ruling dynasty, such as Seleucus and Antiochus, as well as after royal women, including Laodice, Apama, and Stratonice, the Seleucids sought to create a recognizable spatial entity. In doing so, they attempted to shape a shared sense of identity within the empire and to strengthen the cohesion of their imperial domain.

The section “Performing Empire” (ch. 4, 190–212) is divided into 3 case studies centered around three focal in opinion of H., events: “The Parade of Xerxes at Sardis” (192–195), “The Banquet of Alexander at Opis” (195–202), and “The Procession of Antiochus IV at Daphne” (202–211). The selection of the events was determined by the similarities in their character, as well as similarity of the sources describing them. This situation, in H.’s opinion allows comparative study to be carried. One of the goals set by H. in this chapter was an attempt of understanding how and in what part the ideas spread by the rulers reached the addressees – the society of the empire (190).

According to H. the description of the army leaving Sardes authored by Herodotus, may potentially very deliberately reflect the autopresentation of Xerxes (192). The Author emphasizes clear parallels between the description and the Achaemenid testimonies. Xerxes becomes here a central figure, close to symbolic portrayal of Ahura Mazda himself. In similar way the relations of the king with the creator god is illustrated in the reliefs. He is the true central point of the empire (193).

Arrian, our sole source for the events that unfolded in the autumn of 324 BCE, describes how Alexander offered sacrifices to the gods, after which Macedonians, Persians, and prominent figures from across the empire joined him in a banquet. H. analyzes the possible seating arrangement at this banquet and argues that Alexander occupied the central position, surrounded by the Macedonian elite. He identifies striking similarities between this scene and Xerxes' departure from Sardis: in both cases, the king appears as the central figure, while his compatriots are distinguished from the conquered peoples by their physical proximity to the monarch (196). Alexander thus seems to have sought to promote ideals of unity and communal solidarity. This vision closely resembles the concepts conveyed by Xerxes' procession, although the fourfold hierarchy (the king, Macedonians, Persians, and the remaining peoples) suggests a certain degree of development and modification. It is difficult to determine whether these parallels were intentional and reflected Achaemenid influence or were merely coincidental (197). H. attempts to strengthen his argument by referring to Diodorus' description of Alexander's funerary hearse (200–201), yet he focuses exclusively on one of the four tablets. Such an interpretation appears somewhat detached from its broader context and can hardly serve as a sufficient basis for far-reaching conclusions. Besides that H. himself notices: "However, the other tablets caution against reading too much into this" (201).

In light of the Procession of Antiochus IV at Daphne in 166, H. discusses wider implications of the Seleucid vision of the empire (202). Despite important caveats regarding credibility of the sources describing the event (202-203), H. believes that the procession should be seen as "a universalising image of empire" (204).

H.'s opinion "Like the militaristic display on Alexander's hearse, the variety of arms on show presented Antiochus as the master of all forms of warfare" (205) cannot be found convincing or even well-founded. The fact that different formations participated in the parade does not even suggest that Antiochus was a "master" – great warrior proficient in all of the arms. The variety of the troops only illustrates the fact that his army comprised of units wielding different types of weapons.

An appropriate interpretation of Antiochus is offered by H., who argues that the use of images of all known deities during the procession reflected not only the universal reach of the Seleucid Empire, "but it is also part of how Antiochus constructed his legitimacy, since it portrays him as having the support of all deities" (205).

Particularly noteworthy is the final chapter, “Royal Space” (ch. 5, 213–259), whose central ground may be encapsulated in one of H.’s own statements: “The central contention of this chapter is that those spaces mattered, and that understanding Macedonian interaction with Achaemenid monarchical ideas requires an appreciation of the physical spaces in which it occurred” (213). In this chapter, the Author adopts a highly original research approach, the methodological foundations of which are discussed at length in the opening section, “Spatial Approaches” (214–223).

H. drew inspiration for the structure of this section from Amos Rapoport’s analysis,⁷ which “divides the built environment into three categories: fixed-feature elements, semifixed-feature elements, and nonfixed-feature elements” (221).

As a “Fixed-feature elements” (224–235) H. understood in his analysis, the palace complex in Susa. This is justified by the unified, coherent structure of the site and the greatest similarity to Philip’s palace at Aegae. Such selection allowed the Author to note important differences between royal ideology between the Achaemenids and the Argeads. Based on the special configuration of the main entries to the palace in Susa and the palace at Aegae H. concludes the mode of expression of the status which was used by the rulers towards the subjects. Elaborated access to the complex in Susa and subsequent full, multi-segmental control over the personages entering the site (229–230) allows H. to conclude that the Achaemenids preferred greater division between the ruler and the subjects than the Argeads.

The discussion of the second subsection (“Semifixed-feature elements”, 235–242) H. began with description of the special architecture of Persepolis, naturally, emphasizing the possible effect on the visitors (235). The Author concentrates the analytical efforts on two items of furniture, thrones and couches, which were to visually mark the status of the king. H. noticed that except for an anecdote describing Alexander sitting on the throne of Darius after taking Susa, there are no other mentions of the Macedonian conqueror using a throne. Only later, surely at the end of his reign throne becomes a characteristic feature of spatial arrangements in Alexander’s display of power (238). Furthermore an information appears in Arrian (Arr. *Anab.* 7.24.2) about the sophas with the silver legs for the companions were being arranged around the royal throne in the palace in Babylon. It seems clear that the distinction between Alexander and his entourage was marked (239). H. discusses also employment of the golden-footed couches during the procession at Daphne, on which eighty women were to be carried which point out that this sort of furniture was a mark of luxury (240–241).

The section “Nonfixed-feature Elements” (242–257) addresses two research questions concerning court etiquette. The first focuses on *proskynesis* (243–250), while the second offers an analysis of the hunting protocol (250–257).

⁷ Rapoport, 1990a, 1990b.

One of the key elements of audience ceremonies at the Achaemenid court was the gesture of *proskynesis*. In this context, H. examines the alleged attempt by Alexander to introduce this practice at his own court in 327 BCE (243–249).

In the second part of the section, H. explores the challenges that the introduction of the Achaemenid hunting protocol posed for the Macedonians at Alexander's court. His discussion is centered on an incident that occurred in 327 BCE, when, during a royal hunt, Hermolaus attacked a boar before Alexander had done so (251–252).

In the concluding chapter, "Conclusion" (260–268), H. deliberately disrupts the chronological framework of the monograph, opening with a discussion of the manner in which a pretender to the throne was mutilated and executed. Through the examples examined, the Author seeks to emphasize the role that local elites played in integrating foreign conquerors into established local traditions (265). His overarching conclusion is "that the Achaemenids, Alexander and the Seleucids each created their own unique monarchical ideology, but also show [chapters 1–4, K.M.] how this was developed through dialogue with multiple traditions" (266).

The book ends with extensive "Bibliography" (269–305) and general "Index" (306–311). The map of "The Mediterranean and Near East (c. 550–164 BCE)" was at the beginning and 30 illustrations is distributed in the text.

The book is inspiring and novel take on the tradition transfer in Hellenistic east. It will surely become an important position in research literature on the subject. It offers novel interpretations and reading perspectives of the well-known material, however reveals thorough, erudite, knowledge of the Author who is able to compare the geographically and culturally distant phenomena with impressive ease.

The Edinburgh University Press must also be acknowledged for their extremely careful editing of this book, which will undoubtedly become a reference for further research.

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