Frechette on Chaniotis, 'Age of Conquests: The Greek World from Alexander to Hadrian'

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This handy study has much to offer to students of imperialism and imperial history as well as interested lay readers. Chaniotis has produced a wide-ranging and refreshing synthesis of events from 334 BCE down to 138 CE that is self-consciously aimed at a nonspecialist audience. As such, it is something of a departure in terms of chronological breadth, treating both the traditional Hellenistic and early Roman imperial periods in the eastern Mediterranean, and arguing for a “long Hellenistic Age” running from the conquests of Alexander into the Second Sophistic with the anti-Persian alliance of Phillip II and the founding of the Panhellenion serving as bookends of Greek unity, defined first against an external foe and then within the Roman Empire, but with a distinct Hellenic identity observable throughout. For Chaniotis, the period under consideration is distinguished by the importance of monarchy, an imperialist drive shared by the Hellenistic kingdoms and the Roman Senate, the interdependence of political developments from Italy to the Near East, increased mobility of populations, increased urbanism and technology, and gradual homogenization of culture. If one were inclined to quibble, one might argue for an even longer period of coverage through the reigns of the Antonines or Severans, or even through the Third Sophistic of late antiquity. Periodization, however, shall always include necessarily arbitrary terminal points.

For lay readers, Chaniotis points out several features of the period that may resonate with modern concerns. In particular, he notes the “globalization” and connectedness brought on by Alexander’s conquests and the increasing entanglement with the Roman West, the development of novel megacities with heterogeneous populations, religious ferment, and the curtailing of the popular sovereignty in a world of both supra-polis federal and imperial polities and the increasing power of aristocratic “notables.” Chaniotis explores these and other issues over the course of sixteen chapters. Eight of these are devoted to a political narrative of events, with the remainder dealing with administrative and institutional developments, as well as social, cultural, and religious changes.

The first four chapters follow events from the reign of Alexander down to 217 BCE. Chapter 1 begins with a brief resume of Philip II’s reign, Macedonian society, and the creation of the Corinthian League, followed by Alexander’s campaigns in the East. Here Chaniotis touches upon the new model army that gave Philip’s war machine its decisive advantage, Alexander’s moves towards divinity, the foundation of Alexandria and increased urbanization, the destruction of Persepolis, the advance to India, Alexander’s death, and the beginning of assimilation of Hellenic culture throughout the empire.
Students of imperialism may wish for more regarding Alexander's motives other than noting that Alexander had inherited Philip's plans for a campaign in Asia Minor, and, having destroyed the Persian Empire, that he was driven by pothos (longing) to see the limits of the world as well as “the ideology of Oriental monarchy” (p. 22), which could not tolerate rulers who did not accept his authority. Nevertheless, Chaniotis does touch on the administrative challenges of the new empire, and how Alexander's need to combine various monarchical traditions and his hegemony over the Corinthian League, as well as the need to integrate local populations, would shape Hellenistic kingship.

The power struggles of the successors are the focus of chapter 2. Here Chaniotis addresses the problems of legitimacy and reliance on charismatic versus dynastic claims. It is hard to imagine a pithier formulation than his note following a discussion of the murder of the last of the Argeads: “But it was victory that made kings, not the murder of teenagers” (p. 39). In chapters 3 and 4 Chaniotis brings his narrative of the “short third century” down to 217, focusing first on European Greece and Macedon, and then on Egypt and Syria. These chapters are essentially catalogs of the interminable conflicts caused not only by the kings but also by the bellicosity and aggression of more or less autonomous minor powers and “barbarian” incursions. Anyone who doubts the Greeks’ propensity for violence or assumes that the Romans had a uniquely aggressive predisposition would do well to reflect on these pages.[1]

Before turning to the Romans’ entry into Greek affairs, Chaniotis devotes two chapters to Hellenistic political structures. Chapter 5 is devoted to the nature of the monarchies while chapter 6 focuses on poleis and federal leagues. The discussion of the monarchies is wide-ranging, touching on the military and dynastic sources of legitimacy, royal insignia, administration, royal duties, royal divinity, and the theater and illusions of kingship and civic autonomy. Readers will find much to reflect on in the discussion of the kings’ need to negotiate power relationships with their “friends” and armies as well as local elites and populations.

Turning to the place of the cities, Chaniotis stresses the ideological vitality of the polis as the singular political reality for many, while also noting the relative change in its position as the centers of power shifted to larger polities and, ultimately, to Rome. Likewise, he notes that even federal leagues of poleis failed, in part because they found themselves seeking allies from among the greatest threats to their autonomy: the Hellenistic kings and Rome. For modern readers the most interesting discussion here may be on the illusory nature of “democracy” in cities in which the demos might be notionally sovereign, but where real power was monopolized by the wealthy land-owning elite employing the “razzle dazzle” (p. 143) of populism, rhetoric, and euergetism to mollify the people.[2]

Returning to narrative military and political history in chapters 7 through 10, the reader is again confronted by a world of endemic violence with little to no margin for error for even larger polities. Chaniotis treats Polybius’s symploke (entanglement) of the Hellenistic East and Roman West sensibly, noting that modern historians’ theories of Roman conquest are conditioned by their own experiences of imperialism and war. That said, he also recognizes that this is not merely a story of Roman agency and imperialism, and that the Romans initially preferred simple hegemony and alliances to outright annexation. He leaves room for the Hellenistic polities’ pursuit of their own agendas in which they might have seen the Romans as instruments to be bent to their own ends. Readers may wonder whether this was entirely true for “most Hellenistic states” (p. 152) until the annexation of territories
in Greece in 146 BCE, but the point stands that the story of Roman expansion is both Hellenistic and Roman history. In this vein, Chaniotis accepts the reality of the disputed secret agreement between Philip V and Antiochus III of 203/202 BCE, which, in turn, inspired Pergamon, Rhodes, and Athens to seek Roman assistance against Philip, Flamininus’s subsequent proclamation of “freedom” for the Greeks, and the defeat of Antiochus.[3]

Likewise, Chaniotis properly stresses that when the dust cleared in 188 BCE Rome had yet to take direct control of any territory east of the Adriatic. Only in the middle second century would Rome intervene in the East as a “habit” (p. 175), emerging as a “sovereign ruler” in 168 BCE (p. 181), but only slowly establishing provinces beginning in 146 BCE. Nevertheless, in his discussion of the run-up to the Third Macedonian War, he still allows room for an aggressive Roman Sonderweg. He notes the twin motives of greed and glory and the harsh aftermath that eventually led to provincialization and exploitation in Greece and Asia. While somewhat cursory, Chaniotis’s account of the whittling away of the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kingdoms, while the various kings, queens, and pretenders played their games of thrones, gives readers a good understanding of the fractionated nature of those polities. As the writ of Rome ran ever further, and Greece and Asia became a battlefield for foreign clashes, the Greek polities were pawns and junior partners, first between Rome and Mithridates and then between competing Roman strongmen until the final overthrow of Ptolemaic hopes at Actium.

Chapter 11 and 12 provide a 160-year coda to the narrative of Roman expansion as the East adjusted to Roman rule from Augustus through Hadrian. In the former, Chaniotis notes the establishment of the Augustan monarchy, the steady conversion of client polities into provinces, and the movements of population through settlement of colonies, which promoted urbanization and Roman rule. All the while he trips lightly over the Jewish revolts of 66-73, 115-117, and 132-135 CE, Trajan’s eastern campaigns, and Nero and Hadrian’s philhellenism. Chapter 12 covers the mechanisms of rule, including the dominating nature of the emperors’ authority and the development of provincial administrations. Students of imperialism will undoubtedly be interested in the discussion of governors’ need for cooperation with local authorities who, in turn, were generally reconciled to Roman dominance by relatively “soft rule” (p. 279). This is followed by a discussion of cities, both poleis and Roman colonies, as the still vital main political reality dominated by the wealthy elites but still susceptible to pressure from the demos through the influence of assemblies, acclamations, and good old-fashioned riots.

The final four chapters are thematic discussions of socioeconomic conditions, social and cultural trends, and religion, followed by a conclusion on connectedness of the Hellenistic oikoumene. Chaniotis discusses the importance of wealth and citizenship(s), or lack thereof, in determining social position, and the possibility of social mobility through development of education or skill, personal relationships with those in power, as well as tensions driven by economic inequality that often led to war, migration, mercenary service, and later, service in the Roman army as an outlet for the landless poor.

Regarding social trends, he picks out the rise of euergetism and public benefactions and the reciprocity that redounded to the benefit of donors by confirming their dominating positions within civic life. Here one might quibble with Chaniotis’s presentation to the extent that he seems to think that modern wealthy philanthropists are not often still interested in, or recipients of, reciprocal benefits and influence in exchange for their performative generosity, but not all readers will...
necessarily be as cynical as this reviewer. He then goes on to touch on various institutions encouraging a shared cosmopolitanism and civic-mindedness, including cross-status voluntary associations, international festivals and contests, gymasia and the *ephebia*, and the greater visibility and influence of women.

The wide-ranging discussion of religion trips lightly across time and space, set before a backdrop of empires, diplomacy, and war which facilitated mobility and dissemination of religious ideas. Points of particular discussion include greater familiarity with foreign religions, new cults, reorganization of old ones, the divinity of monarchs, the greater significance of private devotion, mystery cults, international communities of worshipers, the imperial cult, the Jewish diaspora, the rise of holy men, and early Christianity.

Overall, the book has a conversational tone that should appeal to lay readers and undergraduates and is enlivened by several excerpts from the poetry of C. P. Cavafy. Specialists may be put off by the absence of specific, detailed notes, as the appendix on references and sources merely notes suggestions for further reading and the ancient sources mentioned in each chapter. Additionally, the number of non-anglophone titles among the suggested works is somewhat at odds with the envisioned popular reception. Nevertheless, to dwell on this technical issue would be to distract from Chaniotis’s achievement in producing so wide-ranging, lively, and accessible a synthesis.

Notes


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