

BMCR 2021.10.13

## Beyond Alexandria: literature and empire in the Seleucid world

Marijn S. Visscher, *Beyond Alexandria: literature and empire in the Seleucid world*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 276. ISBN 9780190059088 \$85.00.

### Review by

Luca Lorenzon, Université de Liège. [luca.lorenzonz@uliege.be](mailto:luca.lorenzonz@uliege.be)

[The Table of Contents is listed below.]

This book was conceived in the context of a Master's degree at the University of Leiden. In her introduction, Visscher highlights the proliferation of studies regarding the relationship between the king and the intellectuals officiating in the context of the Ptolemaic court, in contrast to the lack of such a study for the Seleucid world. With this in mind, the title "Beyond Alexandria" leaves no doubt about the main orientation of the book; in addition to reflecting the primacy usually attributed to the Alexandrians in the study of Hellenistic literature, it also reveals the ambition of treating the rivalry between the Lagids and the Seleucids through the prism of literature. The author thus presents her objective as illustrating the interconnectivity of literature in the Hellenistic world that was born from the conquests of Alexander the Great and the partition of his empire.

The book as a whole relies on the key concept of royal ideology (see pp. 9–13) as a feature distinct from court literature. This difference stems from an essential criterion: the active or passive nature of the king in the process of spreading his ideological message. In the case of royal ideology, the sovereign is active in this process. In return, the intellectuals of the court appropriate it and participate, through their literary production, in providing a distribution network throughout the kingdom. In the Hellenistic world, there is no *art pour l'art*; rather, the authors are linked to the monarchies of Alexander's descendants: their production is intended to serve their representation of power and, in a broader sense, their representation of the place of their dynasty on the political chessboard of the time. This definition requires a systematic consideration of an author's profile and an in-depth study of his relationship to Seleucid power. Within this framework, Visscher seeks to join the historical and literary dimensions, perceived as two complementary aspects in order to consider artistic production in Hellenistic courts.

As pointed out in the introduction, the scope of the study largely depends on the state of transmission of the works produced in a Seleucid context. Much less appreciated than their Alexandrian counterparts by Roman period authors, their production has reached us only in the form of fragments. For a certain number of authors, Visscher is even forced to settle for brief biographical notes, mostly from the Roman or even Byzantine period. Simonides of Magnesia (cf. Chapter 4), for example, is known essentially via a mention in the Suda. The absence of a unique intellectual and literary production center similar to that of the Ptolemaic capital is also an obstacle for a detailed study of Seleucid authors. Rather than offering a comprehensive catalogue of writers serving at the Seleucid court, which would have only a limited interest, Visscher instead focuses on specific moments in the history of the kingdom, from its foundation to Antiochus III. Within this period, she distinguishes four key moments, each corresponding to a chapter of the book.

Chapter 1 focuses on literary production during the reign of Seleucus I. She chooses to pay attention to the works of three officials in the service of the initiator of the dynasty: Patrocles, Demodamas and Megasthenes. All of them, working in the more eastern parts of the kingdom, provide a description of the regions that they visited as well as of the customs of their inhabitants. For her study, Visscher relies on concepts borrowed from social geography (see pp. 25–26): geographical descriptions do not arise from objective observation, but are an integral part of a defining process of the Seleucid realm. Based on elements that may seem incorrect in their respective works, it is thus possible to detect the extent to which their vision of the world around them has been influenced by royal ideology and to what extent their production helped to feed it. Patrocles, for example, when he erroneously describes the Caspian Sea as a gulf of the Ocean, symbolically lays the northern border of the kingdom at the edge of the world.

Accordingly, the Seleucids, although conscious of acting in a world where the balance of power was constantly changing, were conceived as the heirs to the same representation of the world as Mesopotamian kings, who traditionally portrayed themselves as kings of the world. At the end of the chapter, Visscher makes a comparison between these Seleucid writers and Eratosthenes, whose work was to directly compete with their productions. For example, we can highlight the division of the world into 4 plots (*sphragides*) put forward by the Alexandrian author. This had the effect of dividing the Seleucid realm into three distinct parts, thus exerting a conceptual opposition to the unity of the Ptolemaic world. The author's profile and affiliation also contrast with Seleucid writers. While the later were eyewitnesses, Eratosthenes was a scholar who operated from the library of Alexandria. This position is enough, in his vision, to give him a position of superiority.

Chapter 2 focuses on the city of Babylon and its literary production during the reign of Antiochus I. Through the figure of the Babylonian writer Berossus, Visscher reaffirms the vitality of the Babylonian city, in opposition to a line of research that long asserted it had a marginal role. Indeed, in his *Babyloniaka*, Berossus emphasizes the role of the city elites as guardians of the king's power in Babylon. This vision, far from being specific to this author, is particularly echoed in the ritual texts of the Hellenistic period that describe the Babylonian New Year, where it is regularly specified that the king's authority was symbolically renewed in front of Marduk during these festivities. Visscher also notes, very relevantly, the influence of Hellenistic court literature on Berossus. While Greek authors such as Herodotus and Ctesias described Mesopotamian queens through their intrigues, the Babylonian scholar aims to emphasize the cohesion of royal couples. It was therefore coherent with a topic frequently highlighted in the court literature (cf. Chapter 3). Similarly, the language of Berossus, especially in extracts related to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, seems largely influenced by the language of Greek euergetism used by the Seleucid kings. Finally, the comparison with Manetho has the merit of highlighting two similar dynamics of participation by local elites in the building of royal ideology in two different Hellenistic kingdoms.

Chapter 3 then focuses on the dynastic crisis affecting the Seleucid kingdom during the reign of Seleucus II, particularly following the conflicts of the third Syrian war and the fratricidal war against Antiochus Hierax. Even if there is little resonance of these conflicts in the Seleucid kingdom, Visscher interestingly spots reminiscences of these historical events in Callimachus's work. The exaltation of the Ptolemaic couple Ptolemy III and Berenice by the Alexandrian poet is seen as an opposition to the Seleucid marital instability at the source of the crisis. In a Seleucid context, the author still manages to detect attempts to stress the royal love as a guarantee of the stability of power. In the cylinder of Borsippa, a Babylonian foundation text inscribed during the reign of Antiochus I, one can detect a desire to highlight a certain dynastic solidarity between members of the royal family. This chapter, casting its net widely under the theme of opposition between kingdoms, also focuses on the modalities of representation of the Seleucids in Ptolemaic sources. The Adoulis inscription (*OGIS* 54), for example, shows that King Ptolemy III intended to present the Seleucids as the direct heirs, not of Alexander, but of the Persian Empire. This idea can also be found in Callimachus, who calls the Seleucid kingdom "land of the Assyrians".

Finally, Chapter 4 focuses on the literary production of the reign of Antiochus III. The main theme discussed is that of political issues in the western parts of the kingdom, especially the conflicts with the Galatians. Since the attack on the sanctuary of Delphi on 279 BC, the struggle against them had an important symbolic dimension for all Hellenistic kings wishing to present themselves as the saviors of all Greeks. The conflicts against the Celtic tribes thus provided an opportunity to fuel the royal ideology and thus became a theme of emulation for poets affiliated with the various dynasties. In his *Hymn to Delos*, for example, Callimachus magnifies a minor victory of Ptolemy III over some of his Galatian mercenaries. On the Seleucid side, the most important author who wrote on the subject is Simonides of Magnesia. According to Visscher's hypothesis, supported by a notice in the Suda, he lived under the reign of Antiochus III but wrote about Antiochus I. The decision to write about the Seleucid rulers of the past would reflect a desire to legitimize the current conquests of Antiochus III. At the end of the chapter, the emerging tensions with the Romans are examined through the work of Hegesianax of Troy.

The conclusion, in line with the general approach of the book, comes in the form of short summaries of the various chapters. This solid work has many qualities. In addition to working on the fragments of Seleucid authors, which are difficult texts to address, Visscher looks at a wide variety of sources. The Seleucid authors she deals with are systematically placed in the Greek tradition, as in Chapter 1 where the stories related to India are directly linked to Herodotus and Ctesias. Their reception, mainly during the Roman period, is also widely discussed in various chapters. Moreover, the author does not hesitate to draw on epigraphic sources, such as the inscription of Adoulis (*OGIS* 54) which is commented on extensively in Chapter 3. Finally, it is worth noting that Visscher deals with Akkadian sources with competence, based on a fine knowledge of the first-millennium Mesopotamian tradition. Through this effort to take into account non-Greek sources, the book fits well in current research, which tends to value an ever-increasing interaction between Greek and Akkadian sources. The theme of interculturality thus adds a significant and complementary dimension to the interconnectivity, which is at the core of this book. By doing so, Visscher provides an inspiring model for new researches on literature in Hellenistic kingdoms, never fully isolated from each other.

The conclusion, in line with the general approach of the book, comes in the form of short summaries of the various chapters. This solid work has many qualities. In addition to working on the fragments of Seleucid authors, which are difficult texts to address, Visscher looks at a wide variety of sources. The Seleucid authors she deals with are systematically placed in the Greek tradition, as in Chapter 1 where the stories related to India are directly linked to Herodotus and Ctesias. Their reception, mainly during the Roman period, is also widely discussed in various chapters. Moreover, the author does not hesitate to draw on epigraphic sources, such as the inscription of Adoulis (*OGIS* 54) which is commented on extensively in Chapter 3. Finally, it is worth noting that Visscher deals with Akkadian sources with competence, based on a fine knowledge of the first-millennium Mesopotamian tradition. Through this effort to take into account non-Greek sources, the book fits well in current research, which tends to value an ever-increasing interaction between Greek and Akkadian sources. The theme of interculturality thus adds a significant and complementary dimension to the interconnectivity, which is at the core of this book. By doing so, Visscher provides an inspiring model for new researches on literature in Hellenistic kingdoms, never fully isolated from each other.

The conclusion, in line with the general approach of the book, comes in the form of short summaries of the various chapters. This solid work has many qualities. In addition to working on the fragments of Seleucid authors, which are difficult texts to address, Visscher looks at a wide variety of sources. The Seleucid authors she deals with are systematically placed in the Greek tradition, as in Chapter 1 where the stories related to India are directly linked to Herodotus and Ctesias. Their reception, mainly during the Roman period, is also widely discussed in various chapters. Moreover, the author does not hesitate to draw on epigraphic sources, such as the inscription of Adoulis (*OGIS* 54) which is commented on extensively in Chapter 3. Finally, it is worth noting that Visscher deals with Akkadian sources with competence, based on a fine knowledge of the first-millennium Mesopotamian tradition. Through this effort to take into account non-Greek sources, the book fits well in current research, which tends to value an ever-increasing interaction between Greek and Akkadian sources. The theme of interculturality thus adds a significant and complementary dimension to the interconnectivity, which is at the core of this book. By doing so, Visscher provides an inspiring model for new researches on literature in Hellenistic kingdoms, never fully isolated from each other.

### Table of contents

Introduction: Seleucid literature on the Hellenistic stage, p. 1

1. Mapping the Realm, p. 16

2. Babylon, City of Kings, p. 71

3. The Lock of Berenice, p. 119

4. Poets and Politics at the Court of Antiochus III, p. 154

Conclusion: The Fame of the Seleucids, p. 200

Bibliography, p. 203

Index, p. 249

## Comments

BMCR provides the opportunity to comment on reviews in order to enhance scholarly communication. Comments are moderated. We ask that comments be substantive in content and civil in tone and those that do not adhere to these guidelines will not be published. Expressions of thanks or praise should be sent directly to the reviewer, using the email address in the review.

Your email address will not be published. ×

Comment

Name \*

Email \*

Website

Post Comment

