

[BMCR 2018.06.06](#) on the BMCR blog

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2018.06.06

Christian Marek, *In the Land of a Thousand Gods: A History of Asia Minor in the Ancient World (in collaboration with Peter Frei; translated by Steven Rendall; first published in German 2010)*. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016. Pp. xix, 797. ISBN 9780691159799. \$49.50.

**Reviewed by Paola Ceccarelli, University College London
(p.ceccarelli@ucl.ac.uk)**

Preview

The book under discussion is the revised and updated translation of the second edition of *Geschichte Kleinasiens in der Antike*, which appeared in 2010 and was widely reviewed, including in BMCR by M. Weiskopf ([2010.08.13](#)).¹ For this reason, a detailed summary of the book seems unnecessary; I prefer to focus on some aspects which struck me as the main strength of the volume, and on the changes and additions that the opportunity of a translation has offered.

This is an excellent translation of an extraordinary book. Felicitous tweaks start with the title. The English one, *In the Land of a Thousand Gods*, is certainly more enticing than the straightforward original (turned into a subtitle in the English version). It may initially appear slightly misleading, for this is how the Hittites, in the second millennium, viewed Asia Minor (e.g. in the treaty between Suppiluliuma and Ḫukkana of Hajasa, quoted on p. 79). But in light of subsequent historical developments, the title ends up being oddly appropriate: among the various lines of continuity traced by Marek is the suggestion that the religious sense emanating from Hittite texts such as those discussed at pp. 79-82 is ‘spiritually related’ to the rural religiosity of the Anatolian propitiatory inscriptions dating from the first to the third century CE and coming mostly from the valley of the Hermos, discussed at pp. 523-5.

The introduction (ch. 1) justifies the book, explaining how and why it makes sense to write a history of Asia Minor. Asia Minor does not correspond to a clearly differentiated geographical or cultural unit; it was at all times inhabited by a mixture of peoples and cultures, and controlled by a series of shifting empires and states. Marek, however, suggests that continuity is to be found in three constants: first, the orientation towards political and cultural centres outside the peninsula itself; second, the peninsula’s nature as a melting pot of civilisations; and, third, its role in mediating between cultures by offering points of contact for cultural exchange and transmission. The rest of the book is dedicated to demonstrating this thesis while providing a narrative of political events and cultural, social and economic developments.

After a chapter on the modern ‘discovery’ of Anatolia (ch. 2), the reader is transported back in time to the Neolithic age: Asia Minor already functioned as a bridge between Asia and Europe during this period, even if specific pathways and crossroads cannot (yet) be traced with great precision (48). Marek discusses the sites in the region of Urfa (in the so-called northern Fertile Crescent), in particular Göbekli Tepe, and the

rather different ones in the plain of Konya (notably Çatal Höyük), emphasizing the differences between them, but also the links established through exchange and trade. The presence of Assyrian merchants at Kārum Kaneš from the end of the third millennium further underlines cultural contact.

The next chapter (mainly the work of Peter Frei) covers the period from the Hittite empire to the arrival of the Persians in Asia Minor. This is a huge span of time, but the chronological parameters make sense within the overarching thesis of the book. As the authors state, ‘the Hittite empire has a special status in the history of Asia Minor. For the first, and for ages the only, time—and this holds true long after antiquity—almost the whole of the Asia Minor peninsula was politically dominated and culturally shaped by a people residing in Anatolia’ (96). But it was an empire that became part of an international system of relations between states; and once this system broke down, the power vacuum it left led to the development of a series of smaller states, in which aspects of earlier linguistic and cultural traditions remained alive.

Chapter 5 gives a brisk account of events in Asia Minor, from the Ionian revolt to the conquest by Alexander. Political developments and religion, funerary monuments, and status of the land are just some of the topics that receive sustained attention, always with precise references to current scholarly debates and recent discoveries.²

The next chapter (6) covers Asia Minor from the wars between the successors to the formation of the Roman province of Asia. Again, a brisk historical narrative is interspersed with pointed discussions of artistic, cultural and economic developments. Particular space is given to Pergamon (203-250), with illuminating observations throughout. In discussing Attalos’ use of his victory over the Galatians as propaganda, for instance, Marek points to the existence of Eastern (and not just Greek) precedents for the topos of the victory over the barbarian (241-2, with reference to the annihilation of the Saka by the Persians). In the same context, there is also an excellent discussion of Pergamon’s competitive stance—not only towards Athens, but also and especially towards Alexandria (243-4).

The final part of the book looks at the organization of Asia Minor under the Roman Empire, from Augustus to Aurelian. The detailed, mostly political narrative of chapter 7 is followed by a chapter that explores the imperial administration of Asia Minor; the book concludes (ch. 9) with an in-depth analysis of the economic, socio-political and cultural conditions of the Anatolian provinces in the imperial period. The pages dedicated to ‘Society’ (with subsections on ‘Tombs, Death and Dying’ or ‘Land Ownership, Families, Wives, Children, Foster Children and Slaves’) and those on ‘Cultural Heritage and the Second Sophistic’, with their special emphasis on literary practices, spectacles, and religion, are particularly fascinating. Finally, a short ‘Epilogue and Outlook’ justifies the decision to end the book with the moment when Constantine transferred the capital of the Empire to Byzantium, renaming it Constantinople.

The book thus offers a sound chronological roadmap for Asia Minor from prehistory to 330 CE, with subsections in most chapters on, for example, religion, literature, state, society and economy. The treatment of Asia Minor during the Roman Empire is organised differently: there, the political history is separated from discussions of administrative structure and the economic and socio-cultural conditions; but the basic principle remains the same. What impresses throughout is the attention to detail, which brings to life events and situations. To give just a couple of examples: the prosperity of Asia Minor under Hadrian is described through the image on the bronze coins of the small Lydian city of Saitta, presenting on the verso the personified city (Tyche, wearing a mural crown), clasping hands with the emperor, ‘bursting with pride over the ruler of the world’s visit’ (346). Throughout, the authors present the reader with the most recent research on any given topic: the book is remarkably up-to-date. Thus, when discussing the Lydian empire and culture, Frei refers not only to the

corpus of Lydian inscriptions, but adds references (111) to recently discovered Lydian inscriptions from the Caystros valley and Aphrodisias in Caria.³ Similarly, Marek discusses the fascinating inscription from Sinope recording the alliance between the city of Sinope and the family of tyrants from Heraclea Pontica in detail (156), referring to it simply as a ‘stone found in Sinope a few years ago’—which indeed may have been the only description available when the first draft of the book was composed; the text has meanwhile been published by D.H. French as *I. Sinope* 1 in 2004 (see *SEG* 54.1258). Again, Marek draws attention to the extraordinary discovery made in 2010 in a tomb in Mylasa (possibly the tomb of Hekatomnos, the father of Mausolos) of a metrical inscription on stone—the longest Greek poem on stone so far, 124 verses, mentioning a poet so far unknown, Hyssaldomos (166); publication is eagerly awaited.⁴

Over and above specific details, the book makes a good case for its overarching thesis of a unity that paradoxically arises from diversity and the lack of a centre of gravity. The frequent internal references (flash-forwards or retrospects) that emphasize similarities and differences across time are thus an essential part of the argument: the Hittites and the Egyptians confronted each other in Syria ‘more or less as the Ptolemaic and Seleucid kings did more than a thousand years later’ (73); the motif of a richly dressed Persian fighting against a Scythian in a mid-fifth-century painting on wood from a tumulus grave near Kelainai in Phrygia is noteworthy ‘because in it the predecessor of a topos of the barbarian is represented that finds counterparts in depictions of Greeks fighting Persians and later in those of Greeks fighting Galatians’ (165);⁵ ‘two hundred years after the Iranian Cyrus conquered Asia Minor from east to west, the same feat was achieved in the opposite direction by a wild king from the Balkans at the head of Macedonian peasant-soldiers and allied Greeks’ (179); the conquest of Ctesiphon by Trajan in 116 CE, which constituted the maximum reach of Roman power in Asia Minor, is followed by the story, narrated in Dio (68.29.1), of the 63 year old emperor seeing a ship sailing to India, and commenting, ‘I should certainly have crossed over to the Indi, too, if I were still young’ (345)—Alexander is very present here.⁶ Lines of continuity between the Hellenistic foundations of *poleis* and the Roman administration are pointed out more than once (e.g., 291-2; 341; 364).

The book is extremely well produced, including the 23 maps and 109 high quality black and white illustrations, inserted exactly where they are required in the text. An appendix contains lists of rulers from the Hittites to the Sasanians, followed by a list of the Roman governors of the Provinces, from 131 BCE to 284 CE, in turn followed by a general ‘Chronological Table’. The ample (and very well chosen) end-bibliography, presented in thematic order, is meant as a tool for further research (the ‘Index of authors and editors cited in the bibliography’ allows one to track them down across the various sections), while an Index locorum and a thematic index round up the volume. But it is worth noting that for all the end-bibliography’s size (642 entries), not all works discussed in the footnotes find a place in it: thus for instance Santo Mazzarino’s *Fra Oriente e occidente* (Firenze 1947) is absent, but is discussed at p. 131 and n. 100. *In the Land of a Thousand Gods* is even richer than it appears at first sight. Not all readers will want to read it from cover to cover: but there is something here for everyone, from the interested layperson to the scholar.

Notes:

^{1.} A German third revised edition has now appeared: *Geschichte Kleinasiens in der Antike*, München: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2017.

^{2.} P. Thonemann’s new interpretation of the Priene inscription, ‘Alexander, Priene and Naulochon’ (in P. Martzavou and N. Papazarkadas (eds.), *The Epigraphy of the Post-Classical Polis*, Oxford 2012, 23-36) evidently appeared too late to be taken into account.

3. R. Gusmani and Y. Akkan, 'Bericht über einen lydischen Neufund aus dem Kaystrostal', *Kadmos* 43, 2004, 139-150; and A. Chaniotis and F. Rojas, 'A Second Lydian Inscription from Aphrodisias' in R.R.R. Smith et al. (eds.), *Aphrodisias Papers 5: Excavation and Research at Aphrodisias, 2006-2012*, Portsmouth, RI: *Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplement* 103, 2016, 341-346.

4. A photo is given here at the [University of Zurich website](#).

5. The reference here is to L. Summerer, 'Picturing Persian Victory: The Painted Battle Scene on the Munich Wood', in *Ancient Civilizations from Scythia to Siberia* 13 (1-2): 3-30.

6. Cf. now more generally C. Mallan, 'The Spectre of Alexander: Cassius Dio and the Alexander-Motif', *Greece and Rome* 64 (2017), 132-144.

[Read comments on this review or add a comment on the BMCR blog](#)

Home	Read Latest	Archives	BMCR Blog	About BMCR	Review for BMCR	Commentaries	Support BMCR
----------------------	-----------------------------	--------------------------	---------------------------	----------------------------	---------------------------------	------------------------------	------------------------------

BMCR, Bryn Mawr College, 101 N. Merion Ave., Bryn Mawr, PA 19010