

Format de citation

Marco Ferrario: Rezension von: Michael Shenkar: Kings of Cities and Rulers of the Steppes. Representations of Kingship in Pre-Islamic Central Asia, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2025, in sehepunkte 25 (2025), Nr. 7 [15.07.2025], URL: <http://www.sehepunkte.de/2025/07/40018.html>



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Michael Shenkar: Kings of Cities and Rulers of the Steppes

The central, provocatively revisionist argument of the monumental *On Kings* by David Graeber and Marshall Sahlins can be summarized in the contention that, throughout the world and across centuries, kings are gods acting like men, not the other way around, as the scholarly consensus in history, anthropology, and other social sciences has had it. [1] If so, when it comes to Central Asian royalty in both synchronic and diachronic perspectives, few researchers are better suited to unpack the history and ideologies of kings and would-be sovereigns than Michael Shenkar. In his first book, he addressed the first pole of the conundrum by providing a sweeping iconographic study, once again according to Graeber and Sahlins, of the otherworldly origins of kingly power, specifically the reign of metapersons (deities, spirits, ancestors) across the Iranian world. [2] His second monograph is instead devoted to the world of those empowered by the metapersons: kings, queens, aristocrats and their élite retinues, from the earliest origins of (concepts of) Central Asian kingship - as far as iconography and material culture allow us to track them - in the depths of Bronze-Age cultures in Bactria, Margiana, and the Eurasian steppes, down to the establishment of the Umayyad Caliphate in the 8th century CE.

As the author himself notes in the conclusion (tellingly entitled *Continuities and revivals*, where an eruditely allusive history of the *afterlife* of Central Asian visual vocabulary of kingship is presented garbed in the dress of a summary of the argument presented in the previous pages), *Kings of Cities and Rulers of the Steppe* attempts to "shed some light on the cultural history of Central Asia through [quite literally] the 'faces' of individuals who ruled its cities and steppes; to uncover the layers of cultural complexity within Central Asian kingship" (116). The volume is organized chronologically, "from the beginning to the end of Greek rule" (13-20) to the time in which Central Asia fell "under the Turks and the Arabs" (94-108), with a final *detour* in Chorasmia, as the South Aral region presents historical and artistic developments so peculiar to the area and its culture(s) that they deserve a separate treatment (109-115). [3] A short introduction sets out the book's goals and briefly remarks on the - severe, not always acknowledged - methodological challenges facing a broad-ranging study as the present one. It then follows a foreword of sorts (8-13) on "Collective sovereignty and post-nomadic states". Through the analytical lens provided by the case-study of the Arsakids, the most long-lasting and arguably most unrecognized of all ancient (pre-Islamic) Īrānian dynasties, Shenkar argues that Central Asian kingship at the end of the 1st Millennium BCE and arguably until the Russian conquest in the 19th century is best understood as the ebb and flow of a world of steppe rulers who became city lords, in the process merging two different - although related by centuries of interactions - worldviews, visual vocabularies, religious traditions, and even fashion cultures. In the language of contemporary sociology of globalization (which Shenkar does not seem to find useful for his source material), Central Asian kingship represents a particularly interesting case study of "anchoring" cultural innovations coming from different parts of Afro-Eurasia, *dis* embedding them from their semiotic - and social - context of origin and *re* embedding them elsewhere, targeting new audiences, and in the process developing something new, albeit strangely reminiscent of something 'other'. [4]

The main body of the book comprises five chapters that provide a meticulous analysis of a diverse array of sources, ranging from felt headdresses to rings and *torques*, as well as from wall paintings to silver plates, coins, seals, statues, wooden panels from ancient couches, and clay figurines. Each of these artefacts becomes alive under the expert eye of Shenkar, who masterfully unentangles the cultural and artistic references of each depiction of royalty,

discusses its symbolism, and draws compelling chronological and historical conclusions from the evidence he presents. Such a painstaking work ushers in what can rightfully be considered the most comprehensive catalogue of royal figures of Central Asian history to date, covering at least a millennium, and, in the process, providing specialists of the region, world historians, and experts in the traditions of kingship of other areas of Eurasia a stupendous repertoire of visual culture to engage with. Navigating this thick human landscape, across often defyingly complex languages, unfamiliar geography for the vast majority of even the scholarly public, and research traditions not always willing to engage with one another, is an excellent general index of names and places, as well as one of rulers; two critically important tools for the reader to make the best of this landmark book. What truly singles out *Kings of Cities*, however, are the 654 plates gracing the volume: a treasure trove of high-quality photographs and drawings of all the evidence discussed by Shenkar in the text, collecting materials otherwise at times exceedingly difficult to access between two book covers. This is a truly spectacular achievement, which scholars of Central Asia will certainly examine and build upon in the future. The multi-lingual bibliography is also undoubtedly going to provide an important additional research tool for future work, although it should be remarked that it does not always match the literature referenced in the footnote: vagaries of the editorial process, perhaps; certainly a pity, as Shenkar is at home with an impressively large body of scholarship, to which the unhindered access may have benefitted others willing to follow in his footsteps.

The introduction clearly states that the author wishes "to approach the iconography and representations of kingship as a historical and cultural source". The goal, accordingly, is not "to discuss here the ideas and notions of the institute of kingship itself" (6). Yet, such a choice may limit, to some extent - perhaps considerably - the sociohistorical gains of Shenkar's study (even, arguably, *precisely* "as a historical and cultural source"). In recent years, the anthropologically informed *comparative* study of kingship has made significant progress, suggesting new approaches through which to examine old questions and new evidence alike. [5] Certainly understandable for reasons of - one may say regrettable, albeit perhaps unavoidable - hyper specialization, any methodological disengagement with such a body of literature, however conscious, risks depriving the evidence discussed of its explanatory potential and hermeneutic power - if not synchronically, certainly diachronically. Similarly, the remarkably restricted space devoted to an entire (half a) millennium of kingship in Central Asia - from the Achaemenid conquest to the fall of Eukratides (seven pages) does not do justice to the trans-imperial and trans-millennial impact of Perso-Makedonian (and Near Eastern) concepts of kingship, power, and the divine, which may all have impacted subsequent dynasties and Empires in ways that the iconographic study alone may not be always able to account for. [6] This does not detract from the landmark nature of *Kings of Cities and Rulers of the Steppes*. Yet, it seems that a history of Central Asian kingship and its transformations, particularly in its formative (pre-post-nomadic, if a quip is allowed) stages, remains to be written.

Notes :

[1] David Graeber / Marshall Sahlins: *On Kings*, Chicago 2017.

[2] Michael Shenkar: *Intangible Spirits and Graven Images: The Iconography of Deities in the Pre-Islamic Iranian World*, Leiden 2014.

[3] The standard history of Chorasmia in antiquity remains Michele, *Ancient Chorasmia: A Polity between the Semi-Nomadic and Sedentary Cultural Areas of Central Asia Cultural Interactions and Local Developments from the Sixth Century BC to the First Century AD* (= *Acta Iranica*; 56), Leuven 2015.

[4] Ineke Sluiter: *Anchoring Innovation. A Classical Research Agenda*, in: *European Review* 25 (2017), 20-38, Miguel John Versluys: *Glocalization, Embedding, Anchoring: On the*

Cognitive Impact and Experience of Globalization, in: *Glocalism: Journal of Culture, Politics and Innovation* 3 (2025), 2-23.

[5] See A. Azfar Moin / Alan Strathern (eds.): *Sacred Kingship in World History. Between Immanence and Transcendence*, New York 2022. Shenkar is aware of this study but, for the reasons spelled out in the introduction, does not engage with its implications as it might otherwise have been desirable.

[6] Cf. M. P. Canepa: Introduction. Toward a New Transmillennial Understanding of Perso-Iranian Visual, Material, and Political Cultures and Their Global Impact, in: *Persian Cultures of Power and the Entanglement of the Afro-Eurasian World* , ed. by M. P. Canepa, Los Angeles, CA 2024, 1-45.