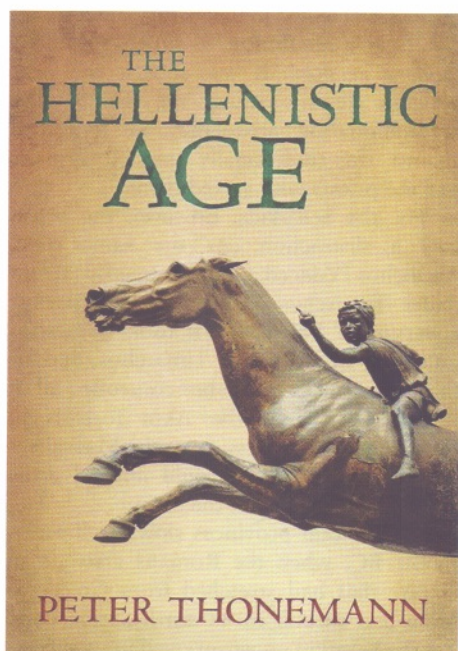


Bacchae sets the audience up for a dramatic and sinister change in tone later.

Other chapters include a discussion on mystic rituals and politics, new and old religion, and the reception and performance history of the tragedy. With contributions from leading scholars across the globe, and a lively, well-paced and clear translation of the tragedy by Stuttard, this book is essential reading for all students of Euripides' *Bacchae*, Greek-readers or not. The play itself remains a key text for anyone studying the god Dionysus, and *Looking at Bacchae* would serve these readers well, too.

Lucia Marchini



The Hellenistic Age

Peter Thonemann

Oxford University Press

176pp, 17 black and white illustrations and two maps

Hardback, £12.99

'The Hellenistic world is, very largely, what we make of it.' So writes Peter Thonemann – Associate Professor in Ancient History at the University of Oxford and author of works on Greek history such as *The Hellenistic World: Using Coins as Sources* (Cambridge University Press, 2015) and *The Maeander Valley: A Historical Geography from Antiquity to Byzantium* (Cambridge University Press, 2015) – in his new introduction to the era.

The Hellenistic Age provides an overview of the Greek world from 323 BC, when Alexander the Great died and his empire was split into different regions under the control of Macedonian generals, to the Roman conquest of Ptolemaic Egypt in 30 BC. The Hellenistic world covered the Black Sea, the eastern Mediterranean of Egypt and the Levant, Mesopotamia and the Iranian

plateau. Lacking a unifying world view, it is too diverse a canvas to be defined other than simply in these terms of time and space.

That is not to say that the period was without any distinguishing features. It was an age of art, exploration and scientific knowledge. Excitingly, though there are few surviving ancient narratives on the era, as Thonemann tells us, 'on almost any criterion, we know far more about Hellenistic history than we do about the Archaic or Classical Greek world'. This is due in part to the masses of papyri – literary texts, school exercises, dream diaries, divorce papers, private letters, business documents and more – fortuitously preserved by the arid sands of Ptolemaic Egypt. Inscriptions on stone, coins in gold, silver and bronze, and architectural remains (particularly at Heraclea under Latmus, Priene in Turkey and Petra and Qasr il Abd in Jordan) shed further light on the period.

Thonemann outlines the history of the era and introduces its power structures, warlords and kings. He also gives a detailed account of some of the figures associated with Hellenistic intellectual endeavour and that most celebrated of institutions, the Museum and Library of Alexandria.

As well as poetry, we learn about mathematical and scientific texts and devices, such as the Antikythera Mechanism (an advanced astronomical device). We also encounter the mathematician Archimedes of Syracuse and the not quite so widely celebrated, but hugely impressive, Eratosthenes of Cyrene. Nicknamed 'Beta' as he was second-best in many disciplines, including mathematics, astronomy, chorography, poetry and literary criticism, Eratosthenes coined the word *philologos* (lover of learning), calculated the circumference of the earth, and single-handedly created the field of scientific geography.

The Hellenistic Age contains maps, a helpful timeline and lists of selected further reading relating to each chapter. It is pocket-sized, highly engaging and packed full of varied and fascinating information – the perfect introduction to an enthralling era.

Lucia Marchini

Earth Shattering Events: Earthquakes, Nations and Civilization

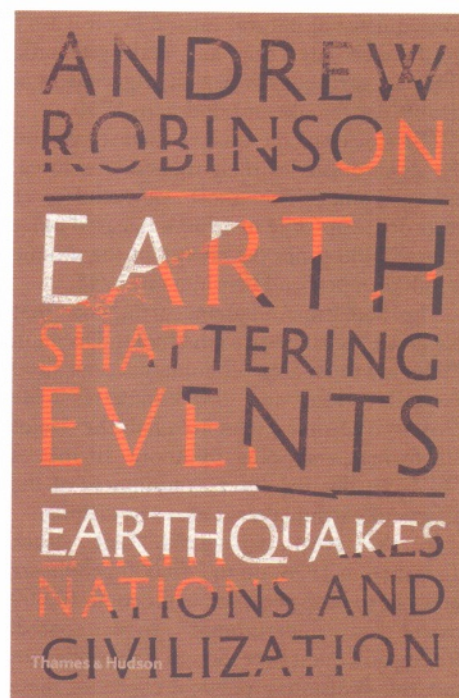
Andrew Robinson

256pp, 15 black and white illustrations

Thames & Hudson

Hardback, £18.95

Horrifying though they may be, earthquakes have long held us in their thrall, mesmerising us with their unpredictable and staggering power. In *Earth Shattering Events*, Andrew Robinson looks at 10 of the most spectacular earthquakes in history including those that struck London and Lisbon in the 1750s, San Francisco in 1906, Tokyo and Yokohama in 1923 and, more



recently, the extraordinary one in Tangshan in China in 1976.

Robinson's introduction is a general appraisal of the history of earthquakes and it whets the appetite for his detailed examination of these most ferocious events, providing a study of man's propensity to ignore the violent realities of nature. No city, he relates, has been abandoned as a result of a great earthquake. Often they have been rebuilt, only to be devastated again later. The Roman emperor Nero suggested that no one return to Pompeii after it was shattered by an earthquake in AD 62-63. Sadly, his advice was ignored and the rebuilding was completed neatly in time for the colossal eruption of Vesuvius of AD 79, which totally destroyed the city. Even today, some 60 of the world's major cities lie in areas of serious seismic activity.

The scientific study of earthquakes had a slow start. In the ancient world, many myths attributed earthquakes to the actions of mythological animals or people. Hindus in ancient India believed they occurred when one of the elephants supporting the world became tired and lowered its head.

Although the god Poseidon was generally held to be the culprit in ancient Greece, thinkers such as Thales and Aristotle proposed that earthquakes were the

Poseidon was generally held responsible for earthquakes, but Thales and Aristotle proposed they were the consequence of natural causes

consequence of natural causes. But it wasn't until much later that any real systematic study of earthquakes began, triggered by a sizable earthquake in London in 1750.

The stories of the quakes themselves and the descriptions of their tremendous force, are gripping. The most powerful ever recorded – in Chile in 1960 – released more than 20,000 times the energy of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima in 1945.

The Sumatra-Andaman earthquake that triggered the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in 2004, led to an area off Sumatra some 1200 kilometres long and 200 kilometres wide (750 by 125 miles) – an area half the size of California – slipping by about 10 metres (33 feet). But the sheer randomness of the effects of earthquakes is also astonishing.

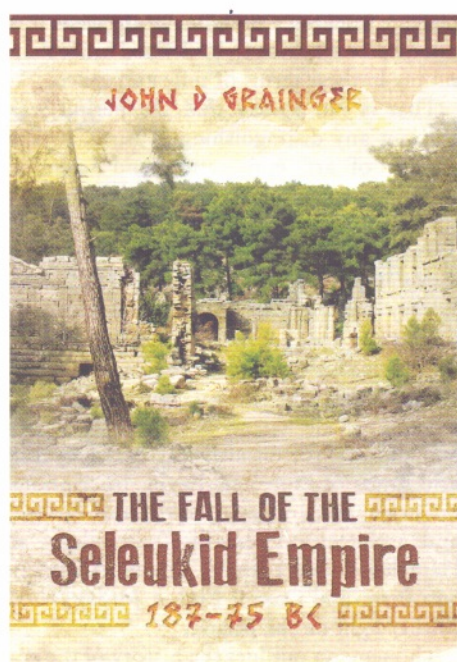
In the great earthquake that struck Tangshan in 1976, up to 750,000 people are believed to have perished, while some 10,000 coalminers underground were spared. Robinson's quest here though is to probe, not just the devastating physical effects of these earthquakes, but their social and political ramifications too. Earthquakes, he believes, are capable of altering the course of history and determining the fate of nations. Archaeologists and historians, he argues, are two groups prone to dismiss the social implications of earthquakes, attributing instead the collapse of some societies to other factors such as war and economic decline.

His study of our social responses to earthquakes makes for uneasy reading. Even those who have suffered don't come off well. In the aftermath of the San Francisco earthquake, those in positions of authority, together with many local people, preferred to blame much of the devastation on the fires that raged after the earthquake, which facilitated insurance claims and helped avoid the grim reality that the site was fundamentally unstable. Nevertheless, the city rose from the ashes although there were financial aftershocks in England where many insurance claims came home to roost.

The political effects of earthquakes too can be even more transformative, says Robinson. Lisbon's devastating earthquake of 1755 allowed the Marquis of Pombal to expel the Jesuits, tighten his grip on the country and set in motion its economic decline; the San Francisco earthquake led to the formation of the US Federal Reserve; the Japanese earthquake of 1923 prompted the militarisation of the country; the Chinese earthquake of 1976 ignited the country's economic growth; the earthquake and tsunami of 2004 helped end bloody internal conflicts in Sri Lanka and Aceh in Indonesia.

Some of Robinson's propositions are open to debate, but they provide much food for thought: our political landscapes can be altered as much as the physical environment by the great force of an earthquake.

Diana Bentley



The Fall of the Seleukid Empire, 187-75 BC

John D Grainger

Pen and Sword

240pp, three maps and tables

Hardback, £19.99/\$34.95

The greater the empire, the more various the reasons for its dissolution. In the concluding volume of his trilogy on the Seleukid Empire, John D Grainger lists the reasons for the decline of Seleukid power in the years after 150 BC.

Externally, the Seleukid realm was surrounded by enemies. The Ptolemies in Egypt, the Parthians to the east and the Armenians to the north all nibbled at Seleukid territory, and that was before the Romans 'turned up at the last minute to snatch a choice morsel'.

Internally, the kingdom suffered from a weak and over-extended government, and a narrow, racial power base, a legacy of the original Macedonian conquest. There was also bitter competition inside the ruling family. Yet this had always been the case. Why, Grainger asks, did the feuding become 'toxic' to the empire after 150 BC?

The Seleukids, he finds, were a Greek drama. The crime that brought down the empire took place in the ruling family. The kingdom that Seleukos IV inherited on the death of his father in 187 BC was 'large, wealthy and powerful'. But the throne was

Of Seleukos' predecessors, two had been murdered, two died in battle, one died in an accident on campaign, and one had been executed

never secure. Of Seleukos' six predecessors, two had been murdered, two had died in battle, one had died in an accident on campaign, and one had been executed. In late 175 BC, Seleukos succumbed to the odds, and was murdered, possibly by his chief minister, Heliodorus of Antioch – and possibly by the winner of the ensuing struggle for power: Antiochus IV.

Antiochus was the 'Epiphanes' (god manifest) who, confusing himself with an incarnation of Zeus, antagonised the monotheists of Judea, which led to the Maccabean Revolt. Grainger skilfully contextualises this episode in Seleukid history with its forced conversions of Jews and razing of Greek cities, as a watershed in the history of nationalism, 'a true revolution, as thorough as any modern version'. It was also a civil war between Jews, pitting the Hellenising, accommodating aristocracy in Jerusalem against the traditionally minded farmers and the priests who served them.

For the Seleukids, however, the revolt was a distraction. At the same time, Antiochus IV faced a more dangerous revolt under Timarchos of Media, the erstwhile governor of Babylonia. It took Demetrios until 160 BC to defeat Timarchos, and by that time, Judah Maccabee controlled all of Judea apart from the Akra fortress in Jerusalem. The repression of the Maccabees pacified Judea, but it could not solve the structural problems of the empire.

The Seleukid provinces slowly fell away. By 75 BC, when the Romans arrived, an empire that had stretched from Greece to India had shrunk to its north Syrian core. Yet the Seleukid ghost survived in its successor states. Judea, a state 'explicitly founded on the rejection of Seleukid authority and Greek culture', emerged from its revolt as 'a near copy of the Seleukid kingdom'. The succeeding dynasty in Judea incorporated Greek cities, hired mercenaries for its professional army, and was ruled by the Hellenistic Hasmonean dynasty, not high priests. Royal names on Judea's coinage were stamped in both Greek and Aramaic.

The 'rejectionist' regime in Parthia had declared its independence by adopting a new chronology – an idea taken from the Seleukids. The Parthian ruler called himself 'king of kings' in imitation of the ancient Achaemenid Persians, but his empire remained largely Hellenistic in culture. His sub-kingdoms were Seleukid provinces by Parthian names, and were often ruled by the descendants of Seleukid governors.

Seleukid 'facsimiles' endured for three centuries in the philhellenic Kushans of central Asia and northern India. And the powers of the Roman emperor were closer to that of a Seleukid king than any other Hellenistic ruler. In Grainger's account, the fall of the Seleukids is as enlightening as the rise.

Dominic Green