Sitta von Reden [in collaboration with Mamta Dwivedi, Lara Fabian, Kathrin Leese-Messing, Lauren Morris and Eli J. S. Weaverdyck], *Handbook of Ancient Afro-Eurasian Economies. Volume 1: Contexts*, Berlin–New York, De Gruyter, 2020, xv-758 pp. [ISBN 978311060451-1].

There are many reasons why the first (out of 3) volume of the *Handbook of Ancient Afro-Eurasian Economies* – a *ERC*-founded project - edited by the renowned classicist and economic historian Sitta von Reden is a remarkable book, with the potential of lastingly reshaping our views both of the space(s) studied in it, from the Mediterranean to China and from India to the steppes of Central Asia and, perhaps more important, of the relationship(s) in which the people and the empires active in this macro area between 300 BCE and 300 AD were entangled.

At least four deserve special mention. The first is the remarkable scholarly rigour of the whole *Hanbdook*, for each space within its scope (including rather, for a European audience at least, under-researched areas such as the Inner Asian steppes and Central Asia) is studied either by a top-class scholar (Joseph Wiesehöfer, Ursula Brosseder, Albert Speidel, Sitta von Reden herself) or by young specialists whose names you would do better to keep in mind because it might be the first time you hear of them, but it will surely not be the last.

Second comes a historical narrative which is *not*, as too often happens within *Silk-Road* studies, teleological or only focused on the "big players" of the game (China, Rome, perhaps the Sāsānids): on the contrary, and this is the third reason I would like to stress, each of the contributors develops a very sophisticated theoretical toolkit, focusing both on the different social actors within his/her study area *and* on the entanglements between these actors and the spaces (physical as well as human) *beyond* what we came to perceive as the imperial borderlands. This emphasis on the historical role played by the "periphery" within Eurasian imperial societies is one of the most innovative aspect underpinning the whole projects: volume I just sets the stage, but does it with commendable insight.

Last but not least, the self-reflecting nature of this book should not go unmentioned: each empire was (and is) studied within a very specific scholarly and intellectual tradition, which roots often go back to the very same history this or that school seeks to study. And if we know (or think we know) the history of historiography within the field of Graeco-Roman studies, what about India and China, Japan and Iran, Uzbekistan and Russia? Given the truly global scope of this enterprise, the authors' awareness of the multiple perspectives from which their study areas have been researched and the materials interpreted set this *Handbook* apart from other works on similar topics within the ever-expanding bibliography on Empires and economic exchanges in Antiquity.

As a brief – but not unimportant – aside, it is perhaps worth mentioning that the book is available *in its entirety* in open access at the publisher's site: this is all but self-evident, and therefore deserves full emphasis. If I am allowed a personal comment, such a fact says something about both the editor and her co-writers' ethics.

The volume is made out of a general introduction (p. 1-12) and three parts, each preceded by a short, but very helpful, preliminary essay, which sorts out the main goals of the forthcoming chapters. Part one (*Empires*, p. 1-304), provides the background for the study of the economic interactions 1. *within* each space and 2. *between* those spaces

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and the territories beyond. Once more is to be stressed here that each author is a specialist within his/her own field, for only this enables, for example, Lauren Morris (ch. 2: *Central Asian Empires*, p. 53-94), Mamta Dwivedi (ch. 3: *Early Historic South Asia*, p. 95-128) or Kathrin Leese-Messing (ch. 4: *The Qin and Han Empires*, p. 129-194) to sketch an accessible but highly informative portrait of such complex societies (but the same could also be said of Eli Weveardyck's chapter on *The Roman Empire*, p. 241-304) over some 600 years in no more than 60 pages.

Part 2 (*Evidence*, p. 307-572) provides a remarkably terse and at the same time up-to-date guide into a tick forest of languages, material culture as diverse as you can imagine (and more) and methodologies, while at the same time tacking stock of the contemporary debate(s) within the different disciplines studying *each* of the space treated in the *Handbook*. It is not easy to single out a chapter as a way of example, but given the work-in-progress nature of the whole field it is perhaps not unfair to mention once again Lauren Morris' contribution on the *Evidence for Central Asia* (ch. 9, p. 381-422). Are you looking for a compact but exhaustive guide in order to understand what we do (not) actually know about the Graeco-Bactrians and the Kuṣāṇa fom either a literary, numismatical or archaeological perspective? Here is what you need to begin with.

As it has already been mentioned, part 3 (*Historiographies*, p. 577-727) is the very hidden treasure of the whole book. Each contribution provides a compelling discussion of the intellectual trends which during many centuries shaped – and in many cases are still shaping: just think about the *Silk-Road* rhetoric, which the *Handbook* more than convincingly deconstructs, providing instead a far more useful theoretical framework, surely to be developed in the forthcoming volumes – our views of the Afro-Eurasian world, so it is again extremely complicated to choose among them as a reading's invitation.

Nevertheless, Lara Fabian's *Russian Perspectives on Eurasian Past* (ch. 13, p. 581-618) forces itself on the reader's attention at the very least for the following reasons. Firstly, because of its very rich bibliography (including important, but because of the language barriers not so widely known, Russian contributions, especially from the Soviet period; others are to be found in the, not less remarkable, 16th chapter, *Constructing Ancient Centra Asia's Economic History* (p. 669-692: by the way, if you still find the "*kuṣāṇa* middleman" narrative attractive, you might want to take a look at those pages). Secondly, because it brings an entire intellectual tradition – as well as a considerable amount of excellent research – back where it belongs, that is at the very center of the scholarly debate.

Long story short, this is an outstanding volume, which provides to both scholars and students, as its title says, the adequate *Contexts* (I stress the plural) in order to better understand the life, culture and politics of a macro region which history deeply influenced, and which memory still influences, the world(s) we are living in.
And this is just *Volume I*: stay tuned.

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