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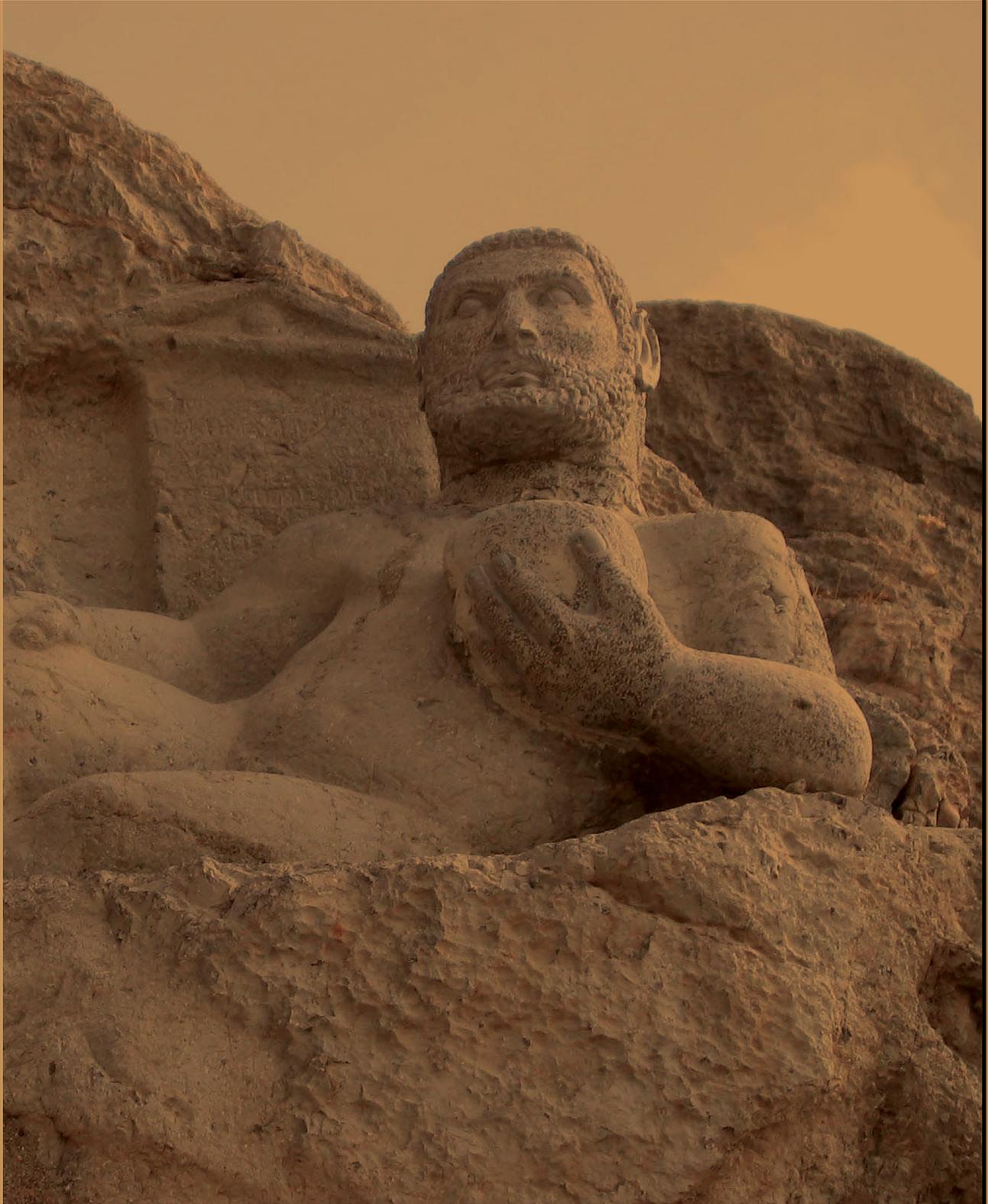
Special Issue: Hellenism and Iran



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Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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Special Issue: Hellenism and Iran

Hellenism and Persianism in Iran: Culture and Empire after Alexander the Great ¹

Rolf Strootman
(University of Utrecht)

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This contribution deals with the problem of Hellenism in the Iranic World during the Hellenistic Period, especially in the context of Seleucid hegemony in Iran (*ca.* 300–150 BCE). By “Iranic World” I mean “what is exquisitely called in the German cultural realm: iranische und iranisch geprägte Kulturen”, as R. Shayegan put it.² But what is “Iranian”?

In my view, the “Iranic world” in Antiquity must above all be seen as a koine of interconnected dynasties and courts from Anatolia to Central Asia. Though going back to the “globalizing” effects of Achaemenid imperialism, this koine came into existence most of all in the Hellenistic period,³ prefiguring

1- This paper is a product of my ongoing research project “Iranians in the Hellenistic World”; it combines my talk at the conference *Iran after Alexander: Hellenism in the East*, organized by the Jordan Center for Persian Studies at UC Irvine, 23 February 2018, and a public lecture I gave at the Getty Villa in Malibu, 15 February 2018. I would like to thank Touraj Daryaee for kindly inviting me to Irvine, and Alexa Sekyra and Timothy Potts of the Getty for the honor to speak at the Villa. I am grateful to Alieh Saadatpour for permission to reproduce her wonderful photograph of the Bisotūn Herakles (Fig 3). All dates are BCE unless otherwise noted.

2- Shayegan 2017, 401. On the Iranian languages from Antiquity to the present, Schmitt 1989; but see the critical remarks of De Jong 2017, 43–44 (the cultural unity of the Iranian language family is a modern invention). On the later (early modern) expansion of the Persian language among—Iranian and non-Iranian—Eurasian court elites, see now Green 2019.

3- Strootman and Versluys 2017; cf. Curtis 2007a.

the Sasanian concept of *Ērānšahr*—a geopolitical and cultural idea that geographically coincided largely with the concept of the Upper Satrapies used by the Seleucids.⁴

Under the Seleucids a fundamental change in Iranian kingship occurred, when a blend of Iranian and Greek practices came into being, which persisted after the collapse of the Seleucid Empire in the second half of the second century.⁵ But what is “Greek”?

Hellenistic, Hellenic, Hellenization, Hellenisk

The subject of Hellenism in Iran compels us to define four interrelated, problematic terms: Hellenistic, Hellenic, Hellenization, and Hellenism. These terms not only refer to historical culture but are also connected to modern ideas about culture and history.

Defining *Hellenistic* causes perhaps least problems, for the word is now most often used as a culturally neutral adjective to designate a period—roughly the last four or three centuries BCE—or to things *from* that period. Characteristic of the period is a significant increase in connectivity, migration and economic exchange in central and western Afro-Eurasia caused by Macedonian imperialism. Empires tend to encourage intercultural connectivity, interregional economic integration and large-scale, long-distance mobility (both voluntarily and involuntarily). This of course began in the Achaemenid period—an age of globalization too—but in the Hellenistic Age, networks of connectivity expanded enormously because a linkage was achieved of the pre-existing land-based networks maintained by the Achaemenids and their agents, and the maritime networks operated in the Mediterranean by Greeks, Phoenicians, and others.⁶ The period moreover saw the integration of the Indian Ocean world of connectivity into the Hellenistic world system. These networks extended far beyond the empires of Alexander and his successors. In addition, “Hellenistic World” denotes the area between the Pamirs and the Straits of Gibraltar, and between the Scythian plains and the Sudan, where this increased interconnectivity and mobility took place.⁷ In this world we see the simultaneous use of two major *linguae francae*, Aramaic and Greek, and as a real sign of proto-globalization, if I may call it that, the spread of a common, international standard of coinage with approximately the same weight standards from Gibraltar to Taxila and a shared system of iconography to guarantee monetary value.⁸

The adjective *Hellenic* means “Greek”. It may refer to people with a Greek identity or the culture by which these people expressed their identity. One usually recognizes Greek style when one sees it. In addition, “Greek” of course indicates a language. In order not to make things too confusing, I will from now on write

4- Gnoli 1989; on the concept of *Ērānšahr* consult Daryaei 2010 and 2017; Payne 2013; and Wiesehöfer 2017.

5- On the evolution of the Iranic world of royalty and religion in the Ancient World, see above all Canepa 2018; cf. earlier Canepa 2010, 2015, and 2017. On Iran in the Hellenistic period, see Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993, 40–90; Strootman 2011a; Plischke 2014; Engels 2017, 103–156 and 213–244.

6- With “age of globalization” I mean a period with a strong increase in connectivity in a substantial part of the globe paired to a contemporaneous awareness of that connectivity, cf. the definition by Robertson and White 2007, 64: “increasing global connectivity and increasing global consciousness”. The Hellenistic world with its concepts of *oikoumenē*, cosmopolitanism and universal empire meets both conditions. For the usefulness of globalization theory for Ancient History, see Pitts and Versluys 2015.

7- Admittedly, in art history and literary studies the word “Hellenistic” has to a large extent retained its association with Greek culture: one can still expect a book on “Hellenistic literature” to be restricted to texts written in the Greek language (but see the more inclusive set-up of Clauss and Cuypers 2010).

8- See Thonemann 2015.

“Greek” when I mean “Hellenic”, for the former word is the more familiar even though the latter is in fact the emic term (ἑλληνικός, ἑλληνικός). In the Hellenistic period, people beyond Greece also self-identified as Greeks, adopted Greek names, spoke Greek, and produced Greek-style material culture.⁹ This is not as unproblematic as it may seem. For what does “Greek” mean in the Hellenistic world? Is it a matter of *being* Greek, *becoming* Greek, or *doing* Greek?¹⁰ In other words, is Hellenistic Greekness an ethnic identity, an adopted identity or one of the constituents of a composite identity? The historical problem associated with these matters of culture and identity is the question of whether or not the presence of Greek culture in a given place indicates the presence of migrants from Greece and the wider Aegean. The question has been heavily debated in the context of Hellenistic Central Asia, particularly regarding the population of Ai Khanum in Bactria.¹¹

For a long time, research agendas were dominated by the question of to what extent the various lands and peoples contained within this large region became “Hellenized” after the conquests of Alexander. The concept of *Hellenization* however has been generally abandoned in present-day scholarship. Because of its one-sidedness, Hellenization, a modern notion, is no longer widely accepted as a good way to describe an historical process (the top-down spread of Greek culture by Macedonian rulers to enhance imperial rule).¹²

This leaves us with *Hellenism*. The question of Hellenism has long intrigued scholars archaeologists, ancient historians, and classicists. In the mid-nineteenth century, the idea of Hellenism represented the first formulation of a theory of cultural interaction in scholarly history: Greek culture allegedly merged with “Eastern” cultures and from this merging new cultures emerged.¹³ But Droysen’s original understanding of *Hellenismus* as a hybrid culture resulting from cultural fusion (*Verschmelzung*) is no longer tenable. The notion of cultural hybridity, as it is now usually called, falsely suggests that cultures can also be non-hybrid, that is, “pure” and unaffected by extraneous influences.¹⁴ But all culture is the product of intercultural exchange. In addition, some have argued that the term Hellenism forefronts the Greek element in larger cultural assemblages (for instance the alleged Greek influence highlighted, or emphatically denied, in older studies of Gandhāran art); against this position it could be maintained that Greek style was in fact widespread in the Hellenistic period, and that its considerable cultural prestige can be partly explained from its close connection to imperial power. The prevalent condemnation of “Hellenism” as a colonialist concept in 1970s and 1980s scholarship does not mean that Greek style was not widespread in areas controlled by the Macedonian empires. In Iran, Hellenism initially was most of all connected to the Seleucid Empire, and later also with the Parthian and Bactrian empires. But as we will see, it was a far more complex phenomenon than assumed in previous literature.

9- Smith 1993 calls the Greek-style art of the Hellenistic period “koine art”.

10- For these questions, see Versluys 2015. “Doing Greek” interestingly is also a contemporaneous notion as it occurs as *hellenizein* in two Hellenistic texts: 2 Maccabees 4 and one of the Zenon Papyri, *P.Col.Zen.* I 66.

11- See e.g. Mairs 2008 and 2014; Holt 2012; Martinez-Sève 2012; Hoo 2018b.

12- Foundational is Millar 1987, showing the conspicuous absence of evidence for Greek material culture in one of the Seleucid core provinces, northwest Syria. Excavations between 1984 and 2010 by an Australian team at the site of Jebel Khalid on the Syrian Euphrates, a Seleucid fortress and garrison town, to some degree has filled this lacuna. See earlier Momigliano 1975 on the bidirectional nature of cultural exchange between Greeks and non-Greeks in the Hellenistic period.

13- Droysen 1836.

14- Ette and Wirth 2014.

In her groundbreaking dissertation, Milinda Hoo recently charted the various simultaneous, often paradoxical uses of “Hellenism” in studies dealing with the cultural identities of sites in Iraq, Iran and Central Asia.¹⁵ “Hellenism” is sometimes used as a strictly ethnic term, to be associated with Greeks; but also as a non-ethnic term, when it is understood as “doing Greek” and thus associated primarily with *non-Greeks*. The presence of Greek architecture in the extensive archaeological record of Ai Khanum in Bactria can be sharply contrasted to the total absence of evidence for Greek cults in that city, which may indicate an absence of ethnic Greeks. To some, Hellenism is a specific (Greek) cultural style, but to others it rather is essentially cultural fusion,¹⁶ and indeed both forms actually existed alongside each other throughout the Hellenistic world from Spain to India.¹⁷

Thus Hellenism can be both Greek and distinctly non-Greek. When used to denote ethnic Greek identity or the spread of Greek culture beyond Greece, “Hellenism” is also applied to later periods.¹⁸ The most striking paradox, according to Hoo, is the fact that Hellenism can be both local and non-local: it is used both to describe a supra-local, “globalized” culture *and* to describe distinct local cultural developments.

Departing from the current awareness in cultural studies that material culture is not necessarily an expression of ethnic identity, new interpretations of Hellenism have recently emerged, which often draw upon modern globalization theory or related fields.¹⁹ Thus, using the analytical concept of “peer polity interaction”, John Ma in an influential paper from 2003 has placed Hellenism in the context of increasing connectivity between civic communities in the period after Alexander.²⁰ It is true that cities throughout the Hellenistic world tended to adopt *polis* institutions, and it has been shown that Greek architectural style in non-Greek cities often can be associated with these institutions; such style is more often than not located in a city’s public, municipal sphere, e.g in the form of an agora, theater or gymnasium, rather than being associated with the religious sphere.²¹ However, the emphasis that the peer polity interaction model rightly places on the horizontal plane of communicating cities omits the important vertical dimension of empire.

In his recent study of the style of Nemrut Dağı, Miguel John Versluys redefines Hellenism as the selective appropriation of Greek style by the rulers of non-Greek societies to create new meanings in local contexts.²² Hellenism, according to this formulation, is not necessarily connected to Greece or ethnic Greeks. For Versluys, Hellenism belongs to the field of cultural production and is to be distinguished from “Hellenization”. Whereas the latter can be understood as the spread and partial adoption of Greek culture generated by actual contact between Greek migrants and non-Greek populations (“becoming Greek”), the former is not necessarily the result of interaction but a cultural means to achieve social and political aims

15- Hoo 2018a.

16- Contrast for instance the material culture presented in respectively Smith 1999 and Schlumberger 1970.

17- The case studies gathered in Hoo 2018a thus contradict the older view that set a “western”, Greek form of Hellenism against an “eastern”, more hybrid one; foundational for this distinction is Schlumberger 1960.

18- See e.g. Bowersock 1990; Kaldellis 2007.

19- For a lucid discussion of these recent trends, consult Hoo 2018a, 47–50.

20- Ma 2003.

21- E.g. at Babylon and Ai Khanum; cf. respectively Strootman 2013 and Hoo 2018b.

22- Versluys 2017; also see Török 2011, another important recent shot in the Hellenism debate, showing how Nubian elites in the Hellenistic Period adopted only those aspects of Greek art that matched indigenous goals.

(“doing Greek”).²³ For my own part, I have associated Hellenism with court culture, and especially the court’s function as an intercultural meeting place where networks of interaction converge and a shared culture of interaction developed.²⁴ Comprehending empire as essentially a negotiated enterprise involving everchanging local and “global” forces, Hellenism to my mind is to be associated with the multi-dimensional interactions between local and “global” interest groups. Milinda Hoo lastly has endeavored to resolve the paradox that Hellenism can be understood as both a local *and* a global phenomenon by approaching cultural interactions in the Hellenistic World with the concept of “translocalism”, an analytical tool from globalization theory which moves beyond the spatial definition of locality by simultaneously emphasizing connections *within* communities and *between* communities.

Hellenism and Persianism

The issue of imperialism brings us back to the problem of Hellenism in Iranian lands. Although the so-called Upper Satrapies were important sources of manpower and war horses for the empires of Alexander, his immediate successors and the early Seleucids,²⁵ Hellenism in Iran seems to have been a limited affair. Although Greek inscriptions have been noticed in a number of sites in Media (Māda),²⁶ the only substantial introduction of Greek culture, and perhaps Greek migrants, occurred in Susiana (Khūzestān) in the southwest and Bactria in the northeast.²⁷

The most likely explanation for the absence of Greek language and visual style under the Seleucids, is the fact that in Iranian lands the Seleucids exerted influence by co-opting local Iranian elites.²⁸ Iranian troops formed part of Seleucid campaigning armies on a regular basis.²⁹ Iranian elites are somewhat invisible in the archaeological, epigraphic and numismatic record of the third century. But from the latter part of that century, Iranian rulers began to issue local coinages – the Arsacids of Parthia, the Fratarakā of Persis, the Mithradatids of Pontus, the Ariaratids of Cappadocia, the Artaxiads of Armenia, the Orontids of Commagene. The “indigenous” style of these local coinages paradoxically connects these kings to a wider Hellenistic koine of secondary rulers. But the imagery also appropriates, or reinvents, Achaemenid imagery, for instance the satrapal felt cap known as *kyrbasia*, and the Aramaic script.³⁰ Unlike the Arsacids and Fratarakā, several western Iranian dynasties (Pontus, Cappadocia, Commagene) in their textual self-presentation referred explicitly to the Achaemenid legacy. The adoption of neo-Persian identities in the late

23- Versluys 2015.

24- Strootman 2014; 2017a; cf. Honigman 2016.

25- Strootman forthcoming.

26- At Nehāvand (Robert 1949, 5–29; 1950, 73–75); Kermānshāh (Robert 1949, 5–29; 1967, 295–296; 1989, 483–484); and Karaftū (Bernard, 1987). The Greek dedicatory inscription from Bisotūn will be discussed below. The relative abundance of Greek inscriptions in Māda/Media may be because this satrapy from the mid-third century was the seat of the Seleucid “viceroy” of the Upper Satrapies (Capdetrey 2007, 366). Here, Greek language is an imperial rather than an ethnic marker.

27- On Hellenistic Susiana, see Potts 1999; Martinez-Sève 2011. There is abundant literature on Bactria; for a recent overview and discussion, see Mairs 2011 with the supplements published regularly at <https://hellenisticfareast.wordpress.com>.

28- A strong current of national resistance to “Hellenization” among so-called Near Eastern peoples has been postulated in the older literature, most influentially by Eddy 1961. We now know that is unlikely: nationalism was not yet invented and there never was an imperial policy of top-down Hellenization.

29- Olbrycht 2005; Strootman 2011a.

30- See Strootman 2017b. Callieri 1998 has proposed to retain the term “Post-Achaemenid” for material culture from Fārs dating to the Hellenistic-period that continues Achaemenid-period visual style.

Hellenistic period has been described by Versluys and this author as “Persianism”.³¹ This phenomenon also comprises the later creation of a pseudo-Persian look for the Greco-Roman deity Mithras, or the adoption of Persian identities by Greek-speaking Zoroastrians in Roman Anatolia.³² Important for the present discussion is the fact that Persianism began as a form of cultural production at the various interconnected dynastic courts of the late Hellenistic period.³³

Because of its reliance on the Greek narrative tradition concerning the Achaemenids, and its use of Greek formal elements to depict Iranian concepts, the Persianism that characterized dynastic identities in the western kingdoms of Pontus, Cappadocia and Commagene can thus challengingly be presented as a form of Hellenism, too. But as we will see, a similar Persianistic tendency may be seen in late-Hellenistic Chorasmia, at the north eastern fringe of the Hellenistic world; but here the underlying narratives and the formal elements to express them were more Iranian-looking than in the west.

In what follows, I will offer four vignettes on culture in Greater Iran during the Hellenistic period. The aim is not to settle the problems outlined above. Neither is it my intention to systematically enforce any of the above analytical tools, nor to develop new ones. The aim of the following is simply to complicate matters even more by showing that processes of cultural change in Hellenistic Iran are multiform and unsystematic, and how in Hellenistic Iran the traditional dichotomy of “Greek” and “Persian” is as unhelpful as the outdated antagonism of “East” and “West”.

Tetradrachm of Antiochos I from Ekbatana

The first of these vignettes concerns a silver tetradrachm from Ekbatana, issued by Antiochos I Soter, the second Seleucid ruler who reigned as sole king from 281 to 261 (Fig. 1).³⁴ On the coin’s obverse, the diademed head of Antiochos is depicted with the inscription ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΑΝΤΙΟΧΟΥ (“[Coin] of King Antiochos”). The reverse depicts the naked figure of Apollo, ancestor and tutelary deity of the Seleucid dynasty,³⁵ seated on an omphalos. He is regarding the three arrows he holds in his right hand while his left hand rests on a bow standing on the ground. A grazing horse appears from behind the god.



Figure 1: Tetradrachm of Antiochos I from Ekbatana: (courtesy American Numismatic Society).

31- Strootman and Versluys 2017.

32- Sergueenkova and Rojas 2017.

33- Strootman 2017b.

34- Houghton and Lorber 2002, I 409.2.

35- On the origins of the Seleucid association with Apollo, see now Nawotka 2019.

Variants of this “Seated Apollo” type were issued under Antiochos at mints across the empire, from Ai Khanum to Smyrna. It remained the dominant Seleucid silver type until the reign of Antiochos IV (165–164). The empire-wide use of this reverse iconography has struck numismatists and historians as a short-sighted focus on the marginal Greek populations of the empire. It has been contrasted with Antiochos IV’s introduction at several western mints of the image of an enthroned Zeus: based upon the seated Zeus-Ba’al tetradrachms issued by Alexander III and Seleukos I more than a century before, this new coin type seemed a return to a more culturally neutral type of god.³⁶ This in turn has been understood as an attempt to counter the growing independence of non-Greek populations in the empire.³⁷ Against this view, Kyle Erickson has rightly pointed out that Greek language and “Greek” symbols were used also by non-Greek dynasts.³⁸

What has puzzled Seleucid numismatists, however, is the fact that despite Antiochos IV’s iconographical reforms in the west, his eastern mints—including those at Susa and Ekbatana—continued to strike tetradrachms with the Seated Apollo reverse image. To explain the lasting preference for Apollo in the Iranian east, Erickson and Wright have suggested that the image of the archer had partly Iranian connotations.³⁹ They first of all associated the image with that of the running royal archer on imperial Achaemenid silver *sigloi* and gold darics struck at Sardis;⁴⁰ the same figure was later also used on darics issued by Alexander at Babylon. They moreover pointed out the similarity between the Seleucid Apollo and the coinage issued by the powerful Cappadocian satrap Datames (OP **Dāta-m-a-* or **Dātamiθra*), who ruled from ca. 385 to 362.⁴¹ These coins from a mint in Cilicia showed on the obverse the well-known image of the enthroned Ba’al of Tarsa (Tarsus)—model for the Zeus-Ba’al type of Alexander and Seleukos—and on the reverse a seated figure in satrapal or royal attire inspecting an arrow in exactly the same way that the Seleucid Apollo inspects his arrow(s) (Fig. 2).⁴² In addition, there may have been an iconographical association of Apollo-Helios and the Iranian god of light, Mithra.⁴³ In another publication, Erickson moreover suggested that the reverse image of Seated Apollo holding a single arrow, as issued e.g. at Seleukeia on the Tigris (the three arrows are typical of Ekbatana, as is the grazing horse), may also have been reminiscent of the Babylonian scribe-god Nabû holding a stylus.⁴⁴ Nabû was commonly equated to Apollo, and his cult at Borsippa was particularly supported by Antiochos I.⁴⁵ But even as the identification of Apollo the Archer with Nabû the Scribe is open for debate, the underlying premise that the deities shown on the reverses of Seleucid coins deliberately welcomed different cultural interpretations must be correct; unlike the original

36- On these iconographical reforms, see Wright 2008; Erickson 2014.

37- Zahle 1990, 127–128.

38- Erickson 2014.

39- Erickson and Wright 2011.

40- On this coinage, see Lintz 2010.

41- On Datames, see Schmitt 1994.

42- Moysey 1986; cf. Erickson and Wright 2011, 164 with Plate I.6; cf. Moysey 1986, 20. Datames’ name is spelled on these coins in Aramaic letters as *tdnmw* (or *trkmw*), which cannot easily be reconciled with the Greek spelling of his name (Aram 1986, 109–110).

43- Iossif and Lorber 2009; Iossif 2011. Erickson 2011, 3, is more cautious because the syncretic association of Apollo, Helios and Mithra is not attested prior to the so-called Nomos Inscription from the “Persianistic” Hierothesion of the Seleucid heritor Antiochos I of Kommagene on Nemrut Dağı (*OGIS* 383, mid-first century). Given the longstanding and widespread practice of *Göttergleichungen* in the ancient Near East (Assmann 2003), it would be surprising if an important deity like Mithra was not associated with a Greek counterpart. On the iconographical association of Mithra with Apollo, also see Sinisi 2017.

44- Erickson 2011.

45- Strootman 2013; Beaulieu 2014; Kosmin 2014. Doubtful of the connection with Babylon is Stevens 2014.

satrapal-Ba'al coinage from Cilicia, the deities on Alexandrian and Seleukid coins are never identified by name, let alone locality. The omphalos that Apollo sits on is no longer to be associated specifically with Apollo's cult at Delphi, but has become a sacred stone that marks the center of the world, and thus a powerful multicultural symbol of imperial universality.⁴⁶ Most important is the fact that Apollo was one of those rare Greek deities who could be depicted as archers; his image could therefore be used to appeal to Mesopotamian and especially Iranian subjects, whose mythological and royal traditions, unlike those of the Greeks, held archery in high esteem as a symbol of heroism and manliness.⁴⁷

Rather than addressing only Greeks and Macedonians, Seleucid mints produced coin images that were comprehensible to several peoples within their respective cultural traditions.⁴⁸ By modeling their Seated Apollo on the Persian image of the victorious Royal Archer,⁴⁹ the early Seleucids did this most emphatically vis-à-vis their Iranian subjects and allies, placing themselves in a centuries-long tradition of heroic kingship.⁵⁰ The early Arsacids (Parthians) adopted on their drachms an image of the Royal Archer which emulated the Seated Apollo of the Seleucids.⁵¹ The throne or *diphros* on which the Parthian archer sat while the Arsacid rulers were still nominally subjected to the Seleucids was replaced by an omphalos when the Arsacids under Mithradates I took over imperial predominance from the Seleucids.⁵² The question whether the Arsacids modeled their coinage on Seleucid or Achaemenid precedent thereby becomes immaterial: the Achaemenid legacy was already integrated in Seleucid imperial imagery.



Figure 2: Datames coinage with seated Ba'al on the obverse and on the reverse a seated king or satrap inspecting an arrow (© Classical Numismatics Group)

46- On the universalistic ideology of the Seleucids, see Strootman 2014. The generic, culturally neutral connotation that the omphalos would obtain in the Hellenistic east is clear from the adoption of this symbol on coins of the Arsacid emperor Mithradates I; it is extremely unlikely this was a reference to the cult at Delphi.

47- Panaino 2019. The other Greek archer-deities with a high degree of transcultural *Übersetzbarkeit* first of all are Apollo's twin sister, Artemis, who was equated to Anāhitā and Nanaia/Nana, and who was likewise promoted by the Seleucids as a "royal" deity; and second Herakles, who was associated with the Iranian god Bahrām/Verethragna (see below).

48- For a more extensive version of the argument, see now Erickson 2018a.

49- On the long history of this image, see Curtis 2007b, who rightly stresses its religious connotations; *pace* Ellerbrock 2013, 256–258.

50- Winkelmann 2006.

51- On the ideological implications of the Parthian royal archer, and its Iranian background, see now Panaino 2019, 28–39.

52- Lerner 2017.

The Imperial Title “Great King” (*Basileus Megas*)

Near the end of the Third Century, Antiochos III assumed the epithet “The Great” (*Megas*), and some years later became the first Seleucid emperor known by the Greek title of *basileus megas* (βασιλεὺς μέγας) “Great King”, in both narrative sources and civic inscriptions.⁵³ Antiochos’ new titulature was connected with his victories in Armenia, Iran and Central Asia, and his restoration of Seleucid hegemony there. Under his rule the Seleucid Empire reached the height of its power with the additional conquest of Phoenicia, Palestine, and Thrace, before Antiochos lost all territories west of the Taurus Mountains after the Seleucid-Roman War of 191–188. Imperial titles nevertheless recurred under several of his successors. Seleukos II and Antiochos IV used the title King of Asia while Antiochos VII (139–129) adopted the epithet *Megas* (*i.e.* the status of Great King).⁵⁴ The titles of these kings had basically the same meaning, defying territorial limits to their power and underlining their unique right to rule over other kings. The Parthian conquest of the Upper Satrapies and Mesopotamia from *ca.* 150 effectively put an end to the Seleucid dynasty’s claim to imperial supremacy, and the Arsacid king, Mithradates I (*Mihrdād*, *ca.* 171–138/7),⁵⁵ now claimed the title of *basileus megas* by right of victory.⁵⁶ A later Arsacid ruler, Mithradates II (*ca.* 125/4–91/0), adopted in addition to *basileus megas* the title *basileus basileōs* (“King of Kings”), perhaps to distance himself more strongly from the Seleucids.⁵⁷

Elsewhere I have argued that the adoption of the title Great King by Antiochos III and several post-Seleucid rulers, including his descendants Mithradates VI of Pontos and Antiochos I of Commagene,⁵⁸ was not the symptom of an “Achaemenid revival” but should be understood within a Seleucid context; specifically, the return of this ancient Near Eastern (but also generic imperial) title in a Greek form was linked to the rise of autonomous local kingdoms in the periphery of the Seleucid Empire.⁵⁹ The Seleucids responded to this development, *not* by opposing, but by embracing it and taking upon themselves the role of “kingmakers”. By encouraging the creation of allied kingdoms under imperial suzerainty, often bound to the imperial dynasty through marriage, a transformation of the political organization of the Seleucid realm came about, notably in the reign of Antiochos III (though it had started already in Seleukos I’s reign).⁶⁰ It is

53- App., *Syr.* 11.3.15; cf. Polyb. 4.2.7. For the epigraphic evidence, consult Ma 1999.

54- The title King of Asia may have been introduced by Alexander (see Fredricksmeyer 2000; Muccioli 2004), but is attested for the first time no earlier than *ca.* 165 (Köhler 1900, cf. Sherwin-White 1982; Piejko 1986); 1 Macc. 8.6 calls Antiochos III “the Great King of Asia” (compare Liv. 35.17.4: *Antiocho maximo Asiae regum*).

55- For the reign years of early Arsacid kings, see the excellent chronological table in Shayegan 2011, 228–239.

56- Sellwood type 10. Mithradates’ successors, Phraates II (*Frahād*, *ca.* 138/7–128) and Artabanos I (*Ardawān*, *ca.* 128/7–124/3), also styled themselves *basileus megas* (Shayegan 2011, 230–231 and 231–232).

57- Engels 2014. On the evolution of the Parthian title King of Kings, see Shayegan 2011, 228–247. For possible Achaemenid associations of the Parthian titles, Wolski 1990 and Wiesehöfer 1996. Mithradates II in addition introduced on his coins a new type of tiara (Sellwood type 28), though this image was not universally depicted: see Fowler 2005, 146 n. 66, noting that “it is doubtless significant that, at the old Seleucid capital of Seleucia Tigris, the Seleucid-style diadem is retained.”

58- In addition to Great King, Mithradates VI took the title King of Kings, perhaps in 89/8 and perhaps as a challenge to the Arsacids (Vinogradov 1990, 554), as did that other powerful claimant to the Seleucid heritage, Kleopatra VII (as “Queen of Kings”, cf. Strootman 2010).

59- Strootman 2019; cf. earlier Brosius 2006, 114–117; Strootman 2010; Engels 2011; Wenghofer 2018; and Strootman 2018—all of whom are indebted to Josef Wiesehöfer’s pioneering study of early Hellenistic Persis (Wiesehöfer 1994, based upon his 1984 PhD thesis). The Ptolemies adopted the title on several occasions too, all of them after having defeated the Seleucids in battle (Strootman 2010).

60- Strootman 2011b; cf. Houle and Wenghofer 2015.

also in this reign that we hear for the first time that the king's children are given Iranian personal names.⁶¹ Subsidiary kingdoms under Antiochos III included Pontus, Cappadocia, Armenia, Atropatene, Parthia, Persis, Bactria-Sogdia, and Gandhāra.⁶² These were mostly countries under the rule of local Iranian (or Macedonian-Iranian) dynasties. Like the Achaemenids before them, the Seleucids were absolute rulers in name only. Infrastructural constraints severely limited their ability to exercise power directly. Acknowledging the autonomy of local rulers was a strategy to hold the vast empire together, while for the local rulers an alliance with the distant emperor gave them the legitimacy to win local support and overshadow their rivals. For a strong imperial leader such as Antiochos III, allying himself with local (Iranian) elites had the additional benefit of undermining the power of the established, and often rebellious, Macedonian elites. The new title of *basileus megas* expressed the new arrangement. Before Antiochos III, the Seleucids simply bore the title of *basileus*, “the King”, the title that for the Greeks previously had denoted the Achaemenid emperor (and by extension the Achaemenid Empire as a whole). Inspiration for the title Great King may have come from the Babylonian literary tradition, which attributed the title to some earlier Seleucid kings in a local context (as Shayegan suggested for the Parthian title King of Kings).⁶³ For several decades this policy of mediated sovereignty proved to be beneficial for both the empire and the various local leaders.

The chief cultural effect of these political changes was the development of self-conscious Persianistic identities among the Iranian dynasties of the later Hellenistic period.⁶⁴ We see this on the coins of the Arsacid rulers of Parthia and those of the Fratarakā of Persis. We see it too in the royal houses of Pontus and Commagene. It is often said that through intermarriage the Seleucids became half-Iranian, but for the same reason the Mithradatids of Pontus and Orontids of Commagene can be said to have been half-Macedonian. But blood lineage is in itself unimportant. What matters are the choices that rulers and their courts made in terms of dynastic identity from the various cultural models that were available to them. In both cases, the articulation of Persianistic identities went hand in hand with claims to be descended from the Achaemenid kings,⁶⁵ and in both cases knowledge of the Achaemenid Persians seems to have been derived from the Greek literary tradition. Thus, paradoxically, the Iranian revival of the later Hellenistic period was not an anti-Seleucid movement but, on the contrary, originally a Seleucid phenomenon.⁶⁶

61- See now Coşkun 2016; most famously, Antiochos IV (a throne name) was originally named Mithradates after his maternal grandfather (Liv. 33.19.9).

62- On the structure of Antiochos' empire, see Engels 2017, 307–347; also see the overview of kingdoms and principalities within the Seleucid sphere of influence in Capdetrey 2007, 112–133.

63- Shayegan 2011, 330–331. Antiochos I and Antiochos II both carry the title of *lugal galú* in the Babylonian king list BM 35603 = Austin 138 (Sachs and Wiseman 1954); on the Antiochos Cylinder from Borsippa (BM 36277 = ANET 317; CM 4; Austin 189), Great King is the first title given to Antiochos I, followed by the titles “mighty king, king of the world, king of Babylon, king of (all) countries” in line I.2 (LUGAL GAL-ú LUGAL *dan-nu* LUGAL ŠÁR LUGAL E.KI LUGAL KUR.KUR).

64- Strootman 2017b.

65- Mithradatids: Lerouge-Cohen 2013 and 2017; Ballesteros-Pařtor 2016. Orontids: Messerschmidt 2000; Jacobs 2002; Facella 2009; Strootman 2017b.

66- On the Iranian revival among the early Parthians, see Curtis 2007a.



Figure 3: Herakles sculpture at Bisotūn (photo: Alieh Saadatpour, used with permission)

The Herakles Sculpture at Bisotūn

The Herakles relief at Bisotūn in present-day Kermānšāh Province (Fig. 3) is important because it is the only rock relief surviving from the long period of Seleucid domination over the Iranian plateau. It is located along the road between Ecbatana and Seleukeia-on-the-Tigris, at the southern entrance of the mountain pass through the Zagros. The relief has attracted surprisingly little scholarly attention, despite its unique style and despite its conspicuous location on the boundary between the lowlands of the Near East and the highlands of Iran. This was perhaps due to the fact that in the past the relief was thought of as “Greek”, and foreign, and perhaps also, paradoxically, because in the eyes of some it did not meet the standards of “Classical” art.⁶⁷ An analysis of its significance in the context of Iranian cultural history however is now provided by Matthew Canepa’s recent study of the imprint of monarchy on Iranian landscapes in Antiquity.⁶⁸ Canepa suggested that the Herakles relief was part of an open air sanctuary.⁶⁹

67- Thus Lushey 1996, 59, complained that “die Proportionen sind schlecht, die Hände übergroß, die Figur plump und kurzbeinig”.

68- Canepa 2018, *passim*.

69- *Ibidem* 2018, 185.

Because two Parthian reliefs were later carved close by, the Seleucid Herakles may have retained its cultic function under the early Arsacids.⁷⁰

The sculpture depicts a reclining, naked Herakles resting on a draped lion skin and holding a drinking bowl in his left hand. Behind him a club, a bow in a bow case and a quiver with arrows are visible, as well as a pedimented stele carved in relief. The form of the stele evokes the stelae of Seleucid official inscriptions from the region, in particular the decree from Laodikeia-in-Media (Nehāvand) on the organization of a royal cult for Antiochos III and his queen Laodike.⁷¹

The reclining figure can be identified from his posture as Herakles Kallinikos (“Gloriously Victorious”), a title also known as a Seleucid royal epithet.⁷² The triumphant hero has discarded his weapons and is now resting from a successfully completed undertaking. Pointing out a resemblance with a Herakles sculpture from Pergamon, Heinz Luschey postulated that the relief at Bīsotūn was created by a Greek sculptor from Asia Minor.⁷³ The style however is more Iranian than Greek. Also, the addition of a quiver with arrows, and a bow of the type shown on the relief of Darius I, is Iranian rather than Greek. Herakles of course was a famous archer, but he rarely appears with a bow in Hellenistic art. In the Hellenistic period, the iconography of Herakles was used to depict Bahrām (MP Wahrām or Warahrān; Avestan Vərəθraϥna), the victorious Iranian warrior god.⁷⁴ It is very likely that the Herakles of Bīsotūn was both Herakles and Bahrām, and that it was precisely his reputation as an archer that encouraged the amalgamation of the two figures. Moreover, in Greek mythology Herakles was a “culture hero”, who traveled the world to fight Chaos and create Order in the name of his father, Zeus—an obvious correspondence with Bahrām’s later role in the *Bahrām Yašt* as a ferocious fighter of Evil in the name of Ohrmazd.

The relief has a Greek inscription dating it to Panemos 164 SE (June/July 148). The inscription was first reported by A. Hakemi and reconstructed by L. Robert as an addendum to a review in *Gnomon*.⁷⁵ The text identifies the reclining figure as Herakles Kallinikos and says that the relief was dedicated by a certain Hyakinthos, son of Pantauchos, “for the redemption of Kleomenes, [governor] of the Upper Satrapies”:

Ἔτους δξρ' μηνός
 Πανήμου, Ἡρακλήν
 Καλλίνικον.
 Ὑάκινθος Παταύχου
 ὑπέ[ρ] τῆς Κλεομένου
 τοῦ ἐπὶ τῶν ἄνω
 σ[ατρ]απειῶν σωτηρίας.

70- *Ibidem*, 78–79. Fragmentary Ionic bases and fragments of pilasters found in the area suggest the presence of Greek-style religious structures at Bīsotūn, dating to the Seleucid or early Parthian period (Luschey 1974, 124). The association of the site with Herakles/Bahrām however seems to have been a Seleucid innovation, as Ktesias *ap. Diod.* 2.13.1–2, describes the site as a *hieron* sacred to “Dios”, *i.e.* Ahuramazda/Ohrmazd (Boyce and Grenet 1991, 93). On the Parthian reliefs see Von Gall 1996.

71- Canepa 2018, 61; for the supposed cult reforms of Antiochos III, see Erickson 2018b.

72- See Muccioli 2013, 342–345. The epithet is attested for Seleukos II (246–225) and three Seleucids postdating the Herakles relief.

73- Luschey 1996, 59.

74- Gnoli and Jamzadeh 1988; cf. Canepa 2018, 185. In the *Nomos Inscription* at Nemrut Dağı, Vərəθraϥna appears as Artagnes-Herakles-Ares (*OGIS* 383, l. 57). Bahrām is still depicted as Herakles on the early Sasanian investiture relief of Ardašīr I at Naqš-e Rājab (Vanden Berghe 1983, 126–127, fig. 9).

75- Hākemī 1958; Robert in *Gnomon* 30, 1963, 76; cf. Kleiss 1970, 144–146; Luschey 1974, 114–115.

The title ἐπὶ τῶν ἄνω σατραπειῶν refers to the Seleucid division of imperial territory into roughly three major parts: the Fertile Crescent in the center, the Anatolian lands west of the Taurus Mountains (lost in 188) and the Iranian highlands to the east, beyond the Zagros Mountains. Thus we know that as late as 148 there still was a “viceroy” of the Upper Satrapies who fought the Parthians in Media a mere year before the fall of Ecbatana.

The Seleucid relief seems unconnected to the more famous relief and inscription of Darius I some 150 m. to the west. But there is a typological semblance: both monuments are essentially victory monuments. The main theme of Darius’ relief is the restoration of order and peace after a period of anomy, an imperial idea that is also expressed in the figure of the resting Herakles Kallinikos, as we saw above. Herakles is looking south towards the Mesopotamian plain, as if to greet travelers coming up from Seleukeia and assure them that Iran is a safe place because the Seleucids are in control there. The same theme of victory is repeated by the nearby Parthian rock reliefs, indicating the ongoing association of the place with monarchy and empire. One of the Parthian reliefs shows a warrior king on horseback armed with a cavalry lance. He is leading a cavalry charge moving from left to right while being crowned with a diadem by a winged *fravaši* or “angel” who comes flying towards him from behind in a posture borrowed from the iconography of Nike in Greek art.⁷⁶ The king is identified by a Greek inscription as “Gōtarzēs” (Gōdarz), perhaps the second king of that name (38–51 CE), but the relief cannot be dated with certainty.⁷⁷ The iconographical depiction of the king as a mounted warrior defeating his enemy in single combat is a Hellenistic innovation, based on entangled Macedonian and Persian traditions of heroic kingship with older Near Eastern roots.⁷⁸ We may compare here the depiction of Alexander confronting Darius III on the Alexander Mosaic from Pompeii (first century BCE, but based upon a late fourth-/early third-century Macedonian painting, and going back rather directly to propaganda emanating from Alexander’s own court) on which Alexander likewise appears at the head of his cavalry charging from left to right; or the depiction of Ptolemy IV as a spear-fighter riding a prancing warhorse on the Raphia Decree of 217. A second Parthian relief, now badly damaged, shows four grandees paying homage to a fifth figure, who is identified in an accompanying Greek inscription as the βασιλεὺς μέγας, Mithradates II. The Greek inscription identifies one of the grandees as the later king Gotarzes I (ca. 91/0–81/0), who is here “Satrap of Satraps” (σατράπης τῶν σατράπων), a title comparable to that of Kleomenes, the governor of the Upper Satrapies mentioned on the Seleucid Herakles relief.⁷⁹

The question whether the Herakles relief is Greek or Persian is of little consequence. Whatever the origins of the image and its ideology, these were created for a local context at a specific historical moment, consciously appropriating local traditions and themselves becoming part of that local tradition. Neither is it useful to ask whether the individuals mentioned in the inscription—the otherwise unknown Hyakinthos, Pantauchos, and Kleomenes—were Greeks, Macedonians or Iranians. They may have been local men: at this late stage of Seleucid history it is unlikely that they were migrants from the Aegean who had newly arrived,

76- The figure of the Greek (female) Nike appears on the reverse of Arsacid tetradrachms from the second half of the first century BCE, offering a wreath to the seated figure of Tyche-Nana (for the identification of the seated figure as the Iranian goddess Nana, see Sinisi 2008).

77- Von Gall 1996.

78- Gropp 1984; cf. Gehrke 1982; Jacobs 2014. On the Assyrian ideology of the fighting king, see still the brilliant analysis by Liverani 1981; cf. May 2012; Fink 2016. On the ideology of the spear-fighting king in Hellenistic poetry, see Barbantani 2010.

79- Shayegan 2011, 197–198. The inscription was reconstructed by Herzfeld 1920, 39, partly based on sketches made by the seventeenth-century French traveler Guillaume-Joseph Grelot in 1673. For the continuation of the Seleucid office of *Generalstatthalter* of the Upper Satrapies under the Arsacids, see Shayegan 2011, 219–220.

or descendants of Greeks who had remained “pure” over the generations. Because of their Greek names, it could be argued that they were Greeks. I think however that their names—which are not complemented by ethnonyms—indicate at best affiliation with the empire, and are not evidence of *ethnic* identity. Albert de Jong has argued that Iranian identity in Antiquity was not a matter of language but of shared religious ideas and practices; in the Hellenistic period, Aramaic and Greek were also languages used by Iranians.⁸⁰ If this is correct, and if the Herakles of Bisotūn was indeed associated with Bahrām, then it becomes very likely that at least the donor Hyakinthos was an Iranian but with a Greek name.

The Wall Paintings of Akchakhan-Kala

We will end by looking at the late Hellenistic development known as Iranian/Persian Revival or Persianism. The most obvious example of this development is of course the iconographical and ideological program at Nemrut Dağı (first century BCE), where Avestan deities were explicitly syncretized with Greek ones to create a dynastic identity for a Macedonian-Iranian local ruler: Antiochos I of Commagene, who rather pretentiously claimed both the Seleucid and Achaemenid heritage, including the imperial title of Great King that was used by both dynasties.⁸¹ To this end, a new religious and royal imagery was created (Fig. 4).



Figure 4.1: Head of a colossal statue of Apollo-Helios-Mithra on the East Terrace of Nemrut Dağı (author’s photograph).

Figure 4.2: Head of a colossal statue of Herakles-Artagnes on the East Terrace of Nemrut Dağı (author’s photograph).

80- De Jong 2017, 43–46.

81- For the political implications, see Strootman 2016; and on the visual style Versluys 2017. The Hellenized names of Avestan deities mentioned in the Nomos Inscription on Mount Nemrut (*OGIS* 383, ll. 55–57) are Oromasdes (Ahuramazdā, Ohrmazd), Mithras (Miθra), and Artagnes (Vərəθraγna); on the religion of Nemrut Dağı, see Waldmann 1991; Jacobs 2000. In fact, the whole of Commagene was transformed into a royal landscape by the construction of interlinked bigger and smaller sanctuaries known as *hierotheresia* and *temenē* respectively (see Jacobs 2000; Schütte-Maischatz 2003).

I would like to draw attention, however, to a part of the “Hellenistic” world that is often overlooked by modern historical and art historical scholarship on the period: Chorasmia. Here, at the easternmost border of the Iranic world, an undertaking took place that to some extent is comparable to what happened in Commagene under Antiochos I: the creation of a new iconography for Avestan deities at the first-century BCE site of Akchakhan-kala.

The fertile land of Chorasmia (also Khorezm, Khwārazm) lies on the lower Oxus (Amu Darya), to the south of the now rapidly disappearing Aral Sea. The region since the early Iron Age had a settled population dependent on irrigation agriculture and herding. It was loosely incorporated into the Achaemenid Empire in the late sixth century.⁸² On the Apadana reliefs of Persepolis, Chorasmian tribute bearers appear as one of the eastern Iranian peoples collectively known as Sakā; in this period, Chorasmian elites partly Persianized by selectively adopting Achaemenid court practices.⁸³

In 329 a Chorasmian ruler—called Pharasmanes by Arrian and Phrataphernes by Curtius—submitted to Alexander,⁸⁴ but the region was never brought under direct control by the Argead, Seleucid and Arsacid dynasties who successively controlled Iran. However, Chorasmia after the Achaemenids remained very much part of a wider imperial world. Recent archaeological work has shown that in the third century the Seleucids consolidated routes between Merv (Antioch in Margiana) and Chorasmia.⁸⁵ In addition, the Oxus and Zarafshan river routes connected Chorasmia to Seleucid Bactria and Sogdia.⁸⁶ Chorasmians were thus able to partake in the extensive exchange networks of the “globalizing” Hellenistic world, absorbing Greek, Iranian and Indian influences.⁸⁷

The fortified palatial site of Akchakhan-kala was founded around 200 and may have served as the royal seat of a unified kingdom until its abandonment in the second century CE.⁸⁸ Recent archaeological research by the Karakalpak-Australian Expedition in the central hall of the so-called Ceremonial Complex has revealed a number of fragments of wall paintings. The paintings represent Avestan deities and associated animals and symbols.⁸⁹ Dated by C14 determinations to the first century BCE to first century CE, these images are the oldest known examples of Zoroastrian art in Central Asia, predating by centuries the first appearance of such imagery on Kushan coins.⁹⁰

82- Minardi 2015, 80–81.

83- *Ibidem*, 20–22.

84- Arr., *Anab.* 4.15.4; Curt. 8.1.8.

85- Recent archaeological work has shown that the Seleucids protected the northern route to Chorasmia with fortified outposts; cf. Stark 2016, 138. On Seleucid policy in Central Asia, see Strootman forthcoming.

86- Along the lower Zarafshan in Sogdia, the Seleucids constructed fortresses to control the roads in the first half of the third century, e.g. at Bukhara, Paikand, and Kuzimon Tepa (Stark 2016, 136). On the Oxus route to Bactria, see Minardi 2018. Trade contacts with the steppe societies of Inner Asia are likely, but hard to detect in the archaeological record (Minardi 2015, 125).

87- Connectivity and cultural exchange have become leitmotifs in recent Chorasmian studies, see e.g. Kidd 2006; Kidd and Betts 2010; and the essays collected in Minardi and Ivantchik 2018. The expanded connectivity is also clear from the introduction of new types of pottery in the third century (Lyonnet 2012).

88- Minardi 2015, 127; on the archaeology of the site, see Betts *et al.* 2012, 125–126 with further references.

89- On the paintings see Kidd *et al.* 2004; Betts *et al.* 2012.

90- Grenet 2018. On the iconography of Central Asian deities, see Shenkar 2014.

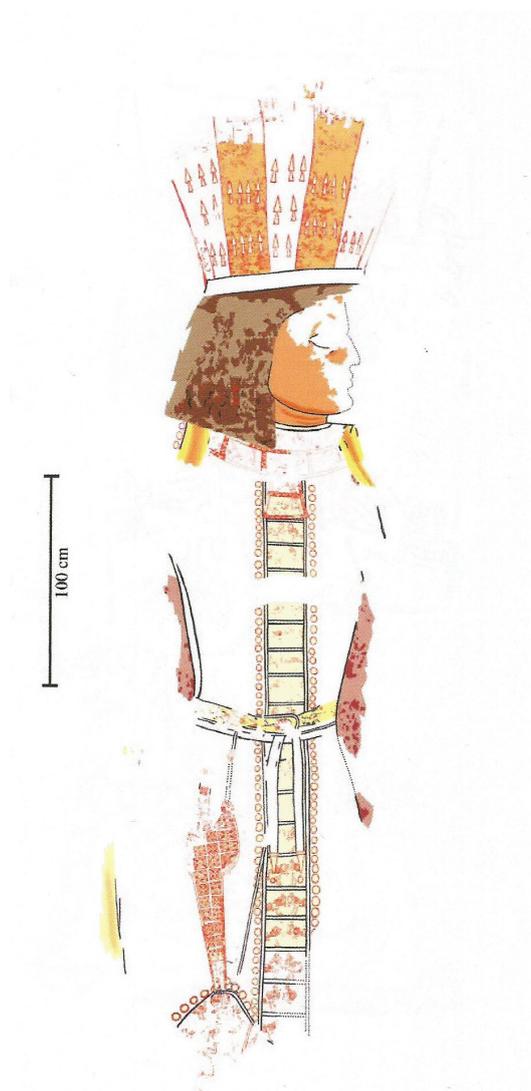


Figure 5: Reconstruction of the colossal figure from the wall paintings in the Ceremonial Complex at Akchakhan-kala. Courtesy Karakalpak-Australian Archaeological Expedition to Ancient Chorasmia.

The best preserved painting uncovered here, a colossal polychrome anthropomorphic figure, has been identified by Frantz Grenet as Sraoša (MP Srōš), the god of prayer and a major *yazata* in Zoroastrianism.⁹¹ His attire combines old Achaemenid, Hellenistic and local components.⁹² The figure's dress recalls classical descriptions of Persian kings.⁹³ Conspicuously Achaemenid is moreover the short sword or *akinakes*, status symbol of the former Achaemenid imperial elite and well-known from e.g. the Persepolis reliefs.⁹⁴ The

91- Grenet in Betts *et al.* 2012, 134–136; cf. *id.* 2018, 73–77; but see now the alternative interpretation by Shenkar 2019 of the figure as the *Gad/Farn* (city god) of Akchakhan-kala. On Sraoša and his place in Zoroastrianism, see Kreyenbroek 1985.

92- Extensively discussed by Kidd and Minardi in Betts *et al.* 2012, 129–134.

93- Xen., *Cyr.*, 8.3.13 (Cyrus the Great); Curt. 3.3.17–20 (Darius III).

94- Minardi in Betts *et al.* 2012, 133–134.

typology of sword and scabbard is however conspicuously different from the near-contemporary short sword in a four-lobed scabbard found in Tomb IV at Tillya Tepe in western Bactria, the same type that is also shown on the *dexiosis* reliefs of Antiochos of Commagene (mid-first century BCE) and the bronze sculpture of a Parthian nobleman from Shami (ca. 100 BCE–100 CE). This latter type thus seems to have been the standard for Iranian nobility across western Eurasia in the later Hellenistic period, which makes the Chorasmian *akinakes* an intentionally Persianistic element.⁹⁵ Even if the use of the Persian *akinakes* had remained a living tradition in Chorasmia since the Achaemenid period, the choice to highlight it in “official” art can be contrasted to the art produced elsewhere in Central Asia at this time. Rather than assuming that the Chorasmian elite was more conservative than its peers elsewhere in the Iranic world, I therefore tend to think of this as an intentional and meaningful reference to an imagined past, and likely modeled after material culture from that past.⁹⁶

New, and very Central Asian, is the image of two opposing human-headed roosters holding sacred *barsom* twigs that decorate Sraoša’s tunic. These figures are to be identified with Zoroastrian priests.⁹⁷ An import from the west is the crenelated *corona muralis* that the god wears on his head. The Anatolian-Syrian high walls/high towers-type of Sraoša’s headdress is clearly derived from contemporaneous Hellenistic art, in which the mural crown was characteristic of female deities such as Tyche, Cybele and Atargatis; the only extant parallels of the “horned” battlements on top of the walls and towers however are representations on Achaemenid seals and Fratarakā coins of buildings associated with fire cult.⁹⁸ The fact that the mural crown is otherwise unknown in Central Asian art makes the adoption of this Levantine symbol for the creation of a local religious iconography an especially puzzling choice.⁹⁹

The Achaemenid-style Persianism of the Akchakhan-kala paintings is a kind of mirror image of the Greek-style Persianism that we see at Nemrut Dağı in the west. What these sites have in common is the creation of a new iconography for Iranian deities: Oromasdes, Mithra, and Artagnes in the west, and (probably) Sraoša and others in the east. Both drew upon the prestige of the Achaemenids through selective references and (especially in the case of Commagene) creative inventions.¹⁰⁰ Though with the present state of knowledge a *direct* influence of the one upon the other cannot be assumed, it is likely that there was some kind of correlation between these first-century developments, because the regions of Anatolia and

95- A newly published wall painting from Akchakhan-kala depicting a recumbent “bezoar” ibex from the first century BCE to early first century CE is reminiscent of Achaemenid imperial iconography, too. The artist probably conveyed an image from a Persian-era vessel or rhyton to the new artistic medium of mural painting introduced in the Hellenistic period (Minardi 2015, 103–113); see Minardi, Betts, Grenet, Khashimov, Khodzhanizayov 2018. The animal may be associated with the Avestan deity Wahrām/Verethraghna (*ibid.* 316–317). For yet another possible case of Persianism from Akchakhan-kala, see Betts *et al.* 2016.

96- In the 1960s, a Persian-style alabaster mold in the shape of an eagle or an eagle-headed gryphon was found in Room 6 of the nearby “Palace” of Kalaly-gyr I (see Minardi 2015 p. 192–192, figs. 24.A and 25.A). Rightly compared by the excavators to the well-known double gryphon protome capitals at Persepolis, the object nonetheless shows also Hellenistic influences, and therefore is no proof of an Achaemenid date for the site, which was probably built by a local ruler somewhere between ca. 300 and 100 (Minardi 2015, 101–102).

97- Grenet 2018; on the occurrence of the *barsom* as a priestly attribute from Achaemenid to Late Parthian times, especially in Central Asia, see Kaim 2016.

98- As pointed out by Minardi in Betts *et al.* 2012, 132; on fire-cult in Akchakhan-kala, see Betts *et al.* 2018.

99- Minardi in Betts *et al.* 2012, 136.

100- Versluys 2017; on the Persian reminiscences in the iconographical program of Antiochos I, also see Facella 2009 and Jacobs 2017; Panaino 2007 discusses possible Iranian elements in the Nomos texts.

Chorasmia were certainly connected. In both cases, religious innovations were linked to the development of a new form of kingship and dynastic identity in a world where the Graeco-Macedonian dynasties had all but disappeared and Iranian dynasties were on the rise. At this time, the imperial superpower in the Middle East was the Parthian Empire, and Commagene and Chorasmia were located on respectively its western and eastern frontiers.¹⁰¹ “Hellenistic” influence however remains manifest, notably in Commagene where a relationship between monarchy and the divine was suggested that was much more direct than that of Achaemenid kingship.¹⁰² In Akchakhan-kala, too, it is clear that a new form of monarchy developed based on a blending of Iranian and Hellenistic practices.¹⁰³

Conclusion

With the current emphasis in Ancient Studies on localism and regionalism, the question how empires were held together over vast distances has become increasingly urgent. Empires are rarely conceptualized any more as monolithic, top-down systems of rule and exploitation. In recent studies, they have become less and less state-like. Instead, they are seen as dynamic networks of interest groups and individuals. Population groups are no longer thought of as being either culturally dominant or dominated. Empire studies therefore should focus not only on the local effects of empire, but also on the overarching imperial and inter-imperial aspects: the transcultural networks of communication and exchange within and between empires, and the cultural change that took place through them.

What the examples discussed here show above all, is the vibrant and multiform nature of cultural trends in Hellenistic-period Iran. In none of these cases it has been possible to draw a line between “Greek” and “Iranian”. Consequently, the older notion of an antagonism between Greco-Macedonian and Iranian elites in the Hellenistic world looks flawed. The Seleucid imperial order was often upset by brutal conflicts between individuals and interest groups, but never between peoples or opposing “civilizations”.

In all of the above examples, the evidence for Hellenistic or Persianistic style is invariably connected to imperial ideas and dynastic identities, not with ethnic groups. Though the top layer of *philoï* at the Seleucid court may originally have been recruited mainly from Aegean civic elite families, local rulers and military leaders in the Upper Satrapies must indeed have been local Iranians, who interacted with their peers through a system of interconnected dynastic courts. In religion, eastern deities could be given the *iconography* of Greek gods and Greek *names*—but this does not necessarily imply that a syncretism of *cults* also took place. Culture is always in flux and changes occur most strongly when geopolitical circumstances change, e.g. when empires break down or are created. Despite the overall trans-Eurasian connectivity that came into being during the Persian and Hellenistic periods—what Jack Goody called the remarkable “relative cultural unity” of Silk Road societies¹⁰⁴—it is most of all the astounding *variety* of local cultures that remains a wonderful and intriguing phenomenon.

101- Interactions between Chorasmia and the Arsacid Empire: see Kidd 2011. On the intermediate place of the Arsacid Empire between Central Asia and the Levant, see Olbrycht 1998; Gregoratti 2014.

102 - Though Orontid ideas about divine kinship were surely derived from Hellenistic, *viz.* Seleucid, precedent, the modern certainty that Achaemenid kingship was in no way divine has recently been challenged by e.g. Garrison 2011; Rollinger 2011; cf. Tuplin 2017.

103- Kidd 2018.

104- Goody 2009, 1.

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