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From Pella to Gandhara. Hybridisation and Identity in the Art and Architecture of the Hellenistic East.

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The fascination with the visual products of cross-cultural interactions, whether through trade, colonization, or immigration, has been ongoing for more than a century. It is, however, only in the last two decades or so that art historians and archaeologists have started to examine such material from a critical perspective. These decades have witnessed a progression towards interdisciplinary modes of research that incorporate theoretical discourses from cultural anthropology, political, and social sciences, and encourage closer collaboration between different area studies. Traditionally regarded as liminal areas largely outside of the interest of mainstream scholarship, these crossroads of cultural contacts are starting to become the focal point of scholarly attention. The Hellenistic (Near and Far) East, reaching the outskirts of northern India – whether as the nexus of settlements that were precursor to the Silk Road, or as an independent entity called the Seleucid Empire – is clearly emerging as one of those foci.

The present volume is a collection of 11 articles, mostly from emerging scholars engaged with the art and archaeology of the Hellenistic East, with a foreword by Sir John Boardman. It is certainly a welcomed addition to the relatively slow-building bibliography of the area in question. Born out of a conference held at Oxford in 2009, the title itself explicitly acknowledges the broader theme that unites the different case studies, which geographically cover the area from Macedonia to the borders of northern India, and whose subjects vary from small art objects to large-scale public architecture. The point is made, several times within the volume, that terms such as ‘hybridity’ are being increasingly re-evaluated, especially by younger scholars, hence locating the publication within the broader trend of a new critical direction in cross-cultural studies. In fact, there are several other edited volumes from similar conferences within the last couple of years, attesting to like-minded efforts in various fields of pre-modern art history.¹ The common thread emerging in these recent efforts is a promise for an updated theoretical framework of cross-cultural interaction, with which the visual material can be understood.

Roberto Rossi starts off the volume with a clear and concise introduction, its highlight being a quick digest of the history of scholarship on the Hellenistic East, from the 19th century to present day. While the bibliography is far from exhaustive, he points to major shifts in scholarly trends and puts them in their own socio-political contexts (British imperialism, post-colonial nationalism, etc.), providing a historical backdrop against which the most current “new directions” may be evaluated. While a cursory introduction to terms, such as ‘hybridity’, ‘Third Space’, ‘Middle-Ground’, ‘Métissage’, or ‘Creolisation’ will be useful for the theoretically uninitiated, it concludes, more importantly, with a cautious advisory against indiscriminate applications of these newer theories to specific ancient case studies. The body of articles opens with Michael Vickers’ keynote address on Alcibiades as a Classical archetype for Alexander the Great. Although it seems, at first sight, a rather unlikely proem for an investigation of the Hellenistic East, Vickers’ attempt to bridge the two historical figures separated in time, in fact, functions beautifully as a metaphorical framework for the rest: to identify, articulate, and theoretically understand the converging point between different cultural traditions separated by space. One may eventually question the degree to which Vicker’s seductive conclusion of Alcibiades as a profoundly influential archetype for Alexander rests on irrefutable evidence. Perhaps there is one too many steppingstones to hop onto along the way, in exactly the right order. But the elaborate process of constructing these stepping stones, and illuminating the possible connections that no other scholars have bothered to see – a Vickers trademark, so to speak – is in itself an exemplary archetype for the younger scholars’ efforts we see gathered in the subsequent pages.

The following articles are truly variegated in geographical coverage, subject matter, and methodology, but roughly fall into two traditional camps: those that deal mostly with architecture and those with figural art or material culture. A total of three articles deal exclusively with the former, and one considers both for a single locale. Maria Kopsacheili starts off by hypothesizing ‘hybridization’ as the *modus operandi* in the palatial architecture of the Hellenistic East. She isolates certain formal architectural elements or spatial organization patterns in the palaces in Pella and Vergina as “purely Greco-Macedonian,” and those seen in Persepolis as “purely Achaemenid.” Then she identifies ‘hybridity’ in seeing both of these ‘purebred’ features in palace complexes at Jebel Khalid, Dura Europos, Ai Khanoum and Samosata. Breaking down the architectural morphology in this way is certainly a useful and insightful exercise. However, fitting these isolated features into a compartmentalized binary framework under the guise of a new term, also insinuates some of the theoretical discomforts that Rossi raised in his introduction. Kopsacheili is on firmer ground when interpreting the driving force behind such hybridity with an emphasis on “intentionality” on the part of the ruling class, imposing imperial agenda or political alliances. The result is highly compelling, but methodologically, there is still a lingering sense of retro-fitting a pre-planned agenda, leaving little space to account for the complex amalgamation of both cultural and natural forces that may be at play behind the hybrid architectural styles.

Michael Shenkar, on the other hand, divides the Iranian temples into two camps, the “Iranian type” and a “Mesopotamian type.”

depending on their basic structure, while none are shown to display inherent standard ‘Greek’ features. It is, however, the majority of the archaeological artifacts found alongside these structures that are Hellenic in nature. Whether they are votive statuary with Greek inscriptions or murals with purely Greek iconography, the question naturally arises: what is the nature of the relationship between the predominantly ‘Greek’ artifacts and the predominantly ‘Eastern’ architecture? Who were the worshippers, the builders, or the patrons? The lack of further evidence precludes addressing these questions directly (except for the case of the Oxus temple at Takht-I Sanghin, to which we return below), and Shenkar instead devotes his attention to individual cases, speculating the nature of the principle deity of each cult place, based solely on the Greek votive material. The possibilities regarding Greco-Mesopotamian-Iranian syncretic deities are so fascinating that one can only lament so much uncertainty plaguing the field.

Timm Radt reports on a single fortified castle perched atop Mount Karasis in Cilicia, which only came to light in very recent years (2003-6). Even without archaeological excavations, the study of the architecture combined with the surface finds reveal a second century BCE dating, and a host of exciting possibilities for royal Seleucid involvement. Although the complex does not show much ‘hybridity’ in its architectural morphology, Radt identifies hybridity at work from the point of view of production. From comparative analysis of the stonemasons’ marks and the material, with those from other sites in Asia Minor, he traces the different origins of the workforce: highly trained ‘Hellenized’ skilled workers, and lesser-skilled ‘semi-Hellenized’ locals from Western Cilicia. Radt thus arrives at the same conclusion as Kopsacheili, advocating a top-down model of ‘Hellenisation’ or ‘hybridization’ initiated by the ruling class, from a complementary perspective of production and labor.

From Jessica Nitschke comes a thoughtful study of a single locale, Umm el-’Amed, a sanctuary town on the coast of Lebanon. Nitschke offers a look into the sanctuary of Milk’ashtarte in its totality, examining the architecture and architectural decorations, as well as votive sculpture. She tackles the question of Phoenician identity in the Hellenistic period, dominated by earlier scholarly assessments of its thoroughly Hellenized character. In the process of refuting this eurocentric perspective, she raises important concerns regarding the relationship between visual material and the cultural identity at large. While carefully dissecting the hybrid character of the visual material, identifying Greek, Achaemenid, and Egyptian stylistic traits, she argues compellingly that the continuity seen in the long-established Phoenician tradition of actively borrowing from neighboring cultures reinforces the need to reassess our methodological framework. Reciprocal agency is key here, and the view of Phoenician culture as a passive receptacle of ‘influences’ will no longer do.

Of the papers dealing with figural art, three specifically deal with the syncretic nature of the mother/fertility goddess, be it the Cypriot Aphrodite, the Aphrodite-Astarte-Isis of Kedesh, or the various types of terracotta female figurines from Hellenistic Mesopotamia. And in slightly different ways, all three papers work to break down the hellenocentric identity of the goddess, either by stressing local continuity, adding on other stylistic influences, or stressing that hybridization creates a ‘third’ independent entity. Giorgos Papantoniou turns to Amathous on Cyprus, where a large number of locally produced, Hellenistic terracotta Aphrodite figurines were found. Rather than regard these figurines, with clear Hellenic traits, as a stand-alone phenomenon of the Hellenistic period, Papantoniou turns to the concept of *longue durée*, where these figurines are but a brief manifestation in the continuous development of the local cult of the ‘Cypriot Goddess’.

Lisa Ayla Çakmak investigates the Anadyomene motif – Aphrodite adjusting her hair while bathing – that occurs in a series of glyptic representations at the site of Tel Kedesh (modern day Israel). Stylistic comparison with other Hellenistic representations of the same type allows Çakmak to conclude that the Anadyomene type at Kedesh is strikingly frontal, for which she finds precedents in the Near Eastern visual tradition of Astarte, Isis, and even the ‘sign of Tanit’. The ‘hybridity’ of the Kedesh Aphrodite Anadyomene is made even more compelling with evidence throughout the Hellenistic East, supporting the notion that Aphrodite was indeed a deity who often lent herself to such complex syncretism. Çakmak’s theoretical discussion on the notion of hybridity, and the parallel drawn between the ‘multilingualism’ in style and the ‘archive’ is a pleasure to read. The visual material themselves, however, bespeak something quite different. The “jarring frontality” to which Çakmak refers, derives from 13 seal impressions that are cursory in style, poorly preserved, and so small in scale that the heads often lack any facial features whatsoever. Her visual comparanda, on the other hand, are mostly larger sculpture in the round. With an unmistakably recognizable contrapposto in all of the glyptic representations, it will take some convincing for the readers to accept that the relative impression of frontality in the glyptic representations are not, in fact, mostly a matter of translation into another medium.

A similar treatment in terracotta female figurines from Hellenistic Mesopotamia comes from Sidsel Maria Westh-Hansen who examines different degrees of ‘hybridity’ in each typology. Draped or nude, reclining or seated, these figures indeed seem to speak to a multitude of sources, traditions, and viewership. She also examines ceramic material and seals. Here the notion of ‘hybridity’ is finally spelled out, following Homi K. Bhabha’s original introduction of the concept of the ‘third space’, i.e., the mixture of styles that creates something ‘other’ and thus “detached from its parents.” And notably, Westh-Hansen contributes with her article, what Timm Radt did with architecture: she goes back to the level of production, by considering the technical development of the coroplastic arts, making the cross-cultural interaction more tangible on the level of workmanship and manufacturing skills.

The final three articles deal with the visual culture of the Hellenistic Far East: Bactria, Gandhara, and Arachosia. They are captivating additions to the corpus of work conventionally included to the studies of the Hellenistic East. Rachel Wood’s close examination of the votive material from the Temple of Oxus at Takht-I Sangin in Bactria reveals the kaleidoscopic landscape of cultural confluence that was happening at the site. While it is true that only Greek inscriptions have been found, which has hitherto encouraged the widely-

practiced hellenocentric reading, the dizzying array of finds that attest to Achaemenid, Indian, Greco-Macedonian, Iranian, and even Scythian nomadic traits evidently calls for an updated theoretical framework. The relatively simple notion of ‘hybridity’ may not even be adequate at such a site, as Wood notes, and the coexisting multiplicity of visual culture and its polyvalent relationship to the larger socio-religious dynamics at large must eventually be addressed.

An important addition to both Hellenistic and Gandharan studies is Jessie Pons’ examination of the so-called ‘toilet trays’, found ubiquitously in the area of Gandhara and dated to around the time of Christ. Their function has yet to be understood, and their popularity and rich iconography captured the attention of many. The class of objects remains, however, largely without proper scholarly treatment. The portability of these objects and multicultural iconographic repertoire may indeed provide the “missing link between the Hellenistic art of Bactria and the Greco-Buddhist art of Gandhara.” Pons concentrates on three motifs that have clear Hellenic precedents: the sea-monster, the Dionysiac scenes, and Heracles. Each subject matter, it turns out, had a complex and wider impact on Gandharan Buddhist visual culture, whether it served a decorative purpose or was a philosophical/doctrinal illustration of the Buddhist belief system itself. While Pons adheres to a largely formalist approach with regard to style, she completely bypasses the already numerous, albeit contentious, discourses on the origin of Gandharan artistic style, the exclusion of which I find quite noticeable especially when dealing with notions of hybridity and assimilation. Why and how exactly did Dionysiac motifs find their home in the Buddhist repertoire? What was the process by which the figure of Herakles was assimilated into one of the main attendants of the Buddha, Vajrapani? These questions have already been asked many times, and Pons adds another important piece to the puzzle with the so-called ‘toilet-trays’. And Gandhara, it turns out, may indeed be the hotbed for exploring the post-colonial conception of the ‘third space’ or ‘middle-ground’, with its well-established and well-studied, own artistic style, independent from both the Greco-Roman West and the Indian East.

On the whole, the theoretical treatments in the articles vary greatly in their degree of sophistication, relevance to the material, and success in application, which is why Rachel Mairs’ article is a particularly valuable end-piece to the volume. Her thoughtful theoretical exegesis is as illuminating as her inclusion of Arachosia (southern Afghanistan) into the Hellenistic Far Eastern repertoire is of great value. Having carefully dismantled the post-colonial hybrid concepts in their original use and their subsequent usage in other fields, Mairs appropriately advises us to be fully aware of the differing contexts to which they are applied, and “re-situate, rather than simply re-word, our questions about cultural interaction in the Hellenistic world.”

Misunderstanding, misappropriating, and misapplying newer theories, when transporting them across disciplinary boundaries, are perhaps a common phenomenon in the ongoing scholarly discourse. But on a metaphoric level, just as ‘hellenism,’ in whatever shape or form, transformed and adapted itself across cultural boundaries, it is certainly natural and even necessary that theoretical frameworks also be adjusted and revised to fit the need of each disciplinary field. And this will undoubtedly be a long and reiterative process. For example, it is evident that the introduction of post-colonial hybrid theories to the archaeology of the Hellenistic East has effectively provided a theoretical basis to distance scholarship from conventional models of ‘dissemination’ or ‘acculturation’. There is, however, still a fundamental sense in which these unidirectional modes of hellenocentric thinking is still ingrained in our usage of terms, whether it is looking for the Greek ‘source’ in a style, or calling a product ‘local imitations’ of the Greek ‘original’. But the field is relatively young, and the new generation of scholars are starting to bring fresh, independent perspectives and insightful expertise that will no doubt build a progressively unbiased cultural understanding of these localities. While clearly a valuable addition to the scholarship on the Hellenistic East specifically, the volume also represents a truly productive starting point in the development of compelling new modes of cross-cultural inquiries in art and archaeology in general. Each article is but a tip of the iceberg in their respective areas of investigation, as they themselves attest so well to the rich and vast potential they hold for the future.

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Notes

¹ M.P. Canepa (ed.), *Theorizing Cross-Cultural Interaction Among the Ancient and Early Medieval Mediterranean, Near East and Asia*. *Ars Orientalis* 38, Washington D.C. 2010; M.Y.L. Huang (ed.), *Beyond Boundaries: East-West Cross-Cultural Encounters*, Newcastle 2011.