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The assembled palace of Samosata: object vibrancy in 1st C. BCE Commagene

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Citation

Kruijer, L. W. (2022, May 24). *The assembled palace of Samosata: object vibrancy in 1st C. BCE Commagene*.

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Introduction.



Fig. 0.1 In the wake of the Euphrates flooding, inhabitants of Eski Samsat moved their belongings to Yeni Samsat. Source: samsathaber.com.

Prelude: the endurance of Eski Samsat

On the 5th of March 1988, the inhabitants of the small village of Samsat, located in the *vilayet* of Adıyaman in southeast Turkey, moved their belongings to higher grounds, away from the west bank of the rising Euphrates river (see fig. 0.1). Further south along the river, at the village of Eskin, the Atatürk Dam and its hydroelectric power plant - part of the large and controversial *Southeastern Anatolia Project* (from here on *GAP: Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi*) - had just been finished and, soon after, the river's entire alluvial plain from Eskin up to the Gerger area was submerged, including the village of Samsat itself.¹ Even the 50-meter high *höyük*, an iconic

¹ The GAP started in the 1960s for irrigation and power generation purposes, intended to enrich the water-resources of the countryside in this area by building sewer dams in both the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. This enormous project (in total 21 sewer dams, 19 hydroelectric power plants and a water tunnel of about 26,4 km. in length) has resulted in a grand-scale threat of Commagenean cultural heritage as not only the valleys of the Euphrates and the Tigris have become overflowed, but also the valleys of smaller tributary rivers. Ultimately, it led to the complete disappearance of all archaeological sites under the 500 m. contour, like Samosata. The most famous of these undoubtedly is Zeugma/Seleukeia on the Euphrates, where, despite the large-scale submergence of the site (and the full disappearance of its 'twin town' Apameia),

artificial mound towering over the village (see fig. 0.2), would ultimately be concealed by the pale blue Atatürk lake, covering it with 90-120 meter of water.² In the wake of the rising waters, the villagers necessarily had to move to the newly built village of Yeni Samsat, leaving behind their houses, their mosque, their small school, their stores, their village square and also the towering *höyük*, never to be able to return to them again.



Fig. 0.2 The höyük of Samosata in 1990 after Eski Samsat was fully submerged. Source: Özgüç Archive.

This forced migration of ca. 3000 inhabitants from Eski Samsat to Yeni Samsat first of all meant a radical and potentially traumatic uprooting from a place that most people had called home their entire life. This biographical caesura was of course suffered first and foremost by individual persons, but it can also be considered in terms of the long historical life of the town itself. After almost 6000 years of habitation on and around the *höyük*, this long chronological fibre, stretching from the Chalcolithic to the late 20th century CE, was abruptly terminated. As such, the villagers of Eski Samsat not only were forced to bid farewell to the materiality of their personal histories, but also to that of a much deeper past. A past that, in fact, had never completely passed by as long as the *höyük* had still cast its long shadow over the village, as long as ploughing farmers would

archaeological investigations are ongoing, cf. Gökay 2012, 2021. For critical considerations of the GAP, see Krüger 2009; Conde 2016.

² Voigt and Ellis 1981, 87 for a similar estimation at the nearby site of Gritille.

stumble on limestone Corinthian capital fragments and as long as children playing hide-and-seek in their backyards would pick up Iron Age pottery sherds.

Loosely following the ideas of the philosopher Henri Bergson, we might say that the inherent ‘multi-temporality’ of material culture causes its many pasts to *endure*; the physical *höyük*, for instance, never only belonged to *one* present, nor to merely *one of its many pasts*.³ Such material endurance, this duration of past worlds, is abruptly terminated when its materiality is destroyed or simply forced out of reach. The flooding of an entire cultural landscape as a consequence of the GAP therefore was not just the destruction (or long-term sealing off) of passive matter that once was imbued with biographical meaning and memory. Rather, it terminated the duration of that past itself.

To some extent, archaeological research has the capacity to re-assemble past worlds⁴, to activate the complexity of material culture, and to resuscitate the relationality of things, their power to amaze, inform, bewilder and transform. Samsat’s *höyük* and its multiple pasts can, in some way, endure in an archaeological narrative. This would not have been possible had a team of archaeologists, led by the late prof. dr. Nimet Özgüç (Middle East Technical University Ankara), not spent circa ten years to excavate and study the *höyük* of Samsat in the years leading up to the 5th of March 1988.⁵ This work has proven to be of enormous value, allowing for the continued emergence and endurance of more of Samsat’s pasts than ever before. This dissertation publishes and analyses the legacy data of these excavations pertaining to the Hellenistic and early Roman periods (ca. 4th c. BCE-1st c. CE), focusing especially on its late-Hellenistic (1st c. BCE) Commagenean palace. In the first place then, this dissertation can be read as a retrieval and re-assembling of one of Samsat’s many submerged past worlds – that of its Late-Hellenistic palace and its myriad of vibrant object capacities.

³ Bergson 1922. For an archaeological reading of Bergson’s ideas about materiality and duration, see Hamilakis 2007. Michael Camille suggests something similar when he claims: ‘*objects from the past (...) serve as ‘actual apparitions’ of history, blurring the line between the past and the present ... where the gazes of both can meet*’ (Camille 1996, 7). See also Crellin et al. 2021, 49: ‘*the material traces of the past have a duration into the present and as such help creating a multi-temporal present*’.

⁴ A phrase borrowed from Harris 2021.

⁵ Note that the American archaeologist Theresa Goell already excavated at Samsat between 1964 and 1967. See ch 1.

A drowned past re-assembled: the archaeological legacy data of the Late-Hellenistic Palace of Samosata



Fig. 0.3 Samosata and Commagene in the 1st c. BCE Eurasia. Source: Pitts and Versluys 2021, 376, fig. 3 (by Joanne Porck).

This dissertation investigates the archaeological legacy data of the royal Commagenean palace of Samosata (early 1st c. BCE) in relation to questions about cultural transformation in Commagene, focusing on the transformative, vibrant role of objects and their glocal genealogical relations (for a map of Commagene in its 1st c. BCE Eurasian setting, see fig. 0.3). Whereas the Late-Hellenistic kingdom of Commagene is world-famous for the ruler cult of king Antiochos I (ca. 69-36 BCE) and its monumental tomb-sanctuaries (*hierothesia*), most importantly Nemrut Dağı, the kingdom's capital Samosata and its large Late-Hellenistic palace have remained largely unknown until now. The palace was excavated on top of the ancient town's *höyük* during the salvage excavations of the

1980s and it is very likely that this elaborately decorated structure, with its tessellated mosaics, painted stucco, and architectural decoration, was the ‘seat of the Commagenean kings’ (τὸ βασιλεῖον) Strabo mentions in the early 1st c. CE.⁶ As such, it adds a rare non-cultic (and probably not exclusively ‘Antiochan’⁷) context to our knowledge of Late-Hellenistic Commagene. Despite its significance, this palatial context has received only limited scholarly attention, something particularly caused by the fact that large parts of the archaeological material and documentation belonging to the palace have remained unpublished so far.⁸

This book provides the first exhaustive archaeological study of this important palatial context.⁹ It unlocks and integrates a variety of different legacy data pertaining to the excavations carried out by Nimet Özgüç and her team. These legacy data consist principally of two different types of data: archaeological objects and excavation documentation. The first consists of a large amount and variety of archaeological artefacts resulting from the Özgüç excavations, stored (and in a few cases exhibited) in the Archaeological Museum of Adıyaman. Thanks to the kind generosity of the museum’s director Mehmet Alkan as well as Turkey’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism, permission was granted to study this material in May-June 2017, June 2018 and July 2019. The second corpus of legacy data derived from the Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara, where an archive was stored containing Özgüç’s excavation documentation. Thanks to the very kind permission of prof. dr. Aliye Öztan and prof. dr. Tayfun Yıldırım (both METU), I was allowed to digitize, study and publish this material together with my Leiden VICI-colleague Stefan Riedel.

These legacy data for the first time allow for a detailed and exhaustive study of the archaeological structures belonging to and surrounding the palace, presenting more than a hundred new photographs, as well as many sketches, maps and excavation reports, all together considerably improving and problematizing our knowledge of the structure’s lay out, chronology and overall character (chapter 4). To this is added a catalogue of all known fragments of Hellenistic and early Roman architectural decoration from Samosata (ca. 3rd c. BCE-1st c. CE), most of which have not been published before, thus adding to our knowledge of the general architectural embellishment of the palace, but also to our knowledge of architectural decoration in Hellenistic and Early Roman Commagene in a broader sense (chapter 5). Another catalogue that consists almost entirely of previously unknown material is provided by the corpus of Hellenistic and Early Roman sculptural fragments from Samosata (chapter 6). Its analysis adds to our broader understanding of Commagenean sculpture, also for the hardly known pre- and post-Antiochan phases. Apart from

⁶ Strabo 16.2.3. See paragraph 4.3.6 for a discussion.

⁷ ‘Antiochan’ in the sense of belonging to the reign of king Antiochos I (ca. 69-36 BCE).

⁸ The few existent publications are mostly in Turkish, e.g. Özgüç 2009; Bingöl 2013. See chapter 1 for a complete historiography.

⁹ A summary of part of the argument was already published in Kruijer and Riedel 2021.

these three material categories, this dissertation also deals with the painted wall decoration, mosaics, and pottery that can be assigned to or associated with the Late-Hellenistic palace (see chapter 7). Taken together, these catalogues and discussions of a variety of material groups allow for an exhaustive and integrated study of the palace of Samosata.

Beyond Hellenism in the East

Moving up one level of interpretation, this dissertation attempts to investigate the material culture of the palace of Samosata in relation to a broader phenomenon of cultural transformations happening in Commagene in the 1st c. BCE (chapter 7). It does so in critical dialogue with a scholarly tradition that has been particularly focused on understanding the character of 'Greek elements' in Commagene, keen on framing Samosata and its late-Hellenistic palace as an example of 'Hellenism in the East' (chapter 2). Scholarship on this topic is vast and varied, but, in recent decades, increasingly, a post-colonial critique has developed deconstructing traditional notions of 'Hellenization' as a one-directional, top-down diffusion of 'Greek culture' imposed on 'eastern' communities, and instead stressing the local agency of elites and societies to actively adopt 'Hellenism' for their own situated purposes. This dissertation argues that, although these new approaches have been of great importance to a more nuanced view on cultural transformation in Commagene, the Hellenism-model retains some fundamental methodological and interpretative shortcomings. A central critique formulated in chapter 2 is the fact that archaeological analyses of 'Hellenism in the East' have consistently overlooked and simplified the complex and manifold capacities of material culture. There seems to be a recurrent conflation between, on the one hand, Hellenism as an *emic concept* and, on the other hand, Hellenism as an *etic class of objects*. By critically evaluating all the instances in Samosata where 'Greek' is used as an object label, this dissertation contributes to the much needed disentanglement of these two notions of Hellenism. As an alternative, this dissertation proposes an approach to the material culture and cultural transformation in Samosata that *postpones* the term Hellenism altogether, rejecting an *a priori* categorical distinction between 'things Greek' and 'things Eastern'.

This critical rethinking of what 'Hellenism in the East' entails is important not in the least because the broader notion of Hellenism in some sense still pervades the world we live in, functioning as one of the main foundation-myths of modern Western society. It is not seldomly the case that the interest and search for 'Greek culture beyond Greece' in the past is in fact an ideologically inspired search for the modern cultural Self, creating a '*false cultural intimacy*'¹⁰ between the ancient and

¹⁰ Herzfeld 2005.

modern worlds.¹¹ Precisely because Shelley's '*We are all Greeks*'¹² still echoes from 10 Downing Street to the White House¹³, and notably also in alt-right racist notions of Western and white supremacy¹⁴, the critical disentanglement of Hellenism as a modern myth and a historical phenomenon is more necessary than ever.

An assemblage of glocal and vibrant objects

To go 'beyond Hellenism' in Samosata, this dissertation places center stage two important theoretical notions about objects. The first is the idea of glocality, a concept developed within the context of globalization theory (see chapter 2), and referring to cultural phenomena that were simultaneously local and global (or more-than-local), emerging in contexts of increased connectivity through mutually constitutive processes of particularization and universalization. In this dissertation, I particularly focus on the *glocal* aspects of the palace's material culture as it helps to prevent from relapsing into the use of ethnic labels and the problematic notion of 'pure' cultural containers that 'curiously' formed a cultural hybrid in the palace of Samosata.¹⁵ Importantly, this dissertation uses globalization theory not as a mere descriptive notion of increased connectivity, but as a heuristic tool at the starting point of the analysis of material transformations in Samosata.

The second notion about objects that is central in this dissertation entails the reconceptualization of the palace as an assemblage, a '*composition that acts*'¹⁶, a notion that derives from a theoretical strand known as New Materialism (see chapter 3). Within this post-anthropocentric framework, objects are vibrant, relational and always more-than-representational; their supposed relation to

¹¹ This links to broader de-colonizing perspectives on Greece, Greek culture and Greek archaeological heritage, cf. Hamilakis 2007. His recent collaborative initiative 'décolonize hellás' calls for '*an urgent (re)viewing of the place of modern Greece in relation to geographies and genealogies of European colonialism*', cf. decolonizehellas.org.

¹² Shelley 1977, 409. For an analysis of Shelley's Philhellenism as a form of Romantic Nationalism, see Findlay 1993.

¹³ The Philhellenism of Boris Johnson is widely attested, most notably perhaps in his assertion that London is today's Athens in his 2014 speech '*Athenian Civilisation: The Glory That Endures*': '*There are people around the world who in one way or another reject Periclean ideals, and so it is more vital than ever that we uphold them here in London. Let us keep the flame alive, protect the owl of Pallas Athena that still haunts the squares of Bloomsbury [...]*' (Boris Johnson, Legatum Institute Lecture, 4-09-2014). Like his predecessors, Joe Biden has repeated several times how ancient Greece is the ultimate source of American civilization: '*Greece and America share common values, common goals, a common philosophical tradition going back to the great scholars of ancient Greece.*' (Remarks by the Vice President Joe Biden, Greek Independence Day, March 25, 2009).

¹⁴ One of its most gloomy recent instances can be found in the extreme right-wing rhetoric of Dutch parliamentarian Thierry Baudet, whose political party uses a Greek temple as its main logo and whose speeches contain evocations of Hegel's 'owl of Minerva' and dog-whistling references to Himmler's notion of Hyperborea. (See Tempelman 2019).

¹⁵ Versluys 2015; Pitts and Versluys 2015.

¹⁶ Due 2002, 32.

specific cultural concepts, material categories or human intentions (as emphasized in the Hellenism framework) can never fully exhaust the many wide-ranging capacities that such objects afford. By exploring the relational capacities of objects in the palace of Samosata, it will attempt to discern how objects are vibrant, functioning as historical agents capable of effectuating change themselves. The latter is specifically done with the use of a so-called 'objectscape methodology' (see chapter 3 and chapter 7), which allows for the investigation of successive object repertoires and their changing object vibrancies in Samosata from the 4th c. BCE – 1st c. CE.¹⁷ One type of object vibrancy that is particularly investigated and explored in this dissertation comprises of the genealogical relations of objects (chapters 7-10). This builds on the idea that objects are always part of bigger groups of objects of the same type and that, as such, they can act *en masse*. Instead of reducing material culture to static concepts, this dissertation invites the reader to 'read along' with objects, entering '*into the fog*'¹⁸ of their glocal relations and their vibrant capacities.

By investigating and exploring the relational capacities of glocal and vibrant objects in the palace of Samosata, this dissertation aspires to demonstrate that there is a lot of analytical room 'beyond Hellenism'. With the palace of Samosata as its central focus, it seeks to develop a new framework and methodology to investigate the local impact of increased connectivity in Hellenistic-period Afro-Eurasia, with objects in the role of historical protagonists.¹⁹

¹⁷ Pitts 2019; Pitts and Versluys 2021.

¹⁸ A phrase borrowed from Bille and Sørensen 2016.

¹⁹ As such, this dissertation is about 'large issues in a small place', investigating the impact of globalization processes on a local scale, Cf. Eriksen 1995.