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

Kruijer, L.W.

Chapter 2. State of Research. New approaches to 'Hellenism in the East' in Commagenean scholarship.

2.1 Introduction

The available archaeological and historical sources for ancient Commagene discussed in the last paragraph of the previous chapter bear witness of profound transformations in this small kingdom during the 1st c. BCE, specifically represented by the radically innovative cultic program of Antiochos I. This chapter discusses the different scholarly approaches to these cultural dynamics and considers how it relates to scholarship on the palace of Samosata more specifically. Paragraph 2.2 deals with the more conventional approaches to the visual aspects of the Antiochan program, which I link to a broader discussion about the issue of 'Hellenism in the East'. This paragraph heavily relies on the convincing historiographic critique that Versluys has developed already in detail in his 2017 monograph '*Visual Style and Constructing Identity in the Hellenistic World*' and therefore will only be dealt with here briefly.[199] New to this criticism, however, is a more elaborate consideration of how these more traditional ideas also recurred in interpretations of the palace of Samosata. In paragraphs 2.3 and 2.4, I critically discuss two new approaches in Commagenean research that have recently reinvigorated debates concerning the cultural dynamics of 1st c. BCE Commagene and 'Hellenism in the East' more broadly. The first approach is represented by the work of Andreas Kropp, and specifically his impressive 2013 monograph '*Images and Monuments of Near Eastern Dynasties, 100 BC – AD 100*'.[200] The second approach developed from the work of Miguel John Versluys and is particularly represented by his already mentioned monograph.[201] After establishing this state of research, I argue for the need of a new approach to cultural change in 1st c. BCE Commagene (paragraph 2.5). This paragraph then functions as a 'stepping stone' to the succeeding chapter, which develops such an approach.

2.2 Making sense of culture styles and perceived hybridity in acculturative approaches

Since already the late 19th century, when scholarship first started to systematically investigate Commagene's history and archaeology (see paragraph 1.3), fundamental problems arose with regards to understanding the 'cultural affiliation' and the overall character of Commagene's cultural eclecticism during the 1st c. BCE.[202] These problems evolved specifically from the

[199] Versluys 2017a.
[200] Kropp 2013.
[201] Versluys 2017a. Crucial publications in this second research line are Strootman and Versluys 2017 on 'Persianism' and Blömer et al. 2021.
[202] For a thorough historiography and a critical discussion of the ways scholars dealt with Commagene's perceived 'in-betweenness', see Versluys 2017a, 14-45. Note however also the personal comment by

manifold cultural elements and styles – 'Greek', 'Persian', 'Armenian', 'Roman' and 'local' – that scholars identified in the Antiochan program, and, importantly, from the (perceived) unusual combination and execution of these cultural styles and concepts. As such, the Antiochan program consistently was considered to fall in-between scholarly categories: it was deemed 'too Eastern' for classical archaeologists and 'too Western' for Near Eastern scholars. According to many scholars, for instance, the colossi of Nemrut Dağı did not live up to the standards of what was considered a 'pure, Greek style', lacking naturalism and defying pre-existing chronological typologies. An explanation for this classificatory defiance was sometimes sought in the non-Greek ethnicity of the artisans who produced these statues; they had to be local, 'Oriental' people who, as a consequence of their ethnic and cultural background, were less skilled and less cultured.[203] Such valorising and dismissive interpretations can be traced from Humann and Puchstein's 1890 description of Nemrut's sculpture as '*Leistungen hellenisierter Barbaren*'[204], to the 1988 assertion by R.R.R. Smith that '*Antiochos' images, then, are (…) a rather hollow, synthetic Greek version of Oriental dynastic art'.*[205] A more positive reading of the same model is found in the work of Roman Ghirshman, who describes the Antiochan style as demonstrating '(…)*la resistenza delle tradizioni iraniche'* and states that it is '*fortemente legata alle formule achemenidi*'[206], only altered because of '*penetrazione delle nuove correnti venute dal mondo partico*'.[207] Similarly, Stewart described the statues of Nemrut Dağı as '*lonely beacons of Asiatic grandeur in the twilight of the Hellenistic world'*.[208] Versluys noticed how many such interpretations reasoned from an 'acculturation-model' of cultural transformation, where the coming together of monolithic 'culture containers' ('Greek', 'Persian', 'Oriental') determined the local outcome of Commagene's material culture.[209]

Such acculturation-thinking is pervasive in scholarly research dealing with the issue of 'Hellenism in the East' more broadly.[210] The question 'What exactly *is* 'Greek?' has proved difficult to answer

---

Michael Blömer in Riedel and Versluys 2021, 15, n.12: '*It is interesting to note that research from the 1950s and 60s seems to have had less difficulties with evaluating Commagene's "inbetweenness" on its own terms than later scholarship'*.

[203] Humann and Puchstein 1890, 348: ‚[the deviation of the ‚Greek' norm] *wird bei den kommagenischen Steinmetzen als Mangel an Kunstfertigkeit, wenn nicht als ein Zeichen ihres barbarischen Formensinns aufzufassen sein*'.

[204] *Ibidem*.

[205] Smith 1988, 104. Versluys gives many examples. See for instance also Hamdi Bey and Efendi 1883, 17-18, who compare the Nemrut statues with snowmen. Smith 1988, 103 furthermore describes the Antiochan style as '*megalomania of a minor potentate'*.

[206] Ghirshman 1962, 57, 65-67.

[207] *Idem*, 69.

[208] Stewart 2014, 267.

[209] Versluys 2017a, 158, who concludes that such approaches '*understand Antiochan Commagene and its material culture as an ethnic or cultural "index" of its population or royal dynasty; as the outcome of an acculturation process in which ethnic identities from East and West have merged'*.

[210] Hellenism was famously first considered by Johan Gustav Droysen as a hybrid culture that resulting from a cultural fusion (*Verschmelzung*) between Greek culture and 'Eastern' culture. cf. Droysen 1836. For critical analyses of Droysen's use of the term 'Hellenismus', see Canfora 1995, 95-109; and Sebastiani 2015.

and in many ways still implicitly or explicitly steers research on cultural transformation in the Hellenistic-period Near East.[211] An explanatory framework that is influential to this very day (especially in non-academic discourse) is the idea of 'Hellenization', an acculturation process that is strongly tied to (British) colonial, imperialist narratives of civilising military expansion (most notably through Alexander's 'conquest of the east') and the presumed inherent superiority of Hellenism. [212] In the wake of post-colonial critique, this model was largely overthrown in favour of narratives of local and regional resistance to such cultural imperialism, stressing, on the one hand, the limits of Hellenization[213], and, on the other, the possibility of local agency, with non-Greek individuals and groups that actively 'self-hellenized'. [214]

At the core of these type of reasoning, however, still lies the assumption of an *encounter* of two groups of people with their distinct cultural (and sometimes also ethnic) containers, namely 'Western-Greek' and 'Oriental' that always retained a certain degree of incommensurability. More recently, understandings of 'things Greek in the East' have increasingly drifted away from such acculturative models, reframing the bottom-up, local appropriations of 'Greekness' as very contextual forms of 'Hellenisms' that were less connected to (resistance to) cultural imperialism or cultural identity per se. Crucial in this shift has been the disentanglement of a strict one-to-one relation between culture styles and cultural identity; especially Paul Veyne already realized that not everything we call 'Greek' from an *etic* perspective was in fact considered 'Greek' from an *emic* perspective.[215] In this more contextual reading of 'things Greek' in 'eastern contexts', Hellenism is considered to have evolved into '*a source of social power'*[216] through its repeated and widespread adoptions. From this perspective, cultural forms that modern scholars designate as 'Greek' might not have functioned as tokens of ethnic and cultural identity in historical contexts and rather were

[211] And beyond antiquity as well; see Zacharia 2008 for a diachronic overview of 'Hellenisms' from antiquity to modernity.
[212] See for instance Schlumberger 1970, 5: *'the Hellenization of Asia is a consequence of the conquests of Alexander the Great, and the art introduced in the regions of the former Achaemenid Empire by the newcomers did adapt and diversify in time and space*.' Daniel Schlumberger was one of the first to seriously consider what he called '*hellénisme oriental*' as a cultural phenomenon in its own right and not merely in relation to Graeco-Roman Mediterranean culture. Although Schlumberger acknowledged the importance of '*hellénisme oriental*' for the formation of for instance Parthian and Greco-Buddhist art, he still considered it the outcome of an acculturation process that started with Alexander's military campaigns and his presumed diffusion of an inherently superior Greek culture. Schlumberger's notion of Hellenization therefore is acculturation in an ethnological sense; it describes the encounter of two distinct cultures that has '*hellénisme oriental*' as its result. See Schlumberger 1960, 1970. For a more recent example of this type of acculturative approaches to '*transferts culturels'* in Zeugma, see Abadie Reynal and Yon 2015, with the review of Kruijer 2018. See also Messina and Versluys 2021, 196.
[213] Cf. Eddy 1961; Momigliano 1975.
[214] E.g. Kuhrt and Sherwin-White 1987; Alcock 1993; Funck 1996.
[215] Veyne 1979.
[216] Butcher 2003, 273.

intended to evoke connotations with, for instance, 'modernization', 'civilization' and a general sense of 'cultural competence'.[217]

In Commagene studies, this 'social' definition of 'Hellenism in the East' was only recently introduced with the work of Versluys.[218] Most Commagenean scholarship, however, has reasoned from an acculturative equation between visual styles and ethnic or cultural ideas.[219] In the case of the Antiochan program, this acculturation-model thus considered the occurrence of different cultural elements ('Greek', 'Persian') as the logical outcome of an encounter of two ethnic or cultural containers, either through the presumed mixed ethnicity of the Commagenean population or the presumed mixed ethnic ancestry of the royals themselves. The outcome of this acculturative encounter is often expressed in terms of a hybrid, an 'in-between' category such as the typically hyphenated category of 'Graeco-Persian', which still refers back directly to its perceived cultural constituents. As such, this more traditional scholarship of the Antiochan project in some way denied this dynastic visual culture its unicity, undermining the way the seemingly different cultural elements actually functioned as a logical 'whole' in its Commagenean context, becoming something genuinely new.

This is relevant for our understanding of the palace of Samosata as, here too, we can witness acculturative approaches that frame the structure as the outcome of an encounter between 'Greek' and 'Oriental' cultural or ethnic containers.[220] The most recent, vocal proponent of this line of thinking is Maria Kopsacheili, who considers the palace of Samosata as an example of 'hybridization of Hellenistic architecture'.[221] The palace, in her understanding, is a 'Greek-Oriental hybrid' that consists of 'Greek' decoration in combination with an 'Oriental' lay-out.[222] She connects this hybridity to the presumed hybridity of the Antiochan program, suggesting it is an

[217] For such contextualized understandings of Hellenisms and their social significance, see Gatier 2003, 112-113; Stavrianopoulou 2013; Versluys 2017a.
[218] Versluys 2017a. See paragraph 2.4 below.
[219] *Ibidem*. for many examples.
[220] Note that the model is also used for Samosata as a whole, for instance in Krüger and Blömer 2011, 348: '*Im 2. Jh. v. Chr. wurde Samosata dann Hauptstadtdes Königreiches Kommagene, das sich unter der Herrschaft der Orontiden vom Seleukidenreich lossagte. Welchen Charakter die Siedlung damals hatte, lässt sich nicht beurteilen, doch scheint der Ort noch über einen langen Zeitraum kaum hellenisiert gewesen zu sein*.' Here, the notion of a 'not yet hellenized' city employs the term '*hellenisiert*' in an acculturative manner that is moreover teleological as it reasons from an understanding of hellenization as a cultural process that would inevitably befall Samosata.
[221] Kopsacheili 2011.
[222] *Idem*, 24 states: '*the plan of the excavated part of the palace in Samosata resembles oriental models instead of early Hellenistic Macedonian (…); corridors appear to play an important role as passageways between the different rooms, while a broader corridor runs along the external wall of the western side of the building and must have extended to the north surrounding the whole palace. Nevertheless, as presented below, western elements also feature, but in this case they are detected in decoration (…) the decoration in the palace of Samosata follows Greek prototypes in terms of iconography and style. Tessellated mosaics depict a pornoboskos (a pimp), a character of the New Comedy, a Rhodian amphora, and cymatia, while wall painting fragments and a Greek-style limestone head representing Antiochus I of Commagene have been also found'.*

expression of the ancestral claims of Antiochos I (discussed in paragraph 1.6): '*The fact that the rulers of Kommagene preferred to follow this pattern is possibly explained by the effort of Antiochus I to claim origin from Seleucus I and the daughter of Artaxerxes II, leading further back to Alexander and Darius I. This is also expressed in the "Ancestor Gallery" he set out at Nemrut-Dağı*.'[223] In this line of reasoning the different elements of the palace are labelled in terms of a perceived cultural affiliation and subsequently considered representative of a certain ethnic (imagined or actual) identity.

A somewhat similar acculturative approach to the palace of Samosata that also emphasises its cultural hybridity is found in Werner Oenbrink's study of Commagene's '*Sakralarchitektur'*.[224] Oenbrink considers the palatial structures of both Samosata and Arsameia on the Nymphaios to be typical Commagenean ‚*Mischformen'* that combine, what he calls 'Greek-Hellenistic' decorative elements with 'oriental' architectural forms: '*Darüber hinaus folgt die Gestaltung beider Grundrisse, die vor allem durch die auf modern westlich-hellenistische Dekorformen zurückgreifende Ausstattung mit Bodenmosaiken vordergründlich griechisch-hellenistisch wirken, eindeutig östlichem Raumverständnis. (…)*'[225] Within this ‚*Mischform*', Oenbrink ultimately considers the palace of Samosata as more 'Oriental' than Greek, when he states: ‚*Aufgrund ihrer topographischen Lage leitet die Kommagene eher zum syrisch-palästinischen und mesopotamischen Raum und ist dementsprechend stärker „orientalistisch" geprägt.*'[226] Oenbrink considers the palatial structures as belonging to a category of 'Oriental-Hellenistic Peristyle houses' that showcase a ‚*partielle „Hellenisierung*"'[227] which particularly developed in the Seleucid and Parthic empires. Especially Oenbrink explicit use of the term 'Kulturkreise', gives away the acculturative interpretative model that lies behind his reasoning, suggesting that the 'Greek' and 'oriental' finally 'meet' in Samosata, forming into a mix of which the constituent parts remain distinguishable and always to some extent incommensurable.[228]

As I explained above, there are several drawbacks to this acculturative interpretative framework, also when employed to analyses of 1st c. BCE cultural dynamics of Commagene. [229] Most importantly, it runs the risk of reducing (culture) styles and material culture in general to mere one-to-one representations of ethnic and cultural identities – *even* when the intention is merely to provide an *etic*, descriptive classification of archaeological phenomena. The claim on an objective classificatory system accommodates a pre-theoretical use of cultural labels and

[223] Kopsacheili 2011.
[224] Oenbrink 2017.
[225] *Idem*, 177
[226] *Ibidem*.
[227] *Idem*, 177-178
[228] *Idem*, 178: *‚Einflüsse aus beiden Kulturkreise'*.
[229] A criticism formulated in detail in Versluys 2017a.

profoundly structures any argument that follows. In the case of Commagene, scholars have specifically focused on the representation of hybrid ethnic or cultural identity, which implies that, when two 'pure' cultural containers meet ('western Greek' and 'eastern Persian or Oriental'), a mixed hybrid is the outcome.

The material culture that is deemed a mere representation of such hybrid identities subsequently is also conceptualized as the logical and passive outcome of this inter-cultural encounter. As such, this argumentation leaves very little agency for the local agents that selected and used the specific cultural elements that made up the perceived hybrid. The local context of 1st c. BCE Commagene – its socio-cultural and politically specific historical situation, the particular selection of elements, and their specific combination and embedding – is made subordinate to an abstract grand narrative of diffusing and clashing 'cultures'. Thinking about the palace of Samosata in terms of hybridity thus risks ignoring the fact that this 'oriental lay-out' and 'Greek decoration' in fact made part of one and the same structure; they were both part of the same assemblage (see chapter 3). The local, contextual and social functioning of the different constituent elements of the palace might very well not have been determined (solely) by their potential cultural connotations.

Lastly, the conceptualization of Commagenean culture as 'in-between' and 'a bridge between East and West' allowed scholars to study Commagene in isolation, considering it as peripheral and a '*Sonderstellung'* in the wider Eurasian world. By using the kingdom's exceptional location 'between cultures' as a shorthand explanation for its cultural dynamics, scholars thus often failed to investigate the socio-cultural local context within which it emerged as well as to compare this to broader Near Eastern or even Eurasian parallel phenomena.

2.3 Understanding the Antiochan program in the context of 1st c. BCE dynastic self-representation of 'client kings' in the Near East

Some of the drawbacks of these acculturative approaches to the cultural dynamics of 1st c. BCE Commagene are dealt with in Kropp's 2013 monograph '*Images and Monuments of Near Eastern Dynasties, 100 BC – AD 100*'.[230] This important book investigates the Antiochan program in the regional socio-political context of other Hellenistic dynasts of the Near East, namely the Nabataeans, the Hasmonaeans and Herodians, the Ituraeans, and the Emesans – traditionally known as 'client kings', a modern label that is increasingly considered controversial for its Romanocentrism.[231] This larger, regional perspective moves away from the more traditional,

[230] Kropp 2013.
[231] *Idem*, 10-13. 'Client kingship' was coined and developed by Badian 1958 and usefully criticized in Braund 1984 and Braund 1988. In general, see Kaizer and Facella 2010.

acculturative approaches discussed in the previous paragraph in the sense that it does not consider what happens in Commagene as a peripheral, isolated case of 'East meeting West', but rather as something that can be studied and explained within its specific socio-political context. For all 'client kingdoms', Kropp systematically compares the iconographies, stylistic choices and intended messages of their royal portraiture, royal palaces, royal tombs and royal cults. Although Kropp's conclusion emphasizes difference and variety in these client kings' cultural responses to Roman power,[232] he also points to the similarity of the intended messages, which, to his mind, share '*the aspiration to manifest royal projections (and illusions) of full-fledged sovereignty*'.[233] Kropp suggests that we should understand the Antiochan program within this socio-political context too, and describes what happens in mid-1st c. BCE Commagene as '*the self-projection as a sovereign ruler, exceeding his Hellenistic predecessors by benefitting from a double Graeco-Persian heritage*'.[234] Rather than interpretating the eclectic character of Antiochos I's cultural program as the result of an ethno-cultural encounter, Kropp considers it the outcome of a broader socio-political context, in which the politically dire circumstances of the time – Commagene being crammed between the Roman and Parthian super powers – necessitated kings like Antiochos I to develop new forms of self-projection.[235] Kropp argues that this increased necessity for self-representation went hand in hand with larger royal investments in luxury and monumentalization, that themselves '*required and conditioned innovation. As local dynasts decided to spend prodigious sums on monuments, they inevitably broke with cultural traditions.*'[236]

Therefore, a second common characteristic of the images and monuments of these Near Eastern client kings according to Kropp is the incorporation of foreign models, and their combination in eclectic and innovative ways. Although, on a structural level, Commagene fits well to this general characteristic, Kropp considers the kingdom an anomaly in his analysis as, according to him, in Commagene there seems to be no place for *local* identities and *local* religious traditions in the newly created eclectic mix. Instead, Kropp claims that the ruler cult of Antiochos I '*uprooted the religious fabric of Commagene*' by solely adopting outside models (Hellenism, Persianism) and not

[232] Kropp 2013, 382: '*In terms of images and monuments, one looks in vain for a trajectory of typical features across the borders. There is no typology of self-representation of client kings, but instead a bewildering variety of images and monuments*'.
[233] *Ibidem*.
[234] *Idem*, 357.
[235] Kropp's analysis of the motives of Antiochos I to establish his royal cult seem to primarily stick with the commonly political '*Großwetterlage*'. See Kropp 2013, 358.
[236] *Idem*, 5.

'*absorbing traditions*'.[237] He suggests that in Commagene, the starting point is never 'local' but instead always 'Greek'.[238]

Although the latter assertion is problematic, especially for the palace of Samosata (see below), Kropp *does* make us aware that what happens in 1st c. BCE Commagene is a type of cultural dynamics that can be studied in a broader, trans-regional context, and that, at its core, is about the innovative and active adoption of non-local elements, creating new forms that benefitted the political self-positioning of dynastic rulers in a local context.

Kropp fails to explain, however, what 'Greek' and 'Persian' as cultural concepts had become by the 1st c. BCE and how the social roles and connotations of these concepts might have developed. When he states that *'the kings of Kommagene can be described as Hellenizers*' who '*enjoyed excellent contacts with the west*'[239], he seems to hold on to an acculturative model where 'Greek identity' and 'Greek style' are all part of a static cultural container that was, moreover, still strictly tied to a territory ('the West'). By merely explaining the occurrence of 'things Greek' and 'things Persian' in Commagene in relation to Antiochos I's ancestry, he misses the opportunity to critically rethink the validity of such material classification and to ask what 'Greek' had become by the 1st c. BCE.[240]

This is specifically problematic in his treatment of the palace of Samosata, which he structurally reduces to a '*Hellenized visual arrangement*'[241], a '*Hellenized counterpart'*[242], with *'a cultural emphasis (…) inclined towards Graeco-Roman culture*'[243], '*rooted in a Greek artistic tradition'*, and '*built by a dynasty keen to stress its Greek credentials*'.[244] This reductive and pre-theoretical labelling allows little room for other, novel meanings and other object capacities emerging in the palace beyond its 'Greek' affiliation. The supposed 'Greek' origins of the manifold elements of the

[237] Both quotes from Kropp 2013, 382. This is a contested issue however; we know so little of local cults that it is hard to consider to what extent they were 'absorbed' by the Antiochan cult. See Blömer 2012a for an exploration of the available evidence for local religion in Commagene. An important argument against a complete depletion of local religion by Antiochos I is the fact that his *temene* were often located in pre-existent cult sites.

[238] Something he witnesses, for instance, in the presumed pre-syncretic phase of the ruler cult, see *infra* n. 179. Note that, even in its 'Greekness', Kropp suggests that what happens in Commagene is '*blown out of proportion*' and '*an extreme example of the normal Greek civic practices'* (Kropp 2013, 170), thus ascribing to Commagene a new type of *Sonderstellung*.

[239] Kropp 2013, 363.

[240] The closest Kropp comes to such theorizing is in the very last sentences of his book, where he states: '*The selective use of 'foreign' elements reveals both a familiarity with things Greek and Roman and a through consideration of how to employ them. Hellenized and Romanized artefacts did not necessarily carry precise cultural messages per se, but were integrated as lavish, exotic, and modern elements. In other instances, the origins of individual elements may have been identifiable, but their composition, and often accumulation, resulted in unique visual expressions charged with new meanings, designed to highlight social superiority and enhance royal prestige'* (Kropp 2013, 383). Kropp does however not explore the socio-cultural consequences of the repeated and widespread adoptions of such 'foreign models'.

[241] Kropp 2013, 85.

[242] *Ibidem*.

[243] *Ibidem*.

[244] *Idem*, 109.

palace become the alpha and omega of the analysis, overshadowing the less obvious outcomes of novel '*integrations*', '*compositions'* and '*accumulations'*.[245] Additionally, Kropp ignores the fact that several elements of the palace – for instance its mudbrick architecture, its architectural lay-out, its pebble mosaic with checkerboard patterns – would not even qualify as 'Greek' or 'Hellenized' in a traditional, *etic* cultural taxonomy. The idea that the Commagenean dynasty only 'does Greek' and 'uprooted' everything local is not only reductive and solely reasoning from an *etic* cultural categorization, but also questionable when looking at the objects themselves.

A last shortcoming of Kropp's analysis is its sole focus on Near Eastern kingdoms as it is too limited a context for the cultural dynamics witnessed in Commagene. The new *Sonderstellung* Kropp assignes to Commagene suggests that not all phenomena witnessed here can be explained within the context of Near Eastern client kingdoms. He even suggests that the 'unique' characteristics of the Antiochan cult - its lack of local religious tradition and the highly central position of the ruler – does in fact find strong parallels in, for instance, the Roman imperial cult[246], adding however immediately (and curiously) that '*Rome played no role in Kommagenian ideology'*.[247] Apparently, the cultural dynamics emerging in 1st c. BCE Commagene demand a broader geographic context, that is not *a priori* restricted to the political context of client kingdoms.

2.4 Towards a globalizing perspective: universalized culture styles in a local context of dynastic ideology construction and strategies of cultural bricolage

Such a broader approach is developed in Versluys's 2017 monograph on Nemrut Dağı, which analyses the Antiochan program in relation to developments happening in the wider Hellenistic world.[248] Versluys suggests that we should understand the seemingly mixed cultural character of Antiochos I's ruler cult in the context of visual strategies of innovative eclecticism and cultural bricolage witnessed throughout Late-Hellenistic Afro-Eurasia - also *beyond* the confines of Near Eastern client kingdoms.[249] Geographically, Versluys thus casts the net wider than Kropp, suggesting that the socio-cultural mechanisms at stake in Commagene during this period to some degree also transcend the socio-political circumstances of the region and have everything to do

[245] See *infra* n. 240.
[246] Kropp 2013, 358-359, 359: '*This veneration of a divinized ruler may draw some conclusions with the imperial cult that was taking shape at almost the same time as Antiochos' cult reform'.*
[247] *Idem*, 359. The fact that the Commagenian kings, from Antiochos I onwards, employed the epithet *'philorhomaios'* seems incompatible with this statement, cf. Facella 2006, 225-298. Kropp also considers how the artificial, eclectic art of the Antiochan program bears structural similarities to the Achaemenid practices at Susa, Pasargadae and Persepolis, cf. Kropp 2013, 361-362.
[248] Versluys 2017a.
[249] Bricolage was first introduced to classical archaeology by Terrenato 1998, 23, who defined it as *'a process in which new cultural items are obtained by means of attributing new functions to previously existing ones*' resulting in *'a complex patchwork made of elements of various age and provenance: some of them are new, but many other are old objects, refunctionalized in new forms and made to serve new purposes within a new context.*' See also Versluys 2013, 434; 2017, 178-182, 201-207.

with increased connectivity - and hence globalization processes.[250] Crucially, Versluys suggests to consider 1st c. BCE Commagene as an integrated node in a large Afro-Eurasian network, which means a very explicit shift away from traditional acculturative understanding of the kingdom as 'peripheral' and 'out-of-the-ordinary' (paragraph 2.2).[251]

Versluys considers how 1st c. BCE Afro-Eurasia was a world that, already for a long time, had been deeply connected, and for which, already since the late Bronze Age, strict cultural borders between 'East' and 'West' are not tenable.[252] He suggests that, therefore, the occurrence of 'Greek' and 'Persian' visual styles in Commagene cannot be the simple outcome of two cultures meeting on 'the bridge between East and West', nor the logic consequence of an actual 'Greek' and 'Persian' ancestry passively befallen upon Antiochos I. Like Kropp, he instead assigns a good deal of agency to the king himself, whose active selection of styles and forms from seemingly different cultural traditions in fact served a very specific purpose in the context of the king's socio-political circumstances, especially with regards to his need for legitimization of his rule.[253] In much more detail than Kropp, Versluys develops an analysis of the character of Antiochos I's visual strategies, arguing that his cultural and cultic program should be understood as an attempt at constructing dynastic ideology through strategies of canonization and cultural innovation. The latter is especially characterized by 'cultural bricolage', creatively and consciously combining elements from different 'cultural scenarios'. Instead of a megalomaniac monarch in the periphery, Versluys

[250] Versluys 2017a, 142-148. See also Riedel and Versluys 2021, 4, where they suggest that the Antiochan program should be seen as '*exemplary of socio-cultural developments in a Hellenistic oikumene that stretched from the Atlantic to the Oxus*'. Note that the comparative approach of Versluys 2017a is still largely limited to western Eurasia (as the author also admits, cf. Versluys 2017a, 24, n.61). This is now compensated for in Blömer et al. 2021, an edited volume called '*Common Dwelling Place of All the Gods. Commagene in its Local, Regional and Global Hellenistic Context*'. This book is the result of a conference held at Münster University in 2019 and contains a range of contributions by different authors that critically discuss and further develop Versluys's approach to Nemrut Dağı. Importantly, the book contains a wide range of 'Eurasian perspectives', with specialists of different Eurasian regions (from Ai Khanoum to Italy and from Alexandria to Armenia) reflecting on the congruence between developments happening in Commagene and in their own respective localities.

[251] This perspective starts out from an explicit critique on the acculturation-model in Commagenean scholarship, arguing that it 1) conceptualizes cultures as monolithic 'culture containers', 2) culture contact as ethnological first-hand encounters and 3) visual styles as directly linked to ethnicity and identity. See Versluys 2017a, 26-29; Riedel and Versluys 2021, 8. See paragraph (2.2) for a more elaborate summary of this argument.

[252] For connectivity in the Bronze Age, see for instance Vandkilde 2016.

[253] For Antiochos I's need for legitimization, see Versluys 2017a, 168: '*Antiochos' position and new political importance – after the disintegration of Seleucid authority and after Pompey's measures – required ideological underpinning and he developed a highly visible ideological system to fulfil this need. Imaginary or not, everything Antiochos I did demonstrated to both his people and the world around him that he had become a Hellenistic sovereign*'. For the agency of Antiochos I see Versluys 2017a, 157-167, see especially 157: '*The main conclusion of this chapter, thus far, is therefore that we should not regard the material culture of Antiochan Commagene as an ethnic or cultural "index" of its population or royal house, but rather as a dynastic Hellenistic project that had many (structural) parallels; not as the logic and linear outcome of a historical process in which ethnic and cultural identities from East and West met, but as a set of specific choices made for specific reasons*'.

considers Antiochos I a capable cosmopolitan broker in sync with dynastic cultural practice of his time.

Crucial for our understanding of Antiochos I's strategies, according to Versluys, is the question what 'Greek' and 'Persian' *had become* in their 1st c. BCE Commagenean context. To investigate this, Versluys considers the implications of increased connectivity for visual styles in the Late-Hellenistic period. He argues that the repeated use of visual styles over a large area can instigate a process of universalization, a phenomenon that derives from globalization theory and implies the de-territorialized, watering down of 'original' meanings and connections to an origin.[254] In line with more social and contextual definitions of 'Hellenism in the East' (see paragraph 2.2), Versluys considers these universalized styles as 'social repositories' rather than direct representations of a territory, ethnicity or cultural identity. By the 1st c. BCE, then, 'Hellenism' had developed into a 'cultural scenario' that was more about 'doing Greek' than 'becoming Greek' – '*a cultural means to achieve social and political aims*'.[255] By tracing the cultural biography of 'Greek style' and 'Greek' as a cultural scenario, Versluys convincingly argues that the 'Greek' element in Antiochos I's ruler cult - including his ancestral claims – was a consciously chosen source of social power that was capable of evoking connotations with civilization and modernity.[256] The Persian element, on the other hand, functioned in Antiochos I's bricolage as a cultural scenario that evoked connotations with dynastic legitimacy.[257]

Versluys's analysis of Nemrut Dağı is particularly useful for this dissertation in terms of its introduction of globalization theory to understand cultural change in 1st c. BCE Commagene. It fits well to a relatively recent trend in scholarship on the Hellenistic World turning to 'globalization' as a concept to describe and analyse processes of increasing connectivity in Afro-Eurasia.[258] Following a plethora of studies on 'things global' – first developed in the social sciences and cultural anthropology[259] but now successfully adopted and adapted by the historical sciences as well[260] - the notion of an expanded Hellenistic *oikoumene* (in terms of long-distance trade,

[254] For de-territorialization, or disembeddedness, see Appadurai 1986, 13-20, 41-48; Giddens 1990, 21-29; Tomlinson 1999, 106-149.
[255] Strootman 2020, 204.
[256] Versluys 2017a, 209-213, 247.
[257] *Idem*, 213-219. See also Strootman and Versluys 2017.
[258] A broader field in which Versluys himself is one of the most influential voices. In general, see Malitz 2000, 37; Martin and Pachis 2004; Moore and Lewis 2009, 174–205; Vlassopoulos 2013; Strootman 2007, 2014; Thonemann 2015; Versluys 2014; 2015; 2017;2021; Hoo 2020; Hoo 2021 (forthcoming). An important precursor to these studies on Hellenistic-period globalization is Horden and Purcell 2000, which did not yet engage with the term globalization in depth but placed much emphasis on connectivity and inter-dependence in the Mediterranean.
[259] Appadurai 1990; Giddens, 1990; Tomlinson 1999, 2006; Held et al 1999; Appadurai 2000; Eriksen 2007; Nederveen Pieterse 2009.
[260] Many scholars have by now argued and accepted that 'globalization' is not restricted to 'planetary global' situations nor industrialized 'modernity', allowing for engagements with globalization theory also in deep historical contexts. For a good historiographic discussion of this shift, see Jennings 2011, who argues for the

economics, politics, science, intellectual networks, culture and arts) is now also reconsidered in terms of globalization.[261] Several authors have warned for the uncritical, undertheorized use of the terms 'global', 'globalism', and 'globalization', as a merely descriptive employment of these terms often holds little analytical and explanatory value, serving mainly as fashionable but hollow terminology.[262] Although definitions of what ancient globalization exactly entails differ greatly[263], a general focus lies on a set of processes brought about by increased connectivity between distant localities, entailing economic, political and cultural interactions through the movement of flows of people, things and ideas.[264] One of the most important of such processes is *universalization*, a concept Versluys uses to investigate the watering down of territorial, ethnic and cultural connotations of a visual style. This phenomenon goes hand in hand with the process of *particularization*, the adoption, adaption and embedding of universalized elements in a local context – creating a variety of different local responses to the global. The ongoing, intertwined process of universalization and particularization forms the mechanism that produces and further develops forms of *glocal* culture; people, things and ideas that are local and global at the very same time.[265]

The notion of the glocality of people, things and ideas has profound implications for our understanding of the cultural dynamics of 1st c. BCE Commagene and 'Hellenism in the East' in general as it is stands in stark contrast to understandings of 'things Greek' as merely global, non-

breaking down of the 'Great Wall' between 'modernity' and 'pre-modernity' (also following the fundamental critique on 'modernity' by Latour 1991). For other good examples of historicized globalization, see Bordo et al. 2003; Chanda 2007; Hopkins 2002; Seland 2008; McNeill 2008; Osterhammel and Petersson 2005; La Bianca and Scham 2006; Hall et al. 2011; Hodos 2009, 2010, 2016, 2020; Hodos et al. 2017; Hales and Hodos 2010; Nederveen Pieterse 2012; Kardulias 2014; Malkin 2011; Pitts and Versluys 2015. Scepticism about the usefulness of the concept of globalization in our studies of the ancient world include Naerebout 2006-2007, 153; Rosenberg 2005, 66; Ball 2015, 251; these studies often point to the perceived anachronism of the term, and the risk of yet a new type of 'grand narrative' terminology. These concerns are dealt with and overcome for instance in Pitts and Versluys 2015; and Hoo 2020, 555-560.

[261] Pitts 2008; Hodos 2010, 2016; Pitts and Versluys 2015; Versluys 2013, 2017; Vlassopoulos 2013; Whitmarsh 2010; Strootman 2017; Hoo 2018; 2020; 2021.

[262] For an eloquent critique, see Hoo 2020, 554. Important exceptions include her own work as well as Hodos 2016, 2010; Pitts 2008; Pitts and Versluys 2015; Versluys 2013, 2017; Vlassopoulos 2013; Whitmarsh 2010.

[263] Ranging from '*a set of processes of increasing connectivities*' (Hodos 2015; Pitts and Versluys 2015, 11; Hoo 2020, 555), to a '*product, not an agent, of change*' (Morley 2015), and a '*hermeneutic device*' (Versluys 2015, 143; Laurence and Trifilò 2015). For this distinction, see Van Oyen 2015, 641.

[264] I follow here the definition in Hoo 2020, 555. An important characteristic of these increased connectivities and global flows is the variety in terms of their strength, frequency, directionality and intensity (Knappett 2013), which causes fundamental unevenness and interdependency, something that can deeply affect social relations and material realities on a local level.

[265] These complex, paradoxical processes clearly are a far cry from stereotypical ideas of globalization as simply a fashionable word for homogenization. Instead, studying ancient globalization entails acknowledging the variety of local responses to the global, and allowing for the existence of, for instance, objects across large distances that are *similarly glocal* in a relational sense but at the same time *wildly heterogeneous* in terms of their specific outcome. Cf. Robertson 1992, 97–115; 1995, 29–32; Hannerz 1990, 249–250.

local, cosmopolitan culture.[266] Kropp's assertion that Antiochos I's program was solely non-local because it was 'Greek' (see section 7.3), for instance reasons from an *a priori* categorical distinction between local culture and global culture, where 'things Greek' can never be considered local.[267] Strootman suggests something similar by defining Hellenism as a '*supranational form of culture*' which was '*in essence what we might now term Greek*'[268], thus disallowing Hellenism a degree of locality. His understanding of Hellenism as 'court culture' is equally problematic in this regard, as he considers this '*a shared culture of interaction*' that developed as an outcome of the social character of courts, being '*intercultural meeting places where networks of interaction converge*'[269], thus only understanding Hellenism as something global and not as something glocal. Understanding Hellenism as a phenomenon that is solely global ('cosmopolitan', 'shared', 'supranational' etc.) risks to ignore the contextual particularities of Hellenisms. Versluys's approach to the glocal character of Hellenism in Commagene, investigating both the universalization *and* the particularization of 'Greek' as a cultural concept, is fundamentally different in this regard, and an important step forward.

2.5 'Doing Greek' in the palace of Samosata? The limits of Hellenism

Versluys's analysis of Hellenism at Nemrut Dağı as a glocal phenomenon provides us with a sophisticated and illuminating understanding of the *conscious* and *intentional* adoption and particularization of what a de-territorialized concept of 'Greekness' had come to mean in the 1st c. BCE. In this paragraph, I will argue that Versluys's Hellenism-model is however problematic when applied to the material culture of the palace of Samosata. I will formulate a set of shortcomings of the Hellenism-model, focusing on its emphasis on conscious adoption, its pre-theoretical

[266] This point is made very well also in Hoo 2020, 557: '*Although the idea of a global culture is an appealing explanation for what we analytically examine as Greek(ish) visual culture across Eurasia and what some describe as Hellenism in passing, we should be wary about how we use the concept. Without proper reflection and clarification, there is a risk of simply equating global culture to the assimilation of local difference into plain sameness, centred on a particular society or civilization – Greek in the case of Hellenistic period Central Asia – from where global culture disseminated to peripheral areas. According to globalization thinkers (…), global culture is by no means homogeneous because the flows of goods, objects, ideas, and meanings are mediated through asymmetrically organized channels. Although we infamously lack written sources to inform us in detail about these channels in Hellenistic Central Asia, the archaeological presence of fragile unbaked sculptures of local clay in various styles at Takht-i Sangin (…), the mould-made and locally fired ''Megarian'' bowls at Ai Khanoum (…), and templates and plaster casts for the manufacture of figural art at Ai Khanoum (…) and at the late Hellenistic sites of Sakhsanokhur (…) and Kampyr Tepe (…), amongst others, should make us think about numerous different hands, eyes, experiences, and interpretations that mediated and intersected in processes of producing, transporting, using, and making meaning of Greek and other styled material objects and visual culture'.*

[267] Kropp 2013, 382.

[268] Strootman 2014, 9.

[269] Strootman 2020, 205; see also Strootman 2014; 2017.

preservation of 'things Greek' as a supposed *emic* category of material culture, and its overall lack of attention for the relationality and capacities of material culture beyond culture styles.

There are fundamental differences between the contexts of Nemrut Dağı and that of Samosata's palace that make the application of Versluys's model of glocal Hellenism in the latter difficult to conduct. At Nemrut Dağı, there is explicit epigraphic evidence that attests of an *emic* categorization of material culture as 'Greek' and 'Persian'. In the Great Cult Inscription of the *hierothesion*, written at the back of the colossal statues of the deities on both the Eastern and the Western Terraces, Antiochos I asserts that the colossal statues of the deities were consciously executed in a Greek and Persian style (*'the kingdom subject to my throne should be the common dwelling place of all the gods, in that by means of every kind of art I decorated the representations of their form, as the ancient lore of Persians and of Greeks – the fortunate roots of my ancestry'*).[270] Such epigraphic evidence for *emic* stylistic and cultural categories that are consciously adopted lacks completely in Samosata. It is furthermore highly probable that the palace of Samosata was not part of the Antiochan program but in fact pre-dated the king's reign. Did the presumed commissioner of the palace, Mithridates I, categorize the palace or aspects of it as 'Greek'? Was this a similarly *conscious* adoption of Hellenism as witnessed at Nemrut? – we simply cannot tell. However, if we speak of 'Hellenism' in relation to the palace of Samosata, we automatically assume that there was a conscious adoption of 'things Greek'.

This is related to a more fundamental criticism on the role of material culture and its categorization in the model of glocal Hellenism, as its reliance on 'conscious adoption' suggests that Hellenism is more conceptual than material. Whereas Versluys investigates the processes of universalization and particularization of Hellenism as a cultural concept, he actually keeps the material culture 'behind it' at distance. By *a priori* assuming that certain objects belong to a certain style, he reduces these objects to a cultural category but the validity of this category remains unquestioned: '*no one will deny that a style of material culture developed in Magna Graecia that has specific formal characteristics and has commonly been denominated as Greek*'.[271] As such, it appears that the *etic*, pre-theoretical categorization of 'things Greek', according to Versluys, is a valid historical category that has '*common characteristics shared and displayed by large groups of artefacts over extended geographic ranges and/or periods of time*'.[272] However, Versluys remains silent about what these common characteristics are – he seems more interested in what Hellenism means than what it actually consists of. The pre-theoretical insistence on the validity of 'things Greek' as an *emic* category should however be avoided, as it is a consequence of the '*false cultural*

[270] N 24-36.
[271] Versluys 2017a, 209. Strootman makes a similar common-sense claim when he asserts that '*One usually recognizes Greek style when one sees it.*' (Strootman 2020, 202).
[272] Versluys 2017a, 190.

intimacy' of antiquity in our modern world: the modern, Western appropriation of the 'classical world' – a term that itself illustrates this modern foundation myth - has fuelled the assumption that our modern *etic* taxonomies and ontologies were more or less identical to the *emic* categories of people living in 'the classical world'.[273] Taking glocal Hellenism as a starting point for an investigation of the material culture of the palace, would imply that its adherence to an *emic* category of 'Greekness' is unquestionable. In short: starting out from Hellenism in Samosata risks the *a priori* imposition of an *etic* (modern) cultural category onto material culture. In this regard, it seems more fruitful to employ the notion of *glocality* – a result of simultaneous processes of universalization and particularization – not to a pre-theoretical stylistic category (as Versluys does) but rather to *actual* objects.

Despite its dynamic understanding of Hellenism as a glocal phenomenon, Versluys's approach retains a static, homogenous category of material culture of ('things Greek') which risks reducing objects to a single cultural category ('Hellenism'), and, related to this, only considers material culture in relation to its human, conscious and intentional genesis. To some extent, therefore, this model assigns only a representational role to 'things Greek', framing these things as vessels of meaning that for instance signal Hellenism as 'civilization'.[274] Uncritically holding on to the category of 'things Greek' however obfuscates the complex and versatile character of material culture, its relationality and its much wider capacities in terms of meaning and impact.[275] Using glocal Hellenism as a starting point for the analysis of this dissertation would simplify our understanding of the roles of material culture in the palace, as its outcome would be fairly predictable: an interpretation in which the 'Hellenism' of the palace of Samosata is interpreted as a situated evocation of concepts of civilization, modernity and/or cosmopolitanism that the Commagenean kings employed to simultaneously legitimize their rule and enter a global stage of shared trans-regional court culture.[276]

---

[273] Herzfeld 2005.

[274] Although Versluys suggests to go '*beyond representation'* (Versluys 2017a, 29-33), he actually retains a largely semiotic understanding of culture styles by looking at '*the meanings and associations that these elements built up over time*', formulating the *'respective messages'* of Hellenism and Persianism, concluding they '*signalled'* civilization, modernity and kingship. (see Versluys 2017a, 247).

[275] Similar *a priori* reductions of material culture to homogenous *etic* categories have been successfully deconstructed (notably also by Versluys) for conceptions of 'things Roman' (Versluys 2014; Van Oyen 2017) and 'things Egyptian' (Mol 2013; Mol 2015) but the category of 'things Greek' might turn out to be the most stubborn of them all. This work also relates to a more general and well-known archaeological critique of the problems of attempting to establish bounded groups and bounded sets of stylistically distinct objects. See Hodder 1979, 1982. Gavin Lucas already noticed in 2001 that, despite this general deconstruction of the culture concept as '*a bounded, homogenous entity which 'more or less' corresponded with a comparable social unit – a people, an ethnic group and, in some cases, a race'* (Lucas 2001, 121), '*in many ways the use of cultural classifications (…) continued – and continues in practice with little thought for what this might mean*' (Lucas 2001, 123).

[276] A similar conclusion as already drawn by Kropp 2013, 363: '*It appears that Antiochos saw Hellenistic palaces, the etiquette of court, and the conventions of Greek symposia as entirely adequate for the projection of his image*'. Ultimately, both Versluys and Kropp explain the cultural dynamics of 1st c. BCE in terms of

This type of interpretation has a strong focus on the human, conscious and intentional genesis of objects and can therefore be seen as an example of what anthropologist Tim Ingold has coined the 'hylomorphic' model of creation, in which '*form came to be seen as imposed by an agent with a particular design in mind, while matter, thus rendered passive and inert, became that which was imposed upon'*.[277] Ingold makes a broad distinction between 'reading creativity backwards' ('hylomorphic') versus 'reading creativity forwards' ('morphogenic'), prioritizing the coming into being of objects over their presumed origin and intention.[278] This distinction should make us aware that the Hellenism-model only covers *one* aspect of what the palace of Samosata - as a *real, actual and material entity* - was, could do and mean. Moving away from an approach that culturally reduces objects creates analytical room for an approach in which other interpretative possibilities appear, in which the palace of Samosata is less trapped in an exclusively representational role.

Although we definitely cannot exclude that Hellenism played a role as a consciously intended 'cultural scenario' in the palace of Samosata, it seems clear that there are significant drawbacks to Hellenism as an analytical starting point for our understanding of the cultural dynamics of Samosata. What is needed therefore, is an approach to the palace of Samosata that postpones cultural categorizations and human intentions, and instead investigates the glocal and 'morphogenic' relations and capacities of objects making up the palatial context, studying it as a real, actual, and material phenomenon. Such an approach is developed in the next chapter, where I introduce assemblage thinking as a post-anthropocentric and post-representational theoretical approach to *vibrant* material culture.

Anticohos I's '*Legitimationsdruck*' (Kropp 2013, 35; see also Versluys 2017a, 170). Note however Sheldon Pollock's critique on interpretations that come down to the notion of legitimacy, claiming these are '*not only anachronistic, but intellectually mechanical, culturally homogenizing, theoretically naïve, empirically false, and tediously predictable*.' (Pollock 2006, 18, 614-625; quoted after De Jong 2017, 42.)

[277] Ingold 2010, 92, in general 91-93. See also Ingold 2012, 432.

[278] Ingold relies heavily on the work of Deleuze and Guattari 2004. See the next chapter for a more elaborate discussion of their work as well as Ingold's in relation to new materialism and assemblage theory.