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

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Chapter 11. Conclusions.

11.1 Assembling legacy data

This book in the first place has assembled a wide variety of legacy data pertaining to the salvage excavations conducted by Nimet Özgüç. From this heterogeneous corpus emerged the possibility to critically evaluate, adjust, add and sometimes falsify the reconstructions and interpretations put forward in earlier publications. As a start of this dissertation's conclusion, let me briefly recapitulate some of, what I consider, the most important new insights and conclusions of this dissertation concerning the palace's architectural construction and lay-out, its chronology, and its internal phasing.

Özgüç's suggestion that the palatial structure existed of an older, Mithridatic, northern section and a later, Antiochan southern section, that was located at a higher level, has proven influential (it was for instance followed by Zoroğlu, Kopsacheili and Kropp), but, as I argued in paragraph 4.3.7, it should be refuted. This interpretation was primarily based on the height difference between these sections of the structure, but it did not take into regard the fact that the entire structure was constructed with a form of 'micro-terracing', with descending elevation zones towards the north-east of the structure (see paragraph 4.3.2). The difference in height should thus be considered integral to the method of construction of the palace rather than evidence for succeeding construction phases.

Another important new insight, formulated in paragraph 4.3.5, concerns the evidence for two different wall types, suggestive of later additions and/or reparations within the overall structure. The first type consists of irregular courses of medium-sized and small stones at its outer faces and an irregular core of small stones and mud mortar, while the second, mostly placed against the former or closing off previous entrances, is a type of fine mudbrick. I have argued that the latter appears to coincide with a second phase of wall painting, something that is particularly evidenced by the introduction of new decorative schemes and motifs: the painting associated with the later mudbrick walls (presented in 'objectscape 3', see chapter 7) is more complex and experimental than the painting on the limestone rubble walls (part of 'objectscape 2'). It contains schemata without a socle or with trapezoid-shaped polychrome fields inside a row of isodomes. The introduction of the framed and multi-coloured lozenges is a particular feature that is exclusively found on the mudbrick walls. It cannot be said with certainty whether the later wall additions were part of one integral phase of refurbishment or a more gradual process of small-scale adjustments. In both cases, however, the proposed internal phasing suggests a transformation of the palace's lay-out that had not been considered in previous scholarly work. The closing off of several entrances profoundly changed the communications inside the structure. Certain rooms

became much more isolated (room V through W18 and W5); others were perhaps divided in two (rooms VI and VII through W7); a group of rooms started to function more as a separate spatial configuration ('the symmetrical suite' of rooms I-V through W17 and W18, and perhaps also W14); and the accessibility between the northern and central sections of the palace might have been fundamentally altered as well (through W30).

These considerations provide an interesting new building block in terms of our understanding of the chronology of the palace's construction and abandonment. Whereas previous scholarship relied almost entirely on a single coin find on top of a mosaic floor to argue for a Mithridatic construction date (early 1st c. BCE), the present corpus of unlocked legacy data allowed for more informed arguments, in favour of a similar dating (see paragraph 4.3.7). The wealth of new evidence for the architectural decoration of the palace presented in chapter 5 suggests an early 1st c. BCE based on the Corinthian capital fragments that can be assigned to Werner Oenbrink's Commagenean Order I, dated to the late 2nd-early 1st c. BCE as well as the fragments of door lintels with trefoil-garland decoration that are likely dated to the early 1st c. BCE. Although the very mixed and coarse periodic layers are difficult to interpret, I observed that it is striking that the pottery associated with the pre-palatial 'curved step structure' in sector k/16, (layer VI), did not seem to contain any Eastern Sigillata A, which at least *allows* for an early 1st c. BCE dating of the palace. Equally telling is the previously unexplored relation between the palace of Samosata and the so-called 'Mosaic Rooms' in the *hierothesion* of Arsameia on the Nymphaios; this very close parallel too seems to have good papers for a Mithridatic construction. A Mithridatic dating of the construction phase of the palace of Samosata would fit in the steadily emerging of Mithridatic contexts in the archaeology of Commagene more widely, notably also at the newly discovered sanctuary at the Güzelçay, and casts a new light on the previously presumed complete artificiality and radical innovation of the Antiochan cultic and visual program.

It is very likely that the palace remained in use until at least the early 1st c. CE, when it was probably abandoned and, later, covered by the structure in *opus reticulatum* in sector m-r/14-15 (see chapter 4 and paragraph 7.5.1). It was argued that the internal phasing of the walls and painted decoration suggests that the building was in active use during the 1st c. BCE, and the evidence for architectural decoration and sculpture in the later 1st c. BCE and the early 1st c. CE seem to support this claim. I have cautiously suggested that the abandonment of the palace might be related to the provincialization of Commagene under Roman emperor Tiberius (17 CE), while the newly built basilica in *opus reticulatum* could very well have been commissioned during the restoration of the kingdom under king Antiochos IV (38-72 CE), although both ideas remain hypothetical.

Due to the general limitations of the archaeological legacy data, several aspects of the palace's architectural character remain obscure. Concerning some questions, we remain largely in the dark, while, for others, only educated guesses are possible. The actual size of the structure can for instance not be estimated with any certainty, although the presented evidence from sector s/11 suggests that the excavated area of the palace could easily be only half (or even less) the size of the original 'palatial area'. Another crucial but still unresolved issue is the character of room XIV, which is interpreted here as a roofed space but could have functioned as a peristyle court as well, in which case the analysis offered in chapter 10 needs to be fundamentally revised. The presence of a roof is equally debatable for the peripheral corridor (B), although here I believe I could make a relatively convincing case for it to have been uncovered, allowing for a light source into rooms I-IX (see paragraph 4.3.4).

11.2 Assembling vibrant objectsapes

This book has proposed an unconventional approach to the study of palatial contexts and cultural transformations of the 4th c. BCE – 1st c. CE in Commagene. This approach emerged first of all from a discontent with previous interpretations of the palace of Samosata and, more generally, from a critique on reductive approaches in scholarship on royal Commagenean contexts. In chapter 2, it was argued extensively that the scholarly tendency to reduce archaeological contexts like the palace of Samosata to (a combination of) cultural concepts like 'Greek' and 'Persian' or 'Hellenistic' and 'Oriental' tend to reason from static classifications of material culture and allow only for representative capacities of objects. The objective of these approaches, I showed, ultimately was to 'reason back' from the objects that make up the Commagenean palace to the human intentions that were presumed to lie at their origin. This resulted in reductive, hylomorphic, representational and anthropocentric analyses, where material culture functioned merely as the 'props' in an otherwise human theatre of intentions and identities, unceasingly deciding the course of history. The palace of Samosata, in this interpretative framework, could only and exclusively be studied as an expression of royal ideology, with its decorative elements and architectural lay-out as rhetorical notions that represented specific cultural affiliations and claims of ethnic and cultural identity. Reasoning further back, such visual rhetoric ultimately always was explained in relation to issues of royal legitimacy, with kings like Mithridates I Kallinikos and Antiochos I acting like they did in the broader socio-political context of a '*Legitimationsdruck*'.¹³⁵¹

This book has not so much intended to refute the overall validity of several of these approaches and interpretations, but rather has insisted on their partiality, asking instead the following simple

¹³⁵¹ E.g. Kopsacheili 2011; Kropp 2013, Versluys 2017.

question: where does this all leave the palace as a real, actual and material entity? By forcing analytical room to ‘think along’ with objects - a morphogenic approach that allows these objects a proper place at the table where history is produced - this thesis has proposed a profoundly different analytical starting point than previous Commagenean scholarship has permitted for. In chapter 3, I argued that the notion of assemblages, developed within the Deleuzian inspired theoretical framework of New Materialism, provides a useful vocabulary and set of ontological axiomata to develop a morphogenic and more-than representational approach to objects, de-centering humans and their intentions from the equation and instead focusing on the relational capacities of objects: what were they capable of? What emerged from objects and their relations? I have suggested that the reconceptualization of Hellenistic palaces as assemblages, ‘compositions that act’¹³⁵², provides a way out of the representational, culturally reductive and anthropocentric notions so far followed in scholarship. Assemblage Theory, I suggested, can help us to think about the palace of Samosata and its elements as ‘*historical actors in their own right*’.¹³⁵³

Assemblages are heterogeneous and always in a state of becoming – they are emergent. As archaeologists, we can turn our attention to the ‘*life proper to matter*’¹³⁵⁴ that allows for this emergence: the vibrant nature of objects, their capacity to have affect through their relations. To arrive at such ‘object vibrancy’, it is necessary to detect, investigate and explore object capacities that are more-than-representational, more-than-intentional, always multiple, and, through their never entirely controllable nature, capable of inciting change. In order to study such vibrancy in the palace of Samosata, I proposed four different types of vibrant modalities to use as analytical proxies for the relational capacities of objects: 1) temporal and geographical genealogies (investigating the vibrancy of glocal relations); 2) materials and colors (investigating the vibrancy of materials and their relational capacities); 3) sensorial capacities (investigating the vibrancy of matter through the multi-sensorial capacities of objects and their place in ‘sensorial regimes’); and 4) radical alterity and representation (investigating the vibrancy of ‘ontologically unsettling’ objects).

In chapter 7, I have applied these proxies to an analysis of four successive objectscares of Samosata. Such objectscares can be understood as a type of assemblage; they describe the total gathering of object types in a particular locality during a specific period, like slices in time and space. Importantly, objectscares can transcend specific archaeological and social contexts; they provide a more holistic analytical tool to compare shifting material repertoires of a specific locality (or region) through time and also allow for a comparison between contemporary localities. By adding the adjective ‘vibrant’ to objectscares, I emphasized that such objectscares,

¹³⁵² Due 2002, 32.

¹³⁵³ Cipolla and Harris 2017, 148. See also the motto of this dissertation.

¹³⁵⁴ Deleuze and Guattari 2004, 454.

like assemblages, are never just representative phases, but instead are full of life, allowing for '*certain types of action and not others*'.¹³⁵⁵ A vibrant objectscape analysis can, for instance, never end up with a narrative of successive phases that move from being 'Oriental', to 'Hellenistic' to 'Roman'. Instead, it focuses on the changing relational capacities of the specific objects that partake in them and focuses on the different ways such capacities incited change. This has, first of all, allowed for a narrative of changing relational capacities in Samosata from the 4th c. BCE until the 1st c. CE that did not have to rely on the cultural labelling of objects - and all its ensuing methodological nationalism, colonialism, and orientalism. Through this approach it has furthermore been possible to investigate the coming into being of the royal palace (objectscope 2) *not* in relation to static cultural concepts and presumed royal rhetoric and intentions, but as the introduction of a new objectscape, that, compared to its preceding objectscape 1, was very different in terms of its 'power to' do things.

Let me recapitulate here just some of the newly established aspects of this transition from objectscape 1 to objectscape 2 (i.e. the royal palace) to stress the strength of this approach again more concretely.

- Whereas objectscape 1 bundled a wide set of chronologically deep and geographically local and regional genealogies that allowed for the manifestation of enduring local pasts (through object types like limestone orthostats, torus bases, glazed bricks, Late-Hittite Luwian spolia, red-painted course wares), objectscape 2 brought together genealogies that, through the 4th -2nd c. BCE, had become universalized on a supra-regional, mostly eastern-Mediterranean scale but were still novel or very rare on a local and often also regional scale in Samosata, allowing for a 'shock of the new' (e.g. tessellated mosaics, concentric border frames, naturalistic sculpture, Masonry Style wall painting).
- Whereas the few trans-regional relations of objectscape 1 are characterized by a strong, almost passive adherence to universalized forms (black gloss imports, torus bases, red-painted course wares, Hellenistic bowls with inverted rims, limestone orthostat wall facings), the embedding of the many trans-regional relations assembled in objectscape 2 are characterized by more unique local adaptations, variations and combinations (combining, *i.a.*, a fish mosaics with a dolphin *emblema*; a satyr-like mask with a medallion; a limestone doorframe with trefoil garlands; a chequerboard motif with a tessellated mosaic technique; flat orthostat wall painting with elaborate and illusionistic frieze zones).
- Whereas objectscape 1 appears to bring together a rather restricted repertoire of colors and mostly local materials (white limestone and ivory, mudbrick, yellow buff clay and red

¹³⁵⁵ Cipolla and Harris 2017, 148.

paint), objectscape 2 aggregates a much wider repertoire of materials and colors (glass, colored stone, plaster, many different pigments, marble), each with their own relational and sensorial capacities.

- Whereas the schematized and two dimensional figuration of objectscape 1 had the capacity to blur boundaries between the ontological status of objects through their material, composition and rendering (the painted 'gazelle-date-tree' and 'hunter-horse-spear' entities as well as the ivory 'human-comb' entity), objectscape 2 introduced more self-contained entities (through framing, *emblemata* and rendering) that brought about different relations and reactions with their viewers (e.g. the satyr-like mask mosaic of chapter 8).

These are just some of the many changes in relational capacities that characterize the shift from objectscape 1 to objectscape 2. The goal here is not to completely reiterate the conclusions of each objectscape of chapter 7, but rather to emphasize how, through this approach, forms of change emerge that notions like Hellenization or Hellenism simply cannot encompass. What made this emergence possible is the move away from an *a priori* categorical divide between 'Persian elements' and 'Greek elements' of the palace. The coming together of architectural forms, materials and object types implied much more than the presumed dichotomous rhetoric of a Commagenean monarch. It meant, for starters, the actual assembling of new and global object capacities that, once they existed, started to affect the world around them. Whereas it is definitely possible that this affect was sometimes in accordance with the intentions of a commissioning monarch (for instance by means of its bio-politics), this was definitely not necessarily the case. We can only guess about the manifold ways that the palace's 'power to' create mind-traps, steer corporeal movement, create 'con-sensus', or incite sensorial dissonance *also* affected, restricted and shaped those who had intended the palace to be solely their instrument of power. The vibrancy of objects, then, occurs on a plane that is often impervious to the human will to control and steer; objects are never exhausted by their representative capacities nor by their presumed roles as indices of human agency.¹³⁵⁶ It's infinite and ever (de-)territorializing relations always allow for a surplus of potentiality, allowing, in fact, for the types of subaltern change humans desire for and act towards. Making this argument for a Hellenistic palace, a type of context where the human will to dominate is self-evidently present, be it through royal rhetoric or forms of bio-politics, should make us aware that, even in such cases, the vibrancy of objects has its own life, forming assemblages in which these humans are only one of many protagonists.

¹³⁵⁶ It is ironic how one of the few domains in which the infinite complexity and multiplicity of object relations and capacities could be more or less successfully reduced to single abstract notions is, in fact, in the domain of archaeological scholarship.

11.3 Assembling glocal genealogies

In the three case studies of this dissertation, I pushed the analysis one step further, focusing on the genealogical capacities of separate objects that constituted the heterogeneous palace assemblage: the satyr-like mask, the crenellation motif and the symmetrical suite. By tracing the genealogical relations of these objects and exploring how the relational capacities that ensued were potentially actualized in the context of Samosata, it was attempted to truly ‘think along with objects’, allowing for their full vibrancy to reveal. I conceived of these genealogies as assemblages as well, constantly territorializing and de-territorializing in the Deleuzian sense, emerging and transforming through the changing relations of their pertaining elements. I added the adjective ‘glocal’ to emphasize how these assembled genealogies emerge from a global-local paradox, with the trans-local, universalizing object type emerging from its local particularizations and vice versa.

In the mask-mosaic case study of chapter 8, it was argued that the Samosata mask in many ways adhered to a glocal genealogy of isolated and non-narrative satyr-like mask mosaics. Through this more-than-local relation, the Samosata mask functioned as a globally available and standardized but regionally and locally unique object. Following the different particularizations of its genealogy, it was argued that, unlike previous interpretations had claimed, relational capacities had developed that were not restricted to representing notions like theatre, Dionysos and Greekness. A crucial, more-than-representational capacity, for instance, emerged from the specific coming together of a satyr-like mask, a frontal depiction, a demanding gaze, a circular roundel and a concentric border decoration. I explored how this satyr/mask/mirror-assemblage had the capacity to draw the viewer into a visual mechanism of mirroring, personal transformation, and breaching of ontological divisions between subject and object, man and animal, human and divine, representation and represented.

The case study of the crenellation motif of chapter 9, equally established the more-than-local character of the mosaic crenellations in Samosata, demonstrating how they adhered to the demands and possibilities offered by the glocal genealogy of crenellation motifs. Like the satyr mask, this genealogical relation allowed the crenellations of Samosata to function as a globally available and regionally unique element. Unlike the mask mosaic, the crenellations were not unique on a local, Commagenean level, where its capacity to create visual coherence was activated in multiple mosaics of at least two royal Commagenean contexts. Through the specific character of their genealogical relations, both the mosaic and the crenellation motif also acquired the capacity to achieve distinctiveness on a regional scale, introducing techniques (tessellated mosaics) and motifs that were not employed in comparative (north-)Syrian contexts like Jebel Khalid and Dura Europos. Here we start to discern how the *absence* of a certain object type in one

locality can inform the capacities of that object type when present in another locality. An exploration of relational capacities furthermore demonstrated that, rather than being merely a marginal, meaningless motif that passively participated in an overall decoration signalling 'Greekness', the crenellations potentially allowed for connotations with architectural fortifications, carpets, celestial and divine notions and, paradoxically, perhaps even Persianism. 'Meaning', in this analysis, is not considered something monolithic and exhaustive, but rather multiple, relational and potential; it can be investigated as a *virtual* capacity that was real but not necessarily actual.

Chapter 10, the case study of the symmetrical suite, functions somewhat as an antithesis to the previous two case studies, as here it proved difficult to establish a standardized glocal genealogy, presenting rather a more loosely related assemblage of suite-like lay-outs occurring in palatial contexts from Syria. On a more structural level, however, this assemblage brings together a set of 3rd-2nd c. BCE structures that, in one way or another, have been considered to function as 'Greek-Oriental hybrids' in scholarship. As such, the analysis of this genealogy assists in further deconstructing the analytical value of hyphenated categories like Greek-Oriental in early 1st c. BCE Samosata, arguing that we have to consider more seriously how the repeated particularization of supposedly hybrid architecture soon would have watered down its assumed oppositional nature.

11.4 Assembling Afro-Eurasian localities

If we zoom out from Samosata, and consider how the analysis presented in this dissertation might resonate with research on Hellenistic-period Commagene and the wider North-Syrian region (and beyond), some final remarks can be made. Recently, Michael Blömer argued that *'Instead of enhancing overarching concepts of regional urban development, individual histories of single sites have to be written which take into account all evidence available. The effort to create generic concepts of urbanism in Syria and generalizing labels like 'cité grecque' in contrast to 'oriental city' (...) have concealed the originality of each place and ignored the co-occurrence of diverse manifestations of urbanity. Writing the biography of a place must take this diversity into account.'*¹³⁵⁷ Blömer's remarks provide a valuable wider context to the broader implications of this dissertation, as its assemblage approach and stress on object vibrancy have aimed to precisely provide a way out from Blömer's (and other's) discontent with reductive concepts like *'cité grecque'* and *'oriental city'*. Stressing the originality of the vibrant and transforming assemblages of Samosata evades the over-simplification of overarching concepts of regional urban development, and allows for highly diverse manifestations of such urbanity. As Pitts and Versluys have stressed

¹³⁵⁷ Blömer 2020, 146.

in their coining of objectscares, this methodology is particularly suitable for the comparison between localities, something that would make a vibrant objectscape approach for different sites in Commagene, North-Syria and the wider region (e.g. Pontus, Armenia, Sophene, Osroehne, Cilicia, and Adiabene) a desideratum.¹³⁵⁸

A methodology that solely stresses the originality and diversity of localities, however, runs the risk of developing fragmented histories of highly compartmentalized places and solely *local* developments. Such an approach seems hardly compatible with the highly connected Hellenistic-period realities of long-distance trade, wide elite networks, travelling workshops, military campaigns, empire dynamics, migrations and its ensuing flows of ideas, people and objects.¹³⁵⁹ Whereas it is clear that the outcome of such globalization processes in Afro-Eurasia was unique and contingent from locality to locality, we simply cannot settle with a focus on diversity alone. This dissertation has demonstrated how a globalization approach to objects – acknowledging and investigating the more-than-local dynamics they were bound up with – is in fact indispensable for our understanding of local object change and its impact. The end-point of such analyses should not be the *passe-partout* generalization that, on a structural level, *everything* was glocal, connected, cosmopolitan and a form of eclectic innovation. Instead, this dissertation has shown how the material outcomes of such connectivities can be taken as the analytical point of departure. It is through an emphasis on the vibrant character of glocal objects that new, exciting analytical territory opens up.

¹³⁵⁸ Pitts and Versluys 2021

¹³⁵⁹ For global object flows, see already Appadurai 1990.

