

# Baktrians as Self, Parthians as Other? The entanglements of North-Eastern inbetweenness in the study of Hellenistic Central Asia

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## ABSTRACT

The study of Hellenistic Central Asia is, in many ways, an engagement with various kinds of inbetweenness: spatial, temporal, cultural, disciplinary, and historiographical. One of the most persistent keywords to characterize this macroregion is that of a crossroads of sorts – a crossroads of cultures, religions, histories, civilizations, and ancient worlds at large. Immersed in exotic appeal, the crossroads motif is not only prevalent in popular narratives on Central Asia but also in scholarly discourse, although in more subtle and diverse ways. As Sv. Gorshenina analysed in her monumental book, the idea of Central Asia was ‘invented’, and its conceptual itinerary has been deeply entangled with shifting geopolitical interests that framed and shaped its history in distinct colonial and Orientalist ways throughout time. This remains profoundly relevant for the study of Hellenistic Central Asia, particularly the historiography of Bactria and Parthia, both in the past and in the present. Writings of their histories has been dominated by a complex legacy of meaning-making concepts and cultural ideas about Hellenism, nomadism, the North and the East – constructs laden with ideologies of inbetweenness. This paper reflects on the entanglements of ancient and modern perceptions of the North-East as a macroregion of inbetweenness and its impact on interpretive methods in the study of Hellenistic Central Asia.

## KEYWORDS

Bactria; Parthia; Hellenism; nomadism; Orientalism; world view; cultural geography; critical historiography; inbetweenness.

## INTRODUCTION: INBETWEENNESS

The conceptual figuration of Central Asia in the third to first centuries BCE is saturated by inbetweenness. Throughout history, the antiquity of this macroregion has been spatially perceived and culturally framed as peripheral to the great civilizations of the West and the East, associated with Greece and Rome on the one hand and China on the other. Indeed, one of the most persistent keywords to characterize Central Asia is that of a crossroads of sorts; a crossroads of cultures, religions, histories, civilizations, and ancient worlds at large (see evocative book titles e.g. ERRINGTON – CRIBB 1992; HIEBERT – CAMBON 2011; OLBRYCHT 2021). Imagined at the nexus of Eurasian transcontinental trade, Central Asia’s perceived peripherality is intricately linked to a distinct type of centrality, a transit zone amidst distant destinations. This duality has been given particular salience through the evocative notion of the Silk Roads, a construct rooted in nineteenth-century colonial and imperialist discourses which shaped and reimagined the space of Central Asia – both in its ancient and modern contexts – as decidedly ‘inbetween’ (for these discourses, see OSTERHAMMEL 1987; REZAKHANI 2010; CHIN 2013; GORSHENINA 2014; VON REDEN 2023).

Inbetweenness should not be understood as an objective empirical fact or quality, but rather as a subjective given of classification and interpretation; it is the matter of cultural

decision. According to B. Giessen, as outlined in his book *Zwischenlagen* as well as across several sociological writings, inbetweenness refers to the ontologized transitory ‘third space’ between opposites in a socially constructed cultural order of things (GIESEN 2012; GIESEN 2010, 9–17; see also BHABHA 2004, 35–38 on the ‘Third Space’ theory). Accordingly, inbetween-places, people, and objects are those unclassifiable remainders that fall between categorically presupposed stages, states, or boundaries, because they have been emplaced, by convention, ‘on the periphery of cultural systems of space in which places are ranked relative to each other’ (SHIELDS 1991, 3). Invoking dual notions of peripherality and centrality, ‘inbetweenness’ holds affordances of undefinable hybridity and disorderly divergence, allowing for interpretations, constructions, and rationalizations of culture, people, and material culture as ambiguous and indeterminate, thus adaptable to multiple perspectives and affectations.

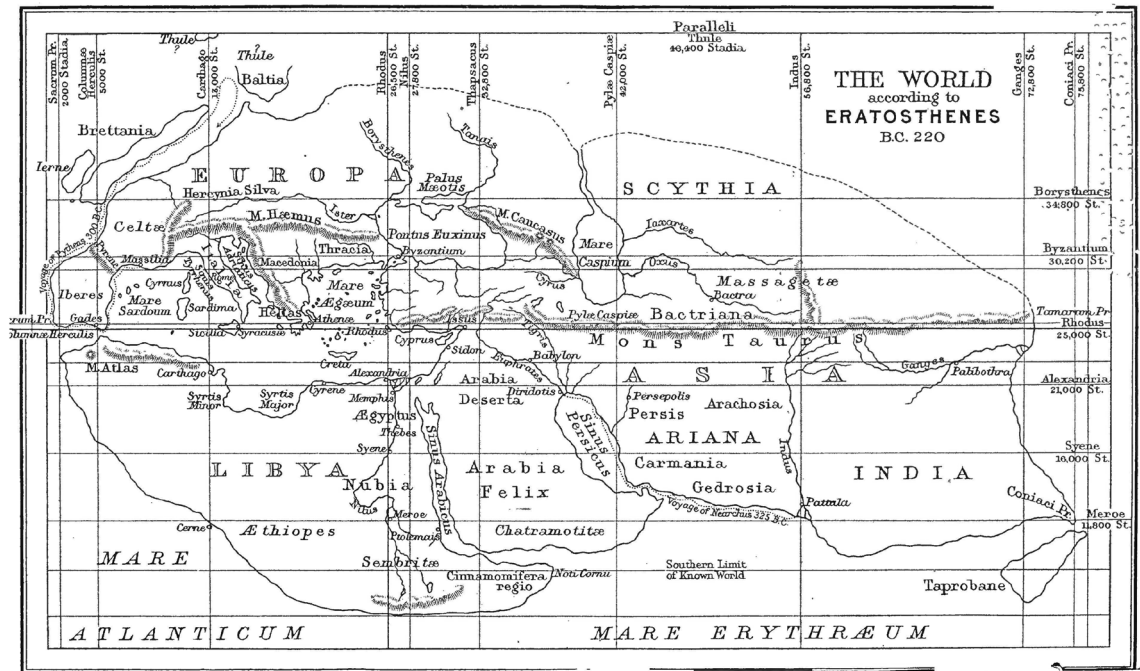
The ascribed quality of inbetweenness and its affordances have significant ramifications for historical and archaeological understandings of material culture within settings and regions that have been attributed an inbetween status. As Gorshenina analysed in her monumental book *L’invention de l’Asie centrale*, indeterminacy surrounding Central Asia has long dominated perceptions and imaginaries of this space, allowing it to be continually reinvented. Throughout history, Central Asia’s conceptual trajectory has been entangled with various geopolitical interests that framed and shaped its history through distinct imperialist and Orientalist lenses (notably from British and Russian perspectives) which linked and disconnected the region from specific civilizational pasts and realms (GORSHENINA 2014; 2011; GORSHENINA – RAPIN 2021; further COLORU 2021). For the study of Hellenistic Central Asia, where archaeological sources predominantly shape our historical understanding, the affordances of inbetweenness hold particular significance (HOO 2022, 17–37). Scholarly reconstructions of Central Asian history are deeply influenced by a complex legacy of meaning-making, shaped by cultural ideas about Hellenism, nomadism, and notions of the North and East, constructs laden with ideologies of inbetweenness. Focusing on Bactria and Parthia whose histories are more prominently featured in ancient and modern historiography than other Central Asian regions, this paper reflects on the entanglements of past and present perceptions of these regions as inbetween and their impact on knowledge production in the study of Hellenistic Central Asia.

## CENTRAL ASIA AS THE FAR NORTH-EAST

Ideas of Central Asia as a crossroads and a space of inbetweenness are not new; they existed and circulated long before Ferdinand von Richthofen popularized the term ‘Seidenstraßen’. In ancient Greek geographies of the world, the lands of Central Asia were situated between the perceived edges of the *oikoumene*, though they were not articulated as distinct places, but as societal zones occupied by certain peoples, adapted from Achaemenid imperial ideology (ROLLINGER – DEGEN 2021, 207–213).<sup>1</sup> Stretching from the Caspian Sea eastwards to the Hindu Kush mountains, ancient Central Asia overlapped with parts of the northern edge of the world, inhabited by Skythians, and the eastern edge of the world, inhabited by Indians (e.g. Hdt. III,

1 In Achaemenid imperial ideology, the king presented himself as ‘the king of peoples’; according to LECOQ 1997, 137 this was unprecedented in Mesopotamian royal titulature and therefore distinctly Iranian. The mention of diverse and distant peoples served to evoke the massive (‘world-wide’) extent of the empire (BICHLER – ROLLINGER 2017; but cf. LECOQ 1997, 137–38), as we read in Dareios’ trilingual inscription on mount Bisitun: ‘I am Dareios, the great king, king of kings, king in Persia, king of peoples... these are the people who obey me: ...’ (DB § 1, 6; transl. KUHR 2007).

98–116; Xen. Cyr. VIII, 6.21; Ps.-Scymn. 170–182; Str. I, 1.13, 2.28, II, 1.22; see Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> Captivating geographical imaginations of the familiar merging with the unknown, these distant elusive fringes of the world inspired a wealth of narrative knowledge of ‘the inbetween’ that bordered on reality. Rather than an objective physical measure, it must be kept in mind that geographical distance to the world’s edges was a cultural and rhetorical tool to differentiate and negotiate boundaries of familiarity and strangeness, whether real or imagined (discussed in HARTOG 1988; ROMM 1994; HÖLSCHER 2000; cf. SONNABEND 2007; SKINNER 2012; DUECK 2012, 20–67; VLASSOPOULOS 2013).



**Fig. 1: Modern reconstruction of the Greek conception of the world, according to Eratosthenes, ca. 220 BCE (BARTHOLOMEW 1912).**

Accordingly, narrative representations of the lands of Skythians in the far North, adapted from Achaemenid world conceptions, and found in the works of widely-read authors such as Herodotus, Hippokrates, Xenophon, Aristotle, Strabo, Pliny, and the Alexander historians, depicted a perpetually cold, inhospitable environment, inhabited by a specific type of barbarian: nomads. Associated with ‘the upper part of Asia’ (Hdt. IV, 1; also Str. XI, 1.1–4; see Fig. 1), these northern nomads with ‘Skythian’ lifestyles became known as wandering, horse-riding, and warlike tribes who carried their homes in wagons, lived in tents, excelled in mounted archery, and practiced diets based on horse meat and mare milk (Hdt. IV, 46; Hippocr. Aer. 18; Arist. Pol. 1324b, 11–19; Ps.-Scymn. 841–859; Str. VII, 3.7, 3.17–18, XI, 8.2–6; Plin. HN VI, 50–51; Just. Epit. II, 2.3–8; Arr. In. 7.2–3) – descriptions that partly resonate with the spectrum of pastoralist lifestyles across the central Eurasian steppes (KHAZANOV 1983, 15–84, 119–198; BARFIELD 1993, 131–168; FRACHETTI 2012; cf. SPENGLER *et al.* 2021). Although variability and gradations in the extent of nomadism in these borderlands were acknowledged (Hdt. IV, 17–18 mentions various farming Skythians),

<sup>2</sup> The other extremities of the *oikoumene* (divided into three continents: Europe, Asia, and Libya, later known as Africa) were inhabited by Kelts in the far west and Ethiopians in the far south.

the North remained conceptually associated with a nomadic lifestyle that was considered barbarian in a cultural and moral sense, contrasting higher, sedentary civilizations.<sup>3</sup>

Similar considerations apply to narrative representations of the eastern part of Asia. The closer one approached the edge of the *oikoumene*, the more marvellous the continent of Asia became in geographical imaginations. Asia's lands and cultures were variously characterized as autocratic, luxurious, decadent, fertile, feminine, and idle (e.g. Xen. *Cyr.* VIII, 8; Aesch. *Pers.* 41–58, 584–597; Diod. *Sic.* II, 21, 23), encompassing familiar Orientalist stereotypes of the eastern Other (especially in relation to the Persian Other in the fifth century BCE: HALL 1989; BRIANT 2002; see SAID 2003, 1–110 for Orientalism). At the furthest, easternmost limit of the world, the lands of Indians were believed to be home to extremely just people (Hdt. III, 100; Phot. *Bibl.* LXXII, 45b), bizarre folk such as dog-headed men and long-bearded 'pygmies' (Phot. *Bibl.* LXXII, 46ab, 47a; Str. XV, 1.57; Philostr. *VA* VI, 1.2), unusually large flora and fauna (Phot. *Bibl.* LXXII, 45b–46a; Pompon. III.62; Philostr. *VA* III, 6–8), and vast riches of gold, couched in tales of gold-digging desert ants or mountain griffins (Hdt. III, 102–105; Ael. *NA* IV, 27; cf. Phot. *Bibl.* LXXII, 46b; Philostr. *VA* III, 48, VI, 1.2).<sup>4</sup> Such stories fed into the literary topos of noble savages: virtuous peoples that inhabited the extremities of the world, whose simple lifestyles were untainted by civilization as they were gifted by nature with a paradisaical abundance and ready access to wealth, sustenance, and resources (e.g. Hdt. III, 106; Diod. *Sic.* II, 16.3–4, II, 35–36, Just. *Epit.* II, 2.9–15; further discussed in ROMM 1989; SCHNEIDER 2015; DUECK 2015; STONEMAN 2019, 99–286; and most recently COLORU 2024).<sup>5</sup>

Ancient Central Asia, then, was situated in between the world's farthest limits in the North and the East. I argue that this macroregion of 'the North-East' can be considered as a meta-geographical construct of limitropic inbetweenness.<sup>6</sup> This liminal zone was imagined to begin at the Caspian Gates: an elusive mountain pass south of the Caspian Sea leading eastwards to the lands of Parthia, Aria, Margiana, Bactria, Sogdia, Chorasmia, and the Skythian lands around and north of the Syr Darya that were associated with nomadic lifestyles (Str. II, 1.22, XI, 8.1–9.1; Plin. *HN* VI, 44–45; Arr. *Anab.* III, 20; Joseph. *BJ* VII, 244–246; Amm. Marc. XXIII, 6.13; cf. Pompon. III, 38).<sup>7</sup> Geographical imaginations of these lands between the far North and the

3 For Skythians as paradigmatic nomads, see WEISS 2012; 2015; for pastoral nomads as the ultimate barbarian, see SHAW 1983; for ancient narrative knowledge about nomads in general, SCHARRER 2002; RÜCKER 2015. Variability in subsistence strategies of mobile pastoralists in the ancient Eurasian steppes, integrating various farming and herding practices, has now been demonstrated widely by scientific studies (mostly focusing on Bronze Age Eurasia), see e.g. FRACHETTI 2012; SPENGLER *et al.* 2014.

4 Gold-guarding griffins were not limited to the (imaginative) geography of India but seem to have been an ethnographic topos connected to the limits of the earth. Elsewhere, we hear about these fantastical creatures in relation to the Arimaspians, a wondrous one-eyed folk related to the Skythians in the far North (Hdt. IV, 13, 27; Paus. I, 24.6). Flora and fauna of the edges of the *oikoumene* were often (con)fused with one another, especially stories about India and Ethiopia (the far east and the far south) (see the references in the text). Not everyone accepted fantastic stories about the world's edges to be true; scepticism about their veracity was already voiced in antiquity, e.g. Str. II, 1.9; see also Arr. *Peripl. M. Eux.* 27.

5 As Herodotos put it: 'The fairest blessings have been granted to the most distant nations of the world' (Αἱ δ' ἑσχατιαὶ κως τῆς οἰκομένης τὰ κάλλιστα ἔλαχον; Hdt. III, 106, transl. Loeb: A.D. Godley).

6 That North-Eastern lands can be considered as an analytically cohesive geographical unit is increasingly recognized and treated as such; see VOGELSANG 1992; RAPIN 2021; STARK 2023.

7 The 'Caspian Sea' was also known as the 'Hyrkanian Sea' (Plut. *Vit. Alex.* 44.2; Curt. VI, 4.18). Several mountain passes were contenders for the toponym 'Caspian Gates' which caused confusion among ancient authors (see, notably, Plin. *HN.* VI, 12, 15, 17). The 'Caspian Gates' leading to Central Asia

far East were entangled with accounts of, on the one hand, the distant unruly northeastern regions of the Achaemenid empire (e.g. DB 35–39; Hdt. IX, 113.1–2; discussed in WU 2017; BALAT- TI 2021, 146–150), and on the other, Alexander the Great's arduous campaigns into Baktria and Sogdiana in pursuit of Bessos, after the murder of Dareios III in 330 BCE (discussed in HOLT 1989; HECKEL 2020, 171–200).

According to narrative traditions, it was in the North-East where the legendary Assyrian king Ninus (un)successfully campaigned (Diod. Sic. II, 6; according to the tale, it was Semiramis, a woman, who secured victory for him) and where the famous empire-founder Kyros (Cyrus) met a violent end at the hands of a Skythian folk (Hdt. I, 204–214; Phot. *Bibl.* LXXII, 3–8; Beros. *Bab.* III, 5.1; Diod. Sic. II, 44; Just. *Epit.* I, 8, II, 3.3; cf. Xen. *Cyr.* VIII, 7; Str. XI, 8.5; Amm. Marc. XXIII, 6.7).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it was upon entering the North-East at Hyrkania-Parthia, that Alexander the Great began to 'Orientalize', losing self-control and moderation, adopting ostentatious Iranian attire and customs, and demanding prostration of his men, behaving as if he were divine (Diod. Sic. XVII, 77.4–7; Just. *Epit.* XII, 3.8–12; Curt. VI, 6.1–12; Plut. *Vit. Alex.* 45.1–2; Arr. *Anab.* IV, 9.9; see further BROSIUS 2003; OLBRYCHT 2014; HECKEL 2020, 201–220).<sup>9</sup> In literary discourse, both Kyros and Alexander 'found their limit in this region of the world' (Plin. *HN* VI, 49), and both marked the frontiers of their empire with the foundation of a name-city in Sogdiana, respectively Kyropolis (Cyreschata) and Alexandria Eschate – 'the farthest' of cities (Str. XI, 11.4; Just. *Epit.* XII, 5.12; Curt. VI, 6.13, 6.20; Isid. 18; Arr. *Anab.* IV, 1; App. *Syr.* 57.298; see also BICHLER – ROLLINGER 2017; ROLLINGER – DEGEN 2021).<sup>10</sup> The North-East was thus geographically imagined as a civilizational borderzone of transgressive limitropic in-betweenness, edging and merging into the far North and the far East.

As centuries passed by, the distant fringes of Skythia, India, and the lands of Central Asia in between became more real and physical as knowledge of the world increased over time. The campaigns of Alexander the Great and the eastern *anabases* of Seleukid kings to these reaches of the world not only triggered increasing connectivity through new or renewed military and diplomatic contacts with local elites and kings, such as with Oxyartes (Str. XI, 11.4; Curt. VIII, 4.21–30) and Euthydemos (Polyb. X, 49; discussion in STROOTMAN 2021; 2023).<sup>11</sup> They also increased geographical knowledge through explorative expeditions, such as by Aristoboulos under Alexander (Str. XI, 7.3, 11.5), or Demodamas and Patrokles under Seleukid mandate (resp. Plin. *HN* VI, 18.49; Str. II, 1.9, 1.17; see further KOSMIN 2014, 59–76; VISSCHER 2020, 16–70). By the final centuries BCE, many of the Central Asian lands were traversed and became better known

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were generally situated in Hyrkania (Str. II, 1.22), but other 'Caspian Gates' were located in greater Armenia in the Caucasus, on the other side of the Caspian Sea.

- 8 Kyros' death was variously attributed to the Massagetai (Herodotos), the Saka (Ktesias), the Dahai (Berossos), or generally the Skythians (Diodoros; Pompeius Trogus via Justin). The significance of Kyros in Central Asia as a distant periphery of the world received discussion in BICHLER – ROLLINGER 2017. For the role of Semiramis in Greek interpretations of Near Eastern history, see STRONK 2016.
- 9 These practices were considered to be 'corrupted by luxury and foreign customs' (*haec luxu et peregrinis moribus infecta*, Curt. VI, 6.9). In Arrian's account, Alexander's 'Orientalizing' behaviour occurs later, i.e. deeper into Central Asia (in Baktria or Sogdiana).
- 10 Quote in Plin. *HN* VI, 49: '*finis omnium eorum [Cyrus et Alexander et Samiramus] ductus ab illa parte terrarum*'. These name-cities – or more likely military fortresses – may have been situated in the same location; after sieging the city (Arr. *Anab.* IV, 3.1–4), Alexander possibly renamed and refounded Kyropolis as Alexandria Eschata (Ael. *NA* XVI, 3; but cf. Str. XI, 11.4).
- 11 More easterly diplomatic contacts were made with the Indian kings Chandragupta (by Seleukos I: Just. *Epit.* XV, 4.20), Bindusara (by Antiochos I: *Ath.* XIV.652f–653a), and Sophagasenos (by Antiochos III: Polyb. XI, 34.11–12). Megasthenes, the Seleukid ambassador at Chandragupta's court (Str. XV, 1.36), also added to geographical knowledge about the far reaches of the world (see esp. Arr. *In. passim*).

as global interconnectivity increased and transimperial geographical information began to permeate common knowledge (see Str. I, 2.1; further GEHRKE 2015; ROLLER 2018 on Hellenistic geography).<sup>12</sup> Yet, mnemonic ideas of the far North as an Otherworld of warlike nomads and the far East as a realm of excessive wealth and wondrous abundance remained influential in knowledge structures and geographical imaginaries of the North-East as a limitropic zone of inbetweenness. These ideas created entangled pasts and presents in the historiography of Central Asia, especially in the cases of Parthia and Bactria, whose histories are intertwined with cultural associations of the far North and the far East combined.

## BAKTRIANS AS SELF, PARTHIANS AS OTHER?

To illuminate the entanglement of pasts and presents and the role of North-Eastern inbetweenness, let us turn to the historiography of Bactria and Parthia in the Hellenistic period. Ancient written sources about the history of these post-satrapal kingdoms are notoriously scarce and of limited reliability. Scholars depend on a handful of documentary sources and scattered passages in later literary works, composed in Greek or Latin from outsider western perspectives mostly of the Common Era (WIESEHÖFER 1998; HACKL – JACOBS – WEBER 2010; WIESEHÖFER – MÜLLER 2017; HOLT 1999, 178–184; COLORU 2009, 65–97; MAIRS 2021a), leaving much of the archaeological evidence for the Hellenistic period open to varying historical interpretations – an interpretive grey zone. We are left with spatially and temporally distant memories in literary narratives. Yet these memories provide critical insights for understanding how the inbetweenness of the Baktrians and Parthians was articulated and shaped through the ascription of historical meaning and identity in ancient historiography, impacting interpretations of their material culture in modern scholarship.

Three ancient works that inform us about the Baktrians and Parthians are instructive here, Polybios, Strabo, and Justin's epitome of Pompeius Trogus, all typically dated later than the events they described. I discuss them here in the chronological order of the events, rather than the order of the works in which the relevant text passages appear. The first is found in Strabo's *Geography*, a universal work written during the reign of Tiberius, somewhere between 18 and 24 CE (ENGELS 1999, 36–40; DUECK 2000, 147–151). The passage in question, drawn from the now-lost work of Apollodoros of Artemita (*FGrHist* 779; DRIJVERS 1998, 281),<sup>13</sup> briefly mentions the satrapal revolts in Central Asia against the Seleukid kings (who were

12 Strabo is most illuminative here: 'Indeed, the spread of the empires of the Romans and of the Parthians has presented to geographers of today a considerable addition to our empirical knowledge of geography, just as did the campaign of Alexander to geographers of earlier times, as Eratosthenes points out. For Alexander opened up for us geographers a great part of Asia and all the northern part of Europe as far as the Ister River; the Romans have made known all the western part of Europe as far as the River Albis (which divides Germany into two parts), and the regions beyond the Ister as far as the Tyras River; and Mithridates, surnamed Eupator, and his generals have made known the regions beyond the Tyras as far as Lake Maeotis and the line of coast that ends at Colchis; and, again, the Parthians have increased our knowledge in regard to Hyrcania and Bactriana, and in regard to the Scythians who live north of Hyrcania and Bactriana, all of which countries were but imperfectly known to the earlier geographers' (op. cit., transl. Loeb: H.L. Jones).

13 Apollodoros of Artemita – a Graeco-Parthian city east of the Tigris – is considered to have authored one of the, if not the first Parthian histories; his *Parthika* was probably written in the first decades of the first century BCE (NIKONOROV 1998, 107–111; MÜLLER 2017, 59–64; further discussion on Apollodoros in COLORU 2009 65–97; D'HAUTCOURT 2010; ENGELS 2017).

preoccupied with dynastic and interimperial conflicts in West Asia) in the mid-third century BCE, prefacing the rise of the Arsakids:

‘Those who had been entrusted with their government first caused the revolt of Bactriana and of all the country near it, I mean Euthydemus<sup>14</sup> and his followers; and then Arsaces, a Scythian, with some of the Dahae (I mean the Aparnians, as they were called, nomads who lived along the Ochus), invaded Parthia and conquered it. Now at the outset Arsaces was weak, being continually at war with those who had been deprived by him of their territory, both he himself and his successors, but later they grew so strong, always taking the neighbouring territory, through successes in warfare, that finally they established themselves as lords of the whole of the country inside the Euphrates. And they also took a part of Bactriana, having forced the Scythians, and still earlier Eucratides and his followers, to yield to them; and at the present time they rule over so much land and so many tribes that in the size of their empire they have become, in a way, rivals of the Romans. The cause of this is their mode of life, and also their customs (ὁ βίος αὐτῶν καὶ τὰ ἔθη), which contain much that is barbarian and Scythian in character (τὰ ἔχοντα πολὺ μὲν τὸ βάρβαρον καὶ τὸ Σκυθικόν), though more that is conducive to hegemony and success in war.’ (Str. XI, 9.2, transl. Loeb: H.L. Jones)

Although the Baktrians were the first to revolt from the Seleukids, for Strabo, the rise of the Arsakid empire in Parthia is more interesting,<sup>15</sup> and it is here where we see distinct engagement with the geographical imaginaries of the far North. Prior to this passage, Strabo described the land of the Parthians as desolate and rugged, a ‘thickly wooded, mountainous, and poverty-stricken’ place (δασεῖα καὶ ὀρεινὴ ἔστι καὶ ἄπορος, Str. XI, 9.1), where one would not want to linger long. In connecting natural habitat with the level of human civilization, Strabo’s geography of Parthia is a typical imagination of barbaric lands (DRIJVERS 1998, 282–283), which foreshadows the story of Arsakes quoted above. The origins of Arsakes were notoriously elusive, but here he is presented as a Skythian, and with him the Parni tribe that invaded Parthia from the Eurasian steppes.<sup>16</sup> As pointed out by previous scholarship, although Strabo omits explicit mention of nomadic roots, he engages with the typical imagination of the belligerent northern nomad, barbarian foremost, and distinct from the Romans by their Skythian customs and style (DRIJVERS 1998, 285–286; discussed as a Roman rhetorical *topos* in HAUSER 2005, 170–184; cf. LEROUGE-COHEN 2009).

Significant for this paper is that earlier in book XI, Strabo also associated the Baktrians of the past with Skythian lifestyles, describing their customs as barbarian – similar to those of nomads (οὐ πολὺ διέφερον τοῖς βίοις καὶ τοῖς ἡθῆσι τῶν νομάδων) – such as abandoning the sick

14 Strabo erroneously attributes the ‘Baktrian revolt’ to Euthydemus rather than Diodotos I; cf. Just. *Epit.* LXI, 4.5, supported by numismatic evidence (BOPEARACHCHI 1991, 41–46, pl. 1–2). Further discussion in HOLT 1999, 48–66; KRITT 2001; BORDEAUX 2018.

15 ‘More interesting’ in relation to the Baktrians; the Parthian (Arsakid) empire was, of course, not of primary interest to Strabo, a universalist Augustan writer aiming to explain the rise of Rome’s *imperium sine fine*; see discussion in ENGELS 2017, 31–34.

16 Arsakes’ elusive origins are mentioned again in a later passage: ‘some say that Arsaces derives his origin from the Skythians, whereas others say that he was a Bactrian, and that when in flight from the enlarged power of Diodotos and his followers he caused Parthia to revolt’ (Str. XI, 9.3, transl. Loeb: H.L. Jones). Strabo’s now lost historical work *Historika hypomnemata* would have contained a full book dedicated to customs of the Parthians (mentioned in Str. XI, 9.3). On Strabo’s sources on Parthia and the Parthians, see DRIJVERS 1998, 290–292). On the literary significance of Arsakes’ foundation story as a migrating refugee from Baktria, see HAUSER 2005, 175; also discussed below.

and elderly as prey to wild dogs (Str. XI, 11.3; commentary in HOLT 1999, 122–123; see further MAIRS 2007). According to Strabo, it was Alexander the Great who put an end to these ancient intolerable customs (Str. XI, 11.3; see also Plut. *Mor. De Alex. fort.* 328C).<sup>17</sup> As the story is told, Bactria under Greek rule later grew powerful as they (the post-Seleukid, Graeco-Baktrian kings) were able to master the fertile land, administer their kingdom in satrapies, and expand their influence to India, ‘subduing more peoples than Alexander’ (πλείω ἔθνη κατεστρέψαντο ἢ Ἀλέξανδρος, Str. XI, 11.2).<sup>18</sup> Implied in this narrative is that, due to their subjection to Greek rule, the Baktrians – once resembling the Skythians – outgrew their primitive barbarism and gradually became more civilized through the agricultural and imperial cultivation of their lands, as their (Greek) kings conquered tribes and founded cities. These practices effectively made Bactria civilized land and positioned its rulers on par with Alexander the Great as spreaders of (sedentary) civilization. The Baktrians, therefore, became repositioned within the realm of civilization through their subjection to Greek kings (whose identities and elite lifestyles were likely not confined to ‘being Greek’ but were multifaceted, shaped by diverse migratory backgrounds and processes of localization over time: NARAIN 2008; BURSTEIN 2012). We can observe a significant contrast with the Parthians, whom Strabo portrays as having become the rivals of the Romans, not because they became civilized and masterful like the (Graeco-)Baktrians, but because of their enduring Skythian, aggressive nature which proved favorable in warfare. Strabo’s narrative thus highlights a cultural distinction between the formerly nomadic, now civilized Baktrians, and the still-Skythian barbaric Parthians, implying that Bactria was capable of developing into civilized land, while Parthia – both the land and its people – remained stagnant, anchored in the North-East.

The distinction between the Baktrians as civilized and the Parthians as barbarian, or more specifically, Skythian – related to warlike, nomadic folk at the northern edges of the *oikoumene* – also occurs in Justin’s epitome of the monumental *Historiae Philippae* of Pompeius Trogus, a widely-read contemporary of Strabo with Gallic roots who probably was active during the Augustan period (VAN WICKEVOORT CROMMELIN 1998, 260–261; MÜLLER 2017, 241 fn. 1; BORGNA 2019, 31–33).<sup>19</sup> Trogus, too, drew on Apollodoros’ *Parthika*, possibly supplemented by recent knowledge about the Arsakids obtained from contemporary accounts of the ‘Parthian’ campaigns by Crassus and Antonius (VAN WICKEVOORT CROMMELIN 1998, 272).<sup>20</sup> Justin himself composed his epitome of Trogus’ history somewhere between the second and the late fourth century CE, centuries later but perhaps still during a time when the Arsakids dominated the eastern *oikoumene* (the date is contentious: YARDLEY – HECKEL 1997, 10–13; YARDLEY 2003, 5; cf. SYME 1988, 361–63; and now HOFMANN 2018, 23–29; BORGNA 2019, 107–110).<sup>21</sup> Similar to

17 A generation later than Strabo, Plutarch (*op. cit.*) similarly mentions that it was Alexander who educated the Skythians to bury their dead, instead of devouring them.

18 Τοσοῦτον δὲ ἴσχυσαν οἱ ἀποστήσαντες Ἕλληνες αὐτὴν διὰ τὴν ἀρετὴν τῆς χώρας, ὥστε τῆς τε Ἀριανῆς ἐπεκράτουσιν καὶ τῶν Ἰνδῶν, ὡς φησὶν Ἀπολλόδωρος ὁ Ἀρτεμιτηνός, καὶ πλείω ἔθνη κατεστρέψαντο ἢ Ἀλέξανδρος: ‘The Greeks who caused Bactria to revolt grew so powerful on account of the fertility of the country that they became masters, not only of Ariana, but also of India, as Apollodorus of Artemita says: and more tribes were subdued by them than by Alexander’ (Str. XI, 11.1, transl. Loeb: H.L. Jones).

19 That Trogus was widely read is reflected in the *Historia Augusta*, which mentions Trogus alongside three other great Latin historians (Livy, Sallust, Tacitus): SHA *Aurel.* 2. 1. , SHA *Prob.* 2. 7.

20 These campaigns did not take place in Central Asia, but in the western part of the Arsakid empire, in upper Mesopotamia (mod. south Turkey) and Media Atropatene (mod. Azerbaijan). For Roman authors, ‘Parthia’ and ‘Parthian campaigns’ referred to campaigns against the Arsakid empire, but not necessarily in Parthia; further reflections in COLORU 2009, 18–19, 168.

21 Henceforth ‘Justin’ rather than ‘Justin-Trogus’.

Strabo, Justin is not deeply interested in the Baktrians. Though mentioning twice earlier that the founders of both the Parthian and Baktrian empires were Skythians (Just. *Epit.* II.1.3, 3.6), his Central Asian history in book XLI is fully dedicated to the Arsakids who, during his own lifetime – as well as during Trogus’ – remained present in the Roman mind as the rival Other: ‘today the Parthians rule the East, the world being partitioned, as it were, between them and the Romans; but originally they were exiles from Scythia’ (*Scytharum exules fuere*, Just. *Epit.* XLI, 1.1; cf. Phot. *Bibl.* LVIII, 17b).<sup>22</sup> Skythians were earlier described as ‘a people savage after hardships and wars’ with ‘enormous physical strength’, who ‘hanker after nothing they would fear to lose, and when victorious they want nothing but glory’ (Just. *Epit.* II, 3.7–8). Thus grounding the Arsakids in Skythian origins, Justin sets the stage for his narrative as he introduces the Parthians through a familiar ethnographic excursus on the Parthian language (a mixture of Skythian and Median tongues, XLI, 2.3), the Parthian army (consisting of mostly slaves, XLI, 2.5, also XLI, 3.9), their battle strategy (charging and retreating on horseback, XLI, 2.7–9), sexual customs (polygamy for men, XLI, 3.1–2), diet (meat from the hunt, XLI, 3.3), treatment of the dead (torn by birds or dogs, XLI, 3.5), religious piety (very devout, XLI, 3.6–7), and the general character of the Parthians (aggressive, devious, and insolent, ‘always restless and ready to create trouble, either at home or abroad’ XLI, 3.8), all of which engages with familiar stereotypes of the Skythian, nomadic barbarian. As in Strabo’s account, Justin’s ethnographic digression builds up to the story of the rise of Arsakes in Central Asia in the mid-second century BCE:

‘There was at that time one Arsaces who, though of obscure lineage, was also of proven courage. He, a man used to a life of robbery and banditry (*latrociniiis et raptis*), had heard that Seleucus had been defeated by the Gauls in Asia, and now having no fear of the king (*solutus regis metu*) he entered Parthia with a band of robbers (*cum praedonum manu*), defeated their governor Andragoras, and after removing him took over his people.’ (Just. *Epit.* XLI, 4.6–8, transl. Loeb: J.C. Yardley)

Once again, we encounter an origin story of the dynasty’s founder – tied to robbers, bandits, and fearless aggression – that draws on ethnographic tropes of predatory warlike Skythians to emphasize Arsakes’ crude Otherness, entangled with the geographical imagination of the North-East. Despite the expansion of the Arsakid empire far beyond Parthia during both Trogus’ and Justin’s time, Justin’s narrative shows that the rhetorical language for the nomadic Other of the far North retained mnemonic significance through its continued use. In an important paper, Stefan Hauser argued that Arsakes’ Skythian Otherness was a Roman rhetorical device and literary adaptation of the Achaemenid foundation myth of Kyros the Great rising from humble, nomadic origins to create a powerful Oriental empire, a narrative that functioned to parallel the Arsakids with the traditional Persian barbarian enemy in the East (HAUSER 2005, 170–185; cf. ALONSO-NÚÑEZ 1988, 140, 144). Building on this interpretation, I further argue that the rhetorical recasting of the Eastern enemy as Arsakes (fused with the Skythian Other) was made possible because of the affordances of Central Asia’s limitropic inbetweenness, adaptable to diverse perspectives.

The divergent affordance of North-Eastern inbetweenness comes into clearer view if we compare the Parthian portrayal with that of the Baktrians. Not many words are dedicated to the Baktrians in Justin’s narrative, but two brief passages are worth citing here:

22 A substantial portion of book 2 of the epitomized *Philippic History* is dedicated to the Skythians, in which Justin also relates the origins of the Amazons to the Skythians (Just. *Epit.* II, 4).

‘At this same time Theodotus, governor of a thousand Bactrian cities (*mille urbium Bactrianarum praefectus*), also rebelled and demanded to be declared king, and following his example peoples throughout the east defected from Macedonia.’ (Just. *Epit.* xli, 4.5, transl. Loeb: J.C. Yardley)

In contrast to Parthia, the Baktrian land is described here as a flourishing urbanized area, with people settled in ‘a thousand cities’ under the rule of Diodotos in the mid-third century BCE. These ‘thousand cities’ have not been archaeologically substantiated; their numbers were likely proverbial while most of the settlements probably had the size of small villages or fortresses (with some exceptions; see overviews in MAIRS 2011, 23–35; COHEN 2013, 254–324; MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2021, 239–243; STANČO 2021, 255–269; LINDSTRÖM 2021, 288–307). The image of Baktria as a cultivated land of ‘thousand cities’, repeated elsewhere (Just. *Epit.* xli, 1.8; Str. xv, 1.3; cf. Diod. Sic. II, 6.2), subtly contrasts with Parthia: a land associated, through its founder Arsakes, with the boundless world of Skythians (Just. *Epit.* II, 2.3: *Hominibus inter se nulli fines*), described as houseless nomads ‘living in desolate wilds’ (II, 2.3–4). One should note here that the landscapes of both Parthia and Baktria in the first millennium BCE supported a spectrum of sedentary and pastoralist lifestyles (for Parthia, see HAUSER 2005, 174; BRUNO 2021, 56–58; see also HARTMANN 2017, 105; for Baktria-Sogdiana, see MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2021, 227–239; STANČO 2019, 353–365; STANČO 2021, 269–279; MORRIS 2021, 700–705; STARK 2023, 294–295). Later in Justin’s narrative, the Baktrians appear again alongside the Parthians:

‘Parthian fortunes, greater under this king (Mithridates I), took them to the height of their power. The Bactrians, however, shaken by various wars, lost not only their empire but even their freedom (*non regnum tantum, verum etiam libertatem*); for exhausted after wars with the Sogdians, Arachosians, Drancae, Arei, and Indians, they finally fell, virtually exhausted (*velut exsangues*), under a weaker people, the Parthians (*ab invalidioribus Parthis*).’ (Just. *Epit.* xli, 6.2–4, transl. Loeb: J.C. Yardley).

Here, we can discern another juxtaposition of the Parthians and the Baktrians in Justin’s history of Central Asian events between 170 and 140 BC. The narrative explains the rise of the ‘weaker’ Parthians and the loss of freedom of the ‘stronger’ Baktrians as resulting from the capricious, divine forces of Fortuna. Not only does this rhetorically engage with a familiar historiographical theme of divine causation reversing the fortune of mighty powers (embodied here by the Baktrians), which denies the political legitimacy of those who overcame them (NICHOLSON 2020), but it also adopts the longstanding trope of the weak barbaric enemy in the East, which now applied to the Arsakids reimagined as Persians (HAUSER 2005, 170–185). Moreover, the portrayal of the decline of this great (Graeco-)Baktrian kingdom as a loss of freedom – a concept anchored in the Greek polis ideal of agricultural, autarkic communities (Hes. *Op.* 449–478 on *autarkeia*; cf. Arist. *Pol.* 1256a, 31–36 on nomads having none) – could evoke among Justin’s cultured readers the threat of eastern despotism to civic autonomy, a classical trope of the Oriental Other that reached back to the Greek rhetoric of the Graeco-Persian wars (HALL 1989; GEHRKE 2001, 301–304; BRIANT 2002; GRUEN 2010).

Previous scholars have discussed Justin’s use of historical synchronism as a historiographical technique, either to parallel eastern and western events to emphasize the division of the world between Rome and Parthia (VAN WICKEVOORT CROMMELIN 1998, 263; HOLT 1999, 57, 63–264), to facilitate readers’ memorization of complex historical events (HOFMANN 2018, 207–211), or to teleologically present the entanglement of diverse regions of the world coming together under Roman, oikoumenic hegemony (MAIRS 2022, 236–244). Additionally,

Justin's narrative also effectively frames Baktria within the realm of civilization – connected to the Roman Self from Justin's perspective – while relegating Parthia to the uncivilized part of the world – despite Baktria's location farther east than Parthia. Their reversed cultural distance from the Greeks and Romans – with Baktria farther east than Parthia – amplified the impact of the rhetorical phrase 'as far as Baktria' (for instance on the Adulis stele of Ptolemy III: OGIS 54, l. 20; see also Diod. 2.6; cf. App. Syr. 9.55) which, alongside India, served to evoke a king's universal rule extending to the North-Eastern edge of the world in Hellenistic imperial ideology (entangled with Greek and Achaemenid world views: GEHRKE 2015; BICHLER – ROLLINGER 2017; ROLLINGER – DEGEN 2021, 207–213). Recent scholarship suggests that, in the Hellenistic period, claims to distant conquests did not require actual victories at the edges of the world, but that such claims could be asserted indirectly by overpowering those who achieved them, namely, the Seleukid kings, the last Hellenistic rulers whose influence, indeed, had reached as far as Baktria (WALLACE 2024, 232–234; STROOTMAN 2025, 2123–2216, 219–221).<sup>23</sup>

The framing of Baktria within the realm of civilization becomes clearer in the third work of interest: Polybios' universal work *Historiai*. His second century BCE fragmented account of the eastern anabasis of Antiochos III (212–205 BCE) – the last great conqueror king of the Seleukids – is well-known for its historical significance. The context of the passage is Antiochos' almost three-year long unsuccessful siege of Baktra (with particular attention drawn to Antiochos' military prowess) which resulted in peace negotiations with Euthydemos of Baktria in 206 BCE (resp. Polyb. x, 49, xi, 34). Polybios presents these negotiations as Euthydemos pleading with Antiochos – without the privilege to speak to him directly, but through the Seleukid royal envoy Teleas – to retain his rule over Baktria<sup>24</sup> and to join forces for a common cause:

'After speaking at some length in the same sense he begged Teleas to mediate between them in a friendly manner and bring about a reconciliation, entreating Antiochos not to grudge him the name and state of king, as if he did not yield to this request, neither of them would be safe; for multitudes of nomads (πληθὴ οὐκ ὀλίγα Νομάδες παρῆναι)<sup>25</sup> were approaching, and this was not only a grave danger to both of them, but if they consented to admit them, the country would certainly barbarize (ἐκβαρβαρωθήσεσθαι δὲ τὴν χώραν ὁμολογουμένως).' (Polyb. xi, 34.3–6, transl. after W.R. Patton: Loeb)

As part of his plea, Euthydemos would have claimed shared western heritage with Teleas, revealing his identity as a native of Magnesia (Polyb. xi, 34.1; discussion in LERNER 1999, 52–54). Antiochos receives the message from Teleas and is persuaded; the pact is sanctioned with a royal marriage between Euthydemos' son Demetrios and a daughter of Antiochos, which interconnected the Seleukid and Euthydemid dynasties, granted Euthydemos kingship over Baktria (xi, 34.10), and secured the Seleukid frontier in the Upper Satrapies (Polyb. xi, 34.15; on the Seleukid context, see COLORU 2009, 176–186; KOSMIN 2014, 59–76; STROOTMAN 2023). The story is pertinent to our argument in two key respects. First and most importantly, the

23 This is especially visible in Ptolemaic ideology after their victory over the Seleukids in the Third Syrian War of 246–241 BCE (argued by both Wallace and Strootman). For Hellenistic universalistic ideology, see BANG 2012; STROOTMAN 2014; 2020. For Baktria see HOO 2024.

24 Euthydemos deflects any accusation of rebellion against the Seleukids, distancing himself from Diodotos I and his son Diodotos II who actually did rebel: 'he himself had never revolted against the king, but after others had revolted he had possessed himself of the throne of Bactria by destroying their descendants' (Polyb. xi, 34.2–3).

25 Litt.: 'no small number of nomads'; W.R. Patton (rev. by F. Walbank and C. Habicht) – revealingly so – translated this as 'hordes of nomads'.

agreement is described as a *συμμαχία* (Polyb. xi, 34.10). This articulates the new stature and relationship between Euthydemos and Antiochos III as peer rulers defending Baktria. Their common cause constructs an evocative contrast between these kings protecting civilization and those ‘multitudes of nomads’ who embody the threat of its barbarization (HOLT 1999, 129–130, 134–135; cf. MAIRS 2014b, 148–150 who questions the reality of this threat; see further RAPIN 2007; MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2018). Combined with Euthydemos’ appeal to a western identity shared with Teleas, the language of the passage establishes a civilizational fault line by invoking common topoi of the far north, portraying Euthydemos and Antiochos III as heroic defenders of civilization, and emplacing Baktria within the world of Hellenistic imperial polities, distinguished from the world’s nomadic far North.

Secondly, the phrasing of the passage implies that, according to Polybios, the Seleukids still held nominal rule over these lands (after the Baktrian ‘rebellion’ under Diodotos) and that Euthydemos, even after the outcome of the *συμμαχία*, remained a regional king under Seleukid imperial suzerainty (see ENGELS 2014; CHRUBASIK 2016 on ‘local independence’ in the Seleukid empire). The significance of Seleukid overlordship in the Upper Satrapies lies in the wider literary context of the *Historiai*. As a Greek writer experiencing the unfolding of Roman hegemony in the Mediterranean, Polybios’ primary concern was outlining (and structuring) a universal history that demonstrated how the Romans ultimately succeeded in subjugating ‘nearly the whole inhabited world’ (σχεδὸν ἅπαντα τὰ κατὰ τὴν οἰκουμένην, I, 1.5) during his own lifetime, a process he called *symploke* (WALBANK 1975). Though Polybios emphasized his commitment to historical veracity – in contrast to other writers who ‘magnify small matters’ (τὰ μὲν μικρὰ μεγάλα ποιεῖ, xxix, 12.) – he also argued for the allowance of ‘the same arguments, or the same disposition and treatment’ (τοῖς αὐτοῖς ἢ χειρισμῶ πραγμάτων, xxix, 12.11) when appropriate for the context of universal history (see MILTSIOS 2013 for Polybios’ narrative strategies). Accordingly, as part of a carefully crafted narrative composition, the story of Antiochos served to highlight his political stature and greatness through his achievements in Asia (exemplified by his military acumen during the siege of Baktra, cf. Ninus: Diod. Sic. II, 6), both in the northeast in Central Asia and in the far east in India. While it may well be that the actual situation reaffirmed Euthydemid sovereignty and Baktrian independence following an *unsuccessful* siege of Baktra (HOLT 1999, 130–133), Polybios narrated the outcome of Antiochos’ anabasis as a definite Seleukid imperial conquest. This outcome allowed Rome, through its victory over Antiochos III at Magnesia in 190 BCE, followed by the devastating Treaty of Apameia in 188 BCE, to ultimately have conquered the continent of Asia including its North-Eastern edge – a narrative that served the overall historiographical scheme of Polybios’ universal history. With the narrative sequence of Rome’s victories over Philip V of Macedon in Greece (I, 3.1), Antiochos III in Asia (I, 3.2), and Hannibal in Africa (Libya: I, 3.3), Polybios weaved the growing interconnected stories of the three continents together, which allowed him to rhetorically map Rome’s achievement, indeed, as a universal domination over the entire *oikoumene* (MILTSIOS 2013, 60; QUINN 2013, 341–346; BENJAMIN 2014, 361–368).

## PARTHIAN NISA – GREEK AI KHANUM?

Polybios, Strabo, and Justin (Trogus), our most important authors for the emergence of the Baktrian and Arsakid kingdoms in Central Asia, all engage with the notion of Parthians as North-Eastern Others, while Baktrians are implicitly claimed as sharing in (high) civilization connected to the sedentary, cultivated, and cultured Graeco-Roman Self. Such ideas should be understood in the socio-cultural context of the authors, whose works dated to a time

when the Arsakids remained the dominant power and an immediate rival (and threat) to the Romans, which impacted the conception of the world as divided between these two powers (Just. *Epit.* xLI, 1.1). To these authors, the Baktrians – which, for Strabo and Justin, could refer to the Graeco-Baktrian kings of the past, entangled with the Kushan kings of the present – represented a more distant empire in Central Asia. Significantly so, the *cultural* positioning of the Parthians and the Baktrians, i.e. their emplacement in the imagined cultural geography of the world, paradoxically reversed the distance of the two lands from a Mediterranean perspective. The Baktrians, though physically farther away, i.e., *further north-east*, were perceived as culturally closer to home than the Parthians, whose ideological image remained entangled with memories of the distant foreign Other of the North-East. Echoes of such ancient, divergent interpretations of the geographical inbetweenness of the North-East – interwoven with narratives of Self and Otherness – can also be observed in the ways in which culturally mixed material culture (‘cultural inbetweenness’) has been translated to modern historical and archaeological understandings. This final section illustrates this by exploring modern cultural interpretations of Ai Khanum and Old Nisa, the two most prominent archaeological sites of Hellenistic Bactria and Parthia respectively.<sup>26</sup>

Both unknown in ancient literature, with the exception of a brief mention of ‘Parthaunisa’ or ‘Nisaia’ in the *Parthian Stations* of Isidore of Charax (Isid. 12; commentary in COHEN 2013, 220–221; SCHMITT 2017, 202–203), Ai Khanum and Nisa have played key roles in archaeologically illuminating the histories of these regions and the cultural landscapes in which they were situated. Both sites saw their beginnings over the course of the third century BCE, and became significant royal centres of post-satrapal Central Asian dynasties through a distinct phase of monumentalization, driven by a royally directed architectural programme under Eukratides I at Ai Khanum and Mithridates I (or shortly after) at Nisa in the second century BCE (discussed with bibliography in HOO 2024, 379–386, 394–395). Ai Khanum, probably founded by Antiochos I (MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2015, 28–33), transformed into a city proper under Euthydemid rule in the first half of the second century BCE (likely spurred by the treaty with Antiochos III; MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2015, 36–38), with the construction of a massive palace complex, monumental renovations of the temples, aristocratic villae, a theatre, and the addition of a gymnasium which remained unfinished when the city came to its end (overviews in BERNARD 2009; FRANCFORT *et al.* 2014; MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2014).<sup>27</sup> The religious architecture in the city was not recognizably Greek but has been typologized as Mesopotamian or Iranian in concept, ground plan, and appearance, while the plan of the palace and houses, the ubiquitous use of local mud brick and clay, and the recurring narrow peripheral corridors to regulate access and movement within inner spaces have been considered Iranian or Central Asian in conception, tradition, and arrangement (BERNARD 1976; 1990; SHENKAR 2011, 126–133; cf. MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2023 on Ai Khanum’s temples). The small sculptural repertoire consisted of several Greek-style statues found in the context of the gymnasium, palace, and the main sanctuary (BERNARD 1973), while all inscriptions in the small epigraphic corpus of Ai Khanum were written in the Greek language (ROBERT 1973; ROUGEMONT 2012, nos. 97–150), with an onomastic range of Greek, Iranian, and local toponymic names, such as Oxoboakes and Oxybazes (ROUGEMONT 2012, no. 101), whose bearers probably had multiple, intersecting identities (MAIRS 2014a; broader discussion in MAIRS 2014b, 102–145).

26 Henceforth ‘Nisa’. A more elaborate treatment of these sites in relation to Hellenism and inbetweenness can be found in HOO 2022.

27 Under Seleukid reign, the built environment of Ai Khanum consisted only of ramparts, a monumental tomb (the ‘heroon’ of Kineas), and the main temple; see MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2015, 26–35.

The Greek statuary and inscriptions, combined with the presence of the theatre, gymnasium, and a fountain, significantly influenced modern interpretations of the city's material culture as an easternmost example of Hellenism, a materialization of Baktria's Greek-cultured history, which reaffirmed Baktria within the realm of Hellenic civilization (cf. TARN 1938, xix–xx, 409–410). Interpreting a sense of cultural conservatism in Ai Khanum's sculptural art, Bernard initially presented the site as 'a Greek city whose colonists strove to maintain the integrity of the civilization they had brought with them', envisioning the city as 'a true cradle of Central Asian Hellenism' (resp. BERNARD 1967, 94; BERNARD 1994, 117), a narrative with immediate and lingering impact across subsequent interpretations of the site. Thus, a seminal handbook on the Hellenistic world featured Ai Khanum as a 'nucleus of Central Asian Greece' settled exclusively by Greeks and Macedonians (GREEN 1990, 315; see also LITVINSKIY 2010, 36–37), while others explained the city's Greek culture as a tool for ethnic differentiation in a socially segregated, colonial society (e.g. HOLT 2005, 157–162; cf. MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2016, 102–103). Especially the presence of a theatre and gymnasium in Ai Khanum's last architectural phase in the first half of the second century BCE (BERNARD 1978, 437; VEUVE 1987, 103), considered as primary expressions of Greekness, have been raised to classify the site as a Greek polis, aligning it with an 'urban checklist' gleaned from nostalgic Greek writers during the Second Sophistic (Dio. Chrys. *Or.* XLVII, 9; Paus. x, 4.1; see e.g. WALBANK 1981, 61, 64; KARTTUNEN 1997, 277–288; BURSTEIN 2008, 67–70, 105; MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2014, 278–279; LECUYOT 2021, 550; cf. TRAINA 2005, 2; MAIRS 2014b, 98–101; CANEPA 2018, 53).<sup>28</sup> Though degrees of cultural mixture or hybridity at Ai Khanum have commonly been acknowledged, modern historiography tended to analyse material novelties typologized as Greek within the framework of ethnic identity (whether real or as part of an imagined community: MAIRS 2013; MAIRS 2014b, 183–185; MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2016, 105–106), linked to the identity of the Graeco-Baktrian kings (cf. Polyb. xi, 34.1), the determination of Greek settlers in preserving and gatekeeping their culture from outsiders (e.g. HOLT 2005, 157–162), or the assimilation of local Baktrians into the dominant Greek culture (HOLT 1999, 45; LITVINSKIY 2010, 36–37; further discussed in HOO 2022, 100–108, 215–218). Whether or not explicitly identified as Hellenism, modern scholarship has articulated Ai Khanum's historical significance primarily through discussions of Greekness.

In contrast, the way in which the historical significance of the material culture at Nisa has been assessed and expressed is distinctly different. After an obscure archaic phase in the third century BCE, the citadel Nisa radically transformed in a monumental ceremonial capital under or shortly after Mithridates I (171–138 BCE), dedicated to the memory of the Arsakid dynasty (INVERNIZZI 2001, 134–136; LIPPOLIS 2011; BRUNO 2021, 65–72 for concise overviews). The Central Complex dominated the citadel: a series of monumental buildings with various functions organized around a central courtyard, including a building with a tetrastyle hall and red-painted walls (the Red Building), a round building with clay statues (the Round Hall, possibly a dynastic mausoleum), a high tower building (perhaps a tower temple; MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2023, 245), and a square hall with a gallery of statues, possibly an audience hall (INVERNIZZI 2001; 2009; PILIPKO 2008; INVERNIZZI – LIPPOLIS 2008, 7–166 on the Red Building and Round Hall). These buildings, constructed from mud brick and with square, symmetric plans using peripheral corridors, have been typologized as Iranian or Central Asian in conception, layout, and architecture, while Greek elements such as metopes were used for architectural decorations (LIPPOLIS 2009). Economic ostraca from the storage complex in the southern part

28 Dio Chrysostom mentions an agora, theatre, gymnasium, and stoa, while Pausanias refers to government offices, gymnasium, theatre, agora, fountain, and houses. No identifiable agora was excavated at Ai Khanum.

of the citadel indicated that Parthian was the language used for administration, including the documentation of wine collected from regional estates (BADER 1996; DIAKONOFF – LIVSHITS 2001). The site drew particular excitement because of the discovery of impressive works of art that integrated Greek stylistic or iconographic elements: ivory rhytons with friezes with Greek iconographic scenes and marble and metal anthropomorphic figurines, all found in storage in the Square House, north of the Central Complex (MASSON – PUGACHENKOVA 1982; PAPPALARDO 2010; INVERNIZZI 1999; 2009), as well as over-life-sized anthropomorphic clay statuary in the Round Hall and the Square Hall, with Greek and Iranian armour and draperies (BOLLATI 2008).

These findings sharply challenged the portrayal in ancient narrative sources of the Parthians as uncultured, crude barbarians, incapable of cultivating anything of impact (see critique in WOLSKI 1984; 1989). Modern historiography on Nisa's cultural character has therefore drawn particular attention to those object classes that exhibited the strongest Greek influences: the ivory rhytons and the marble figurines in the Square House. For M. Masson and G. Pugachenkova, it was the Greek features that gave the rhytons great artistic value, as they revealed the 'Parthian-Philhellene interpretation' of local subject matter and the 'great complexity and syncretism of original elements' in Parthian art (MASSON – PUGACHENKOVA 1982, 94, 149). Typologized as culturally composite rather than uniformly Greek or Iranian, the Nisa rhytons and statues would represent 'a willingness to borrow style and motifs from Greek and Near Eastern cultures to recombine them to create new forms' (DOWNEY 1986, 580). The fact that some of the ivory vessels displayed Greek iconographical themes, such as Dionysian scenes and the Olympian *dodeka theoi* (INVERNIZZI 2005; PAPPALARDO 2010, 123–159), led some to believe that these vessels were not crafted locally. Bernard suggested that the rhytons could only have been made by Greeks for a Greek symposiastic audience. Identifying figures of famous Greek poets carved on the rhytons, rather than martial themes, he argued that the rhytons would not suit the warlike Parthian aristocracy (who would have had little interest in refined Greek culture), but that they were acquired as war spoils from a Greek polis, possibly in Babylonia or Bactria (BERNARD 1985, 75–77, 88–91). Detailed analysis showed that the rhytons, like the statuary, were actually produced in local workshops over longer periods of time (PAPPALARDO 2010, 330–331), which gave impetus to more locally embedded perspectives on the rhytons, the statuary, and the site as a whole. While reliance on (itinerant) Greek artists commissioned to create Greek-style objects is widely assumed (e.g. INVERNIZZI 2001, 136; INVERNIZZI 2007, 174–175; INVERNIZZI 2012, 93–94; BOARDMAN 2015, 75–77; MANASSERO 2018, 299; BRUNO 2021, 72), common interpretations now portray the Arsakid kings as active agents who consciously selected and adapted Greek figurative language that invited linkage with – and interpretation as – Iranian traditions in order to articulate their own ideological concepts (INVERNIZZI 2011b, 659; INVERNIZZI 2011a, 204) in a courtly taste that was oriented to both eastern and western audiences (LIPPOLIS 2014, 230).

Both Ai Khanum and Nisa display eclectic material culture, both are set in Central Asian regions that entered historiographical narrative from outsider perspectives, with scarce contemporaneous sources, and both drew heavily on regional architectural practices, such as the use of local mudbrick, symmetrical planning, and regulating peripheral corridors. However, the cultural character of these sites has been analysed and given meaning in different ways that entangle with ancient articulations of the limitropic spaces of the North-East that position Bactrians as part of the Greek, civilized Self, as opposed to the Parthians as foreign non-Greek Other. We discern this most distinctly in the interpretation of Hellenism at both sites. While the notion of Hellenism did play a role in the main lines of scholarly interpretation of Nisa's material culture, its particular explanation did not primarily relate to matters of ethnic

identity, but rather to the expression of ‘philhellene’ behaviour, which inserts the political epithet *philhellenos* on coins of Mithridates I into a cultural interpretation (for which WOLSKI 1984; on political Philhellenism, see WIESEHÖFER 1996; DĄBROWA 1998; 2011; OLBRZYCHT 2017). The terms Hellenism and Philhellenism both pertain to forms of Greekness, yet the prefix ‘phil’ separates its proponents from genuine, authentic Greekness, while defining them as distinctly non-Greek: only outsiders can express love and admiration for Greek culture (discussion in HOO 2022, 219–221). Accordingly, at Nisa, material culture typologized as Greek (sculptural art, architectural decorations) has been considered as distinctly non-ethnic *behaviour*, with the Parthians (Arsakids) remaining detached from any form of Greek identity. This stands in stark contrast to interpretations of Greek culture at Ai Khanum which have frequently centred on the question of Greek ethnicity, and whether or not to explain Greek culture as an expression of *identity*. While the administrative language discovered at each site – Greek at Ai Khanum and Parthian at Nisa – played a distinct role in this difference, the asymmetrical cultural interpretations of Hellenism and the extent to which this is associated with questions of ethnicity are also impacted by narratives of Baktrians as Self and Parthians as Other. Had the ivory rhytons at Nisa been discovered at Ai Khanum instead, we can imagine them to be readily interpreted as brilliant examples of genuine Hellenism, made by and for Greeks, reaffirming Bactria within the realm of Hellenistic polities (HOO 2022, 221).

## ‘HELLENISTIC’ AND ‘PARTHIAN’ TEMPORALITIES

The divergent articulation of North-Eastern inbetweenness also unfolds in different temporalities accorded to the Baktrians and the Parthians. In Strabo’s narrative, the Baktrians are imbued with dynamism in their progression from Skythian origins, transitioning into the civilized world through Alexander and the Greek kings who came to rule them, which transformed Bactria in an agriculturally wealthy land famed for its ‘thousand cities’. This entangles with modern cultural approaches in the historiography of Ai Khanum’s material culture, which has commented variously on its Greekness, relating or placing it within the realm of Alexander’s Greek legacy in the East, rather than within the Baktrian context. The Parthians, on the other hand, have appeared in ancient literary discourse as weak, stagnant, and nomadic outsiders, despite the forceful expansion of the Arsakid land empire far beyond Parthia. Paradoxically, in the diverging interpretations of culture at Nisa and Ai Khanum, dynamic agency is more readily expected of the Arsakids (rather than the Baktrians), who would have creatively adapted Greek culture as a visual language to express Arsakid ideology.

To finalize the argument, further divergence on Baktrian and Parthian temporality can be noted in the distinct historiographic usage of ‘Hellenistic’ in the study of Central Asia. While conventional periodization of the Hellenistic age commences with the reign or death of Alexander the Great while ending with the Battle of Actium or the death of Cleopatra VII (336/323–31/30 BCE), the term ‘Hellenistic’ carries a distinct interpretive load in the context of Central Asia, complicating its application even for mere chronological clarity. ‘Hellenistic layers’ in Baktrian archaeology usually refer to strata with distinctive cultural material that predates the ‘nomadic invasions’ from the north which resulted in the ‘fall of Ai Khanum’ around 145 BCE. Yet the upheaval around 145 BCE was not solely the result of the ‘coming of nomads’ but driven by a variety of interconnected factors (discussion in MAIRS 2014b, 146–176; MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2018). The line between Hellenistic and non-Hellenistic (or ‘post-Greek’) is therefore not a neutral temporal marker, but also a distinct cultural marker. Echoing Polybius’ narrative, Bactria’s Hellenistic phase is demarcated from a period of nomadic invasions

and decline of Greek culture, thus culturally opposing Hellenism to nomadism. By contrast, while ‘Hellenistic Central Asia’ has been adopted as chronological marker, encompassing the rule of the Seleukid kings in the Upper Satrapies and the rise and flourishing of the Graeco-Baktrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms, the term is rarely applied to the region west of Bactria. Even though the Arsakid kingdom emerged during the same period and its kings culturally engaged with Greek visual language in the final centuries BCE, the term ‘Hellenistic Parthia’ is uncommon and unheard of. Hellenistic and Parthian temporalities of Central Asia thus entangle with notions of Baktrians as Self and Parthians as Other.

Classifications of space and time are not neutral: they hold power to transform ambiguous and transitional spaces into meaningful places, shaped by specific interests and narratives. Conversely, inbetween-places, people, and things are ambiguous and difficult to describe exactly, which therefore attract various interpretations and articulations of meaning. This paper has drawn attention to the affordance of the ‘North-East’ as a limitropic zone of inbetweenness that invites divergent cultural imaginations adaptable to different perspectives, both in the past and in the present. We can see this in how Baktrians and Parthians have been culturally positioned in ancient literary discourse, which entangle with the different ways in which ‘Hellenism’ at Ai Khanum and at Nisa have been analysed and explained. In ancient and modern historiography, articulations of North-Eastern inbetweenness have positioned the Baktrians as part of the western Self – cultured actors within the realm of sedentary, Graeco-Roman civilization – and Parthians as the eastern Other, associated with the foreign outsider, coupled with associations of the nomadic far North as a borderzone of the civilized world. Without the intention to diminish the historical significance of mobile pastoralism or migrations of settlers from the Aegean, Asia Minor, and West Asia, this paper emphasized the ideological resonances of geographical imaginations of the North-East in historical and archaeological understandings of culture and identity in Central Asia, which developed in far more fluid and interactive ways than the labels ‘Hellenism’ and ‘nomadism’ lead us to believe. An awareness of such past and present entanglements remains crucial for the study of Hellenistic Central Asia, as a developing field of knowledge production about regions of inbetweenness.

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