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An Archaeological Approach to “Hellenization” in the Seleucid Empire

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The remains of Seleucid cities in the Near East such as Ai Khánum and Seleucia on the Tigris have long defied explanation. Both Hellenic and Near Eastern peoples once inhabited these cities, and the evidence for the types of interactions they once had is contradictory. Did they form a new culture that was a pure hybrid of what had come before? Did the Greeks live separately from the natives, as the latter underwent an inexorable process of "Hellenization"? This paper will investigate which domains of Greek culture were open to mixing and which were carefully preserved during the Hellenization of the former Persian Empire, and venture explanations as to why. Emphasis is placed on the active role of material culture in constructing ethnic identities in light of large-scale intermarriage during the initial years of these cities.

Introduction

Upon his death in 323, Alexander the Great was the supreme ruler of an empire greater than any the world had ever seen. Though his infighting successors quickly broke it apart, the kingdoms they built from the rubble of his conquests would soon match their General’s grand designs. A Macedonian officer named Seleucus Nicator consolidated the eastern portion of the General’s conquests into the independent Seleucid Empire, which at its height stretched from Asia Minor to Afghanistan. Seleucus and his descendants instituted a massive program of colonization to solidify their initially tenuous grip on these far-flung regions. Two of these cities have been especially well preserved for modern excavators: Seleucia on the Tigris in Babylonia (central Iraq) and Ai Khánum in Bactria (northern Afghanistan).

These cities were constructed on irrigated plains at the intersections of major waterways—providing each with natural defense, agricultural independence, and access to vital trade routes. These factors attracted waves of Greek migrants and retired soldiers to join with sizeable native populations to settle in these fledgling cities. Scholars have long disagreed over the exact nature of the multiethnic

society that resulted. Two seemingly contradictory processes have been proposed to explain ethnic dynamics in the Seleucid East: the subjugation of native populations and their forced assimilation of Greek culture through a process of “Hellenization”, or the creation of an entirely hybrid culture through fusion of Greek and native populations.¹

Both interpretations are oversimplifications of the data that fail to accommodate the full range of archaeological evidence from Seleucia and Ai Khánum. A more nuanced picture of culture change in Seleucid cities during the critical first generations after their foundation is required. This paper first provides summaries of the regional and urban contexts in which ethnic interactions would have taken place, and the archaeological evidence for ethnicity in them. A more theoretically precise definition of “ethnicity” will then be used to reconcile the conflicting evidence at Ai Khánum and Seleucia. It will ultimately be shown that rather than being a simple proxy for ethnic identities, material culture can play an active role in their creation.

Regional Context

Ai Khánum

The foundation of Ai Khánum can be dated to the beginning of the 3rd century BC during the reign of Seleucus Nicator or one of his immediate successors.² It sits on the bank of the Oxus River where it meets with a tributary, the Kokcha River. The Greeks were not the first to exploit this area, as archaeological survey of the city’s hinterland has shown.³ The plain between the Oxus and Kokcha was cultivated since the Bronze Age; the surveyors even uncovered a trading outpost from the far-off Indus

¹ G. Traina, “Notes on Hellenism in the Iranian East (Classico-Oriental Notes, 6-8),” *Iran & the Caucasus* (2005): 1–14; R. Mairs, “The ‘Temple with Indented Niches’ at Ai Khanoum: Ethnic and Civic Identity in Hellenistic Bactria,” in *Cults, Creeds and Contests in the Greek City After the Classical Age*, ed. R. Alston, OM Van Nijf, and C. Williamson (Leuven: Peeters, 2010).

² Susan Sherwin-White, *From Samarkhand to Sardis: a New Approach to the Seleucid Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). 21.

³ Jean-Claude Gardin and Pierre Gentelle, “I. L’exploitation Du Sol En Bactriane Antique,” *Bulletin De l’Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient* 66, no. 1 (1979): 1-29; G. Fussman, “Southern Bactria and Northern India Before Islam: A Review of Archaeological Reports.,” *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116, no. 2 (1996).

Valley civilization. Nevertheless, the researchers found that irrigation networks on the plain only reached their fullest extent with the coming of the Seleucids and the founding of Ai Khánum.⁴

The plain was at a strategic position in both the Bronze and Iron Ages because it put whomever dwelt there in control of the international trade in lapis lazuli, a stone as highly valued in the ancient world as its geologic occurrence was limited. The Sar-e Sang mines, one of the only sources of lapis known until the modern era, are located in a deep valley carved by a tributary of the Kokcha far to the east in the Pamir Mountains.⁵ The Oxus, in turn, linked the rugged mountains of Afghanistan with points further west near the Iranian Plateau. Excavations of the treasury at Ai Khánum confirm the importance of the region's mineral wealth in the city's economy -- in addition to blocks of unworked lapis, excavators uncovered traces of agate, beryl, carnelian, turquoise, sapphire, onyx⁶. Control of the gem trade was likely a key reason for the city's foundation and a source of power for Ai Khánum's ruling elites.

Seleucia

Seleucia on the Tigris had similar geographic advantages to Ai Khánum, and both were integrated into the same trade network. A well-travelled caravan route known as the Great Khorasan Road led from Bactria across the northern edge of the Iranian Plateau to Mesopotamia.⁷ Seleucia is located precisely where this road crosses the Tigris River, a position that also placed it in control of all maritime trade with India travelling up the Tigris from the Persian Gulf.⁸ The "King's Canal" at Seleucia led in turn from the Tigris to the Euphrates River; the city was built to take advantage of this waterway

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Gary W. Bowersox and Bonita E. Chamberlin, *Gemstones of Afghanistan* (GeoVision, Inc., 1995). 47

⁶ Paul Bernard, *Etudes De Géographie Historique Sur La Plaine d'Ai Khanoum, Afghanistan* (Paris: C.N.R.S., 1978); Frank Holt, *Into the Land of Bones Alexander the Great in Afghanistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). 160.

⁷ J Cook, *The Persian Empire*, 1st ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1983).

⁸ William Woodthorpe Tarn, *Hellenistic Civilization* (New York: The New American Library Inc., 1961).

and not *vice versa*.⁹ Opis, a trading center in operation since the Bronze Age, was located near the King's Canal; Seleucia diverted its trade revenue and may have even physically incorporated it.¹⁰ For several centuries after, Seleucia was the nexus of trade between India, the Mediterranean, and places in between. An extensive network of irrigated farmland dominated the city's hinterland on both sides of the Tigris; here too surface surveys have shown that cultivation began in the Bronze Age but increased markedly during the Hellenistic period.¹¹

Discussion

The Indus Valley outpost and the King's Canal both show that the Seleucids placed their cities to capitalize on existing agricultural lands and trade routes rather than to create new ones. Aside from the insight into the logic that governed where the Seleucids settlement, this provides a context for the first interactions between the settlers and natives. Greek traders would have needed to interact with native merchants and work within pre-established social networks and infrastructures of docks and warehouses.¹² During his life, Alexander made the appeasement of Persian and Bactrian elites a key part of his strategy for securing his newly conquered empire.¹³ The coming of the Greeks did nothing to change the geographic realities that produced wealth for the regions' inhabitants; there is no reason to assume that native elites were restricted from the upper class in these cities. The characterization of the Seleucid Empire common in modern scholarship – a Greek elite ruling a native peasant class¹⁴ -- is untenable. Socio-economic distinctions thus did not necessarily correlate with ethnic distinctions. The urban forms and material remains unearthed by excavators at Aï Khánum and Seleucia suggest that

⁹ Bert Van der Spek, "Feeding Hellenistic Seleucia on the Tigris and Babylon", 2004. in: Richard Alston, O.M. van Nijf, eds., *Feeding the Ancient City*. (Leuven: Peeters, 2004). 33-45.

¹⁰ Clark Hopkins, *Topography and Architecture of Seleucia on the Tigris* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1972). 150.

¹¹ Van der Spek, "Feeding Hellenistic Seleucia on the Tigris and Babylon."

¹² Hopkins, *Topography and Architecture of Seleucia on the Tigris*. 150.

¹³ James Romm, "Alexander's Policy of Perso-Macedonian Fusion," in *The Landmark Arrian: the Campaigns of Alexander: a New Translation*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 385.

¹⁴ Traina, "Notes on Hellenism in the Iranian East (Classico-Oriental Notes, 6-8)."

social dynamics were much more complex than that.

Syncretism and Urban Form

Ai Khánum

The layout of Ai Khánum is roughly triangular, with 30m drops to the Oxus and Kokcha preventing attack on two sides. The third edge of the city runs along a large hill rising above the plain, which was used as the city's acropolis. Elite residences cluster around the southern portion of the city, while those of the lower classes were likely relegated to the north side of the city, the acropolis, and the plain beyond the walls. The main street runs along the acropolis, and the rest of the city is laid out in a basic grid plan. The city center included a massive administrative complex containing offices, elite residences, and a treasury. A gymnasium, heroön (monumental tomb and center for a hero cult), and temple abut the palace. This complex of buildings was the most conspicuous public area in the city, reflected by its central location in the city plan.

The relative degree of syncretism displayed by different buildings at Ai Khánum is highly variable, and this has long puzzled excavators. Some structures, such as the gymnasium and heroön, are clearly Greek in form and bear inscriptions in a conservative form of literary Greek, while others are an amalgam of Greek, Bactrian, Persian, and Mesopotamian influences. Corinthian columns support the administrative center, yet the layout is clearly derivative of Achaemenid palaces such as those at Persepolis and Susa¹⁵. Most surprisingly for a "Greek" city, the only temples unearthed at the site are of Persian and Mesopotamian design and bear no trace of the rich tradition of Greek religious architecture.¹⁶

¹⁵ Paul Bernard, *Ai Khanoum on the Oxus: A Hellenistic City in Central Asia*, vol. 53, Proceedings of the British Academy (Great Britain: University of Oxford Press, 1967). 82

¹⁶ Mairs, "The 'Temple with Indented Niches' at Ai Khanoum: Ethnic and Civic Identity in Hellenistic Bactria."

Seleucia

Seleucia's urban layout reflects its role as a trading capital. The city blocks were huge for a Hellenistic city, measuring 140x70m.¹⁷ A branch of the King's Canal from the Euphrates bisected the city horizontally and emptied into the Tigris. Two more branches split off from the main canal before entering the city and flowed around the north and south walls to form a moat. A caravan route ran parallel to the Canal in the southern portion of the city, leading west from a port on the Tigris. Remains of public structures are only found along the northern and southern edges of the city.

A large square, likely one of the city's agoras, lay at the center point of the city along its northern walls.¹⁸ To the north was what may once have been the city's theater, to the east a stoa, and to the west the city archives. A heroön found here with a Greek dedicatory inscription parallels that at Ai Khánum.¹⁹ The public buildings to the south, located as they were along the main caravan route leading from the city's port, were likely meant to capitalize on trade-related traffic. The city's excavators noted the prevalence of east-west roadways over those running north-south, which suggests restricted permeability between the two centers.²⁰ The ability to easily move goods through Seleucia was seemingly given precedence over the ability to move within it.

It is interesting to note that the structures more associated with Greek culture and administration – such as the heroön and archives– are less associated with trade activity in the city's layout. Relatively few portions of this massive city have been excavated, however, and it remains unclear whether the unearthed structures represent only part of a potentially more complex cityscape. But based on the nature and position of the agora and its surrounding buildings there is little doubt that the area served some administrative function. The large volume of clay bullae found in the archives,

¹⁷ Hopkins, *Topography and Architecture of Seleucia on the Tigris*. 1.

¹⁸ Antonio Invernizzi, "Seleucia on the Tigris - Center and Periphery in Seleucid Asia," in *Center and Periphery in the Hellenistic World*, ed. Per Bilde et al., Studies in Hellenistic Civilization (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1994), 230-250.

¹⁹ Mairs, "The 'Temple with Indented Niches' at Ai Khanoum: Ethnic and Civic Identity in Hellenistic Bactria."

²⁰ Invernizzi, "Seleucia on the Tigris - Center and Periphery in Seleucid Asia."

which attest to role of this section the wider functioning, confirms this. Furthermore, the bullae themselves provide a useful body of evidence for ethnic interactions on a more personal scale.

The Archives at Seleucia

The ruins of Seleucia's archive contained nearly 25,000 clay bullae, making it by far the largest Hellenistic archive yet known.²¹ These bullae, having been stamped by the owner's signet ring, would have sealed the papyri once stored in these archives. Though drawing from a normalized collection of motifs, these seals were used to identify individuals in day-to-day business and legal transactions and are thus a key piece of evidence for conceptions of personal identity.²²

Depictions of the Greek goddesses Athena and Tyche are two of the most common types uncovered from the archives: there were 663 impressions of Athena from 328 distinct seals and 914 impressions of Tyche from 322 seals.²³ Depictions of Athena rigidly adhere to one of two classical design norms while the Tyche seals exhibit a complex iconography that heavily incorporated Mesopotamian and Egyptian themes.²⁴

The other seal impressions largely depict other members of the Greek pantheon, though approximately 20% are of Mesopotamian gods such as Nabu.²⁵ Several seals display syncretic deities that draw equally on both traditions; Apollo-Nabu is the most common.²⁶ The variety of motifs used on stamps seals in the archives at Seleucia, especially the Tyche impressions, show that though the majority of the forms were ultimately Greek in origin, their widespread use was by no means evidence of Hellenization in the traditional sense of an outright assimilation into Greek society.

²¹ "Seleucia on the Tigris: The Clay Sealings." Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi di Torino 2006

²² Sharon C. Herbert, "Hellenistic Archives from Tel Kedesh (Israel) and Seleucia-on-the-Tigris (Iraq)," *Bulletin of the University of Michigan Museums of Art and Archaeology* XV (2005): 65-86.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Centro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi di Torino 2006

Discussion

The material remains from Aï Khánum and Seleucia clearly confound any interpretation that relies solely on paradigms of “fusion” or “segregation.” The traditional agora, stoa, archive, and heroön at Seleucia suggest a Greek character to the city’s administration, which is seemingly contradicted by their isolation from trade activity and the heavily syncretic seals used there daily in important transactions. Judging solely by the architecture at Aï Khánum, one might infer that the city’s residents practiced Mesopotamian religion, were subject to Persian-style administration, studied Greek culture in the gymnasium, and enjoyed Classical drama in the theater. Though this is clearly a caricature of archaeological reasoning, it makes clear the contradictory lines of evidence coming from the excavations and misinterpretation they can produce. Many scholars cherry-pick data to fit a simpler narrative: one of the first publications of the excavations at Aï Khánum cited the gymnasium and heroön alone as evidence that the city was an “outpost of Hellenism” in the barbarian east.²⁷

It is obvious that Aï Khánum and Seleucia were multiethnic cities, but what exactly this means in a practical sense is still unclear. The old adage in archaeology that “pots do not equal people” is especially valid here. Just because a temple looks “Mesopotamian,” there is no reason to think that it was used by Mesopotamians to worship Mesopotamian gods. It is difficult to resolve the archaeological evidence into a coherent picture of ethnic dynamics because material culture does not passively reflect the identity of those that create it. Archaeological approaches to ethnicity must instead examine material culture in light of the active role it plays in constructing and maintaining group identities.²⁸ This is a more fluid view allows the analysis to move beyond the conception of ethnicities as concrete, bounded entities. The reality, especially at Seleucia and Aï Khánum, is much more complex.

²⁷ Bernard, *Ai Khanoum on the Oxus: A Hellenistic City in Central Asia*, 53.

²⁸ Margarita Díaz-Andreu García et al., introduction to *Archaeology of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2005). 9.

Untangling Ethnicity in the Material Record

Ethnic Groups and Ethnies

An ethnic identity is rooted in the perception of shared common ancestry with others in a community. A useful insight provided by contemporary anthropology is that ethnic groups develop through the use of certain cultural traits to distinguish members of the in-group from the out-group.²⁹ Exactly which cultural traits – such as a language, art style, religion, etc. – a group or individual can use to assert an ethnic identity will change over time and largely depend on social context³⁰. A German speaking in her native tongue would be making a public, though possibly unintentional, assertion of German identity if she were in England but not in Austria.

This highlights the fact that ethnicities are essentially conceptions about how certain “types” of people are expected to act; they are ideas within people’s heads rather than physically bounded groups in a population. The term “ethnie” emphasizes that ethnicities are culturally constructed categories, in contrast with “ethnic group.”³¹ Ethnies and ethnic groups certainly can co-vary, such as in the ethnic enclaves of modern cities. But the historical context in which Aï Khánum and Seleucia were founded suggests that, at least for the initial generations, this was not the case.

The Role of Inter-marriage

The difficulty in studying the ethnic makeup of the Seleucid Empire ultimately stems from the actions of Alexander himself. The General had strongly encouraged intermarriage between Greek soldiers and local women, and thus significant subsets of the population (even the ruling Seleucid

²⁹ Geoff Emberling, “Ethnicity in Complex Societies: Archaeological Perspectives,” *Journal of Archaeological Research* 5, no. 4 (1997): 295-344.

³⁰ R. Mairs, “Greek Identity and the Settler Community in Hellenistic Bactria and Arachosia,” *Migrations & Identities* 1, no. 1 (2008): 19-43.

³¹ F.J. Gil-White, “Are Ethnic Groups Biological ‘Species’ to the Human Brain?” *Current Anthropology* 42, no. 4 (2001): 515–553.

dynasty) were genetically heterogeneous.³² This suggests that it was “occidental” and “oriental” cultures that were struggling for influence – not necessarily the people themselves. With the blurring of group lines brought about by intermarriage came the need to redefine and reassert one’s ethnic identity, and the patterns of syncretism in these two cities can be explained by the selective use of cultural traits as ethnic markers. Later waves of genetically “pure” migrants would have still had to operate within the framework of ethnic markers established during the first few generations. This explains the seeming contradiction seen in the archaeological record, where some aspects of Greek culture remained static while others were open to hybridization. By focusing on ethnies rather than ethnic groups, the archaeological evidence becomes much more coherent.

Discussion

Where the architecture at Ai Khánum displays a great degree of syncretism, cultural boundary maintenance was either impractical or unimportant. A lack of readily available stone and laborers trained to work it forced the designers of the city to build the kind of flat-roofed mud brick buildings characteristic of Achaemenid architecture.³³ The Temple with Indented Niches was the largest temple at Ai Khánum and occupies a central position along its main road, which suggests it may have been used by a majority of the city’s inhabitants. It is laid out in a manner that closely parallels Mesopotamian religious architecture rather than the expected Greek norms.³⁴ These building styles were likely transmitted to Bactria by the Achaemenids and were thus absorbed into the local architectural tradition.³⁵

The Temple with Indented Niches’ design reflects the input of local architects into city planning.

³² James Romm, “Alexander’s Policy of Perso-Macedonian Fusion,” in *The Landmark Arrian : the Campaigns of Alexander: a New Translation*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 386.

³³ Bernard, *Ai Khanoum on the Oxus: A Hellenistic City in Central Asia*, 53: 77

³⁴ S. B Downey, “The Citadel Palace at Dura-Europos,” *Syria* 63, no. 1/2 (1986): 27–37.

³⁵ Mairs, “The ‘Temple with Indented Niches’ at Ai Khanoum: Ethnic and Civic Identity in Hellenistic Bactria.”

Religious practice at Ai Khánum seems to have born little or no ethnic connotation, and an individual could worship at the temple without making an explicit statement about their ethnic affiliation.³⁶ Though poorly contextualized, the artifacts found within the temple suggest that deities from a variety of traditions were worshiped therein.³⁷ Indeed, a comparison with Ptolemaic Egypt suggests that syncretistic cults were actively used during the first few generations of Hellenistic rule to encourage unity in the populace.³⁸

In contrast, the structures with purely Greek features, such as the heroön and the gymnasium, must have had more explicit ethnic connotations. Their very existence in the original city plan was a conscious assertion of Greek culture by its designers. Excavations of Ai Khánum's gymnasium uncovered several inscriptions and statues dedicated to Hermes and Hercules – the traditional protectors of Greek gymnasia. This suggests that this building's function was consistent with other gymnasia Greek society; it was a center for the education and enculturation of young men into Greek traditions and values.³⁹

The heroön commemorated the mythical founder of the city, and would have played a similar role as the gymnasium. A list of "Delphic maxims," familiar to any educated member of the Hellenic world, were inscribed on it in literary Greek.⁴⁰ These maxims detailed the civic and moral responsibilities of the ideal Greek man⁴¹, in essence presenting the same lessons from the gymnasium in a much more publicly visible context. The heroön at Seleucia likely served a similar function for that city's inhabitants.⁴²

Each of these explicitly Greek structures served as metaphorical storehouses of Greek traditions, but just because they had strong ethnic connotations does not mean their use was restricted only to

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Paul Bernard, "The Greek Colony at Ai Khánum and Hellenism in Central Asia," in *Afghanistan : Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul*, ed. Fredrik T Hiebert and Pierre Cambon (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2008), 93.

³⁸ Romm, "Alexander's Policy of Perso-Macedonian Fusion." 387.

³⁹ Bernard, "The Greek Colony at Ai Khánum and Hellenism in Central Asia." 89.

⁴⁰ Bernard, *Ai Khanoum on the Oxus: A Hellenistic City in Central Asia*, 53.

⁴¹ Bernard, "The Greek Colony at Ai Khánum and Hellenism in Central Asia." 94

⁴² Mairs, "The 'Temple with Indented Niches' at Ai Khanoum: Ethnic and Civic Identity in Hellenistic Bactria."

those of Greek ancestry. Such buildings would have played a key role in defining what exactly it meant to be Greek to all the citizens of Aī Khánum and Seleucia. They were centers for the expression of Greek identity, and corresponded to ethnies rather ethnic groups.

Each of these structures, and the various degrees of syncretism they display, reflect decisions by the city's architects in the initial years of each city. They represent the means by which ethnicity was conceived and delineated in the public sphere. The seals from Seleucia, however, are personal items. They represent how individual and group identities articulated on a much more dynamic level than public architecture. In light of the variability and experimentation that characterized depictions of other Greek deities, the stasis in Athena designs is anomalous and suggests that depictions of this goddess could have been used as means cultural boundary marking for the wealthy citizens at Seleucia. Athena played a pivotal role in Greek religion for centuries, and by using time-honored ways of portraying her on public and private documents, a wealthy citizen could display an affinity to Greek culture.

Before the advent of the Hellenistic era, Tyche was a minor member of the Greek pantheon and would have lacked much of the cultural baggage of other deities. Artisans would have had to develop their own styles for portraying her, drawing from local traditions. A positive feedback may have resulted: any who wished to project a non-Greek or a hybrid identity chose those styles which, in turn, encouraged artisans to create more heavily syncretic images on new signet rings. Thus, at Seleucia a conservative "Greekness" was contrasted with a more innovative hybrid style. The distributions of these very common objects point to two different ethnies in the populace. Though they mirror the patterns seen in public architecture, the seals emphasize that personal identity can be much more ambiguous than group identity.

Conclusion

This analysis of ethnicity in Seleucid cities has thus far treated "Greeks" and "locals" as two

monolithic entities. The reality of group divisions was surely more complex. Greek, Macedonian, Bactrian, Persian, Jew, Babylonian, and other ethnies may each have used various overlapping ethnic markers to display their identity. This would have been further compounded by myriad regional and tribal affiliations that would have subdivided the populace. But because ethnies are so often defined along cultural boundary lines -- as exemplified by the ancient tendency to divide the world into "Greeks" and "barbarians" -- binary distinctions tend to become more salient over time. Ethnies in modern-day America such as "Hispanic" and "Native American" have developed through similar processes wherein only shared cultural traits are highlighted. What may once have been perceived as intractable differences among various Bactrian tribes would surely have become much less salient when faced with an invading army that was completely foreign, just as would the differences among mainland Greeks, Macedonians, and Ionians when isolated in an unfamiliar land.

This reflects the dynamic nature of ethnic markers and the processes by which they are created. Cultural norms that favored endogamy would have ultimately begun to reify these groups, increasing in-group homogeneity and making the abstract opposition between "Greek" and "non-Greek" more concrete as the generations progressed. It is likely that, over time, different ethnies actually did come to correspond with distinct groups within the populace. But the groups that resulted may have had only a minor resemblance to the settlers of those first generations. What it meant to be "Greek" at Seleucia and Ai Khanum in the 2nd century BC would have been very different from what it meant in the 4th century, just as being "Italian" has different connotations in New York and Naples. The extent to which some local populations also favored conservatism and separation from the Greeks is an avenue for further research, as relatively little is yet known about what should be considered, for instance, characteristically "Bactrian".

Concrete answers to the difficult questions of ethnicity ultimately lie in the fields of psychology and neuroscience, which are currently shedding light on the aspects of human cognition that makes

societies so readily divide themselves into increasingly smaller groups. Archaeology answers an equally significant question by showing how material objects allow these abstract concepts to shape the real world. Regardless of whether the architectural syncretism in the palace or temple at Aï Khánum only reflects the practical decision of an architect limited by his raw materials and labor force, over the centuries individuals asserting a mixed Greco-Bactrian ethnics could look to the patchwork of architectural motifs as an archetypal example of their identity. The same is true for the more distinctively Greek structures, whose conservative style does not necessarily reflect ethnically charged decisions at the time of their design. Rather, over time their conservative style would have attracted those who wished to assert their “Greekness.”

People and ideas from the vast spread of Alexander’s empire were allowed to intermingle on the streets of Seleucia and Aï Khánum and produce something entirely new. The fluid conceptions of ethnic identity brought on by intermarriage in the first generations of the Seleucid Empire established a framework that would define the social dynamics of all who came later. This is the true legacy of “Hellenization” in the Seleucid Empire. Rather than an “east meets west” accident of history, the complexity of Seleucid urbanism reflects fundamental processes that have driven cultural change for millennia.

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