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An 'Identity Crisis'? Identity and Its Discontents in Hellenistic Studies

Introduction

As the title of the present panel, 'Beyond Identity in the Hellenistic East', indicates, the theme of 'identity' in Hellenistic archaeology has become a source of some uneasiness, a concept whose theoretical underpinnings – and basic utility – have come to be seriously questioned. The following discussion aims to explore some of the reasons for this uneasiness, and ask what we might do to better articulate (perhaps even resolve) some of our theoretical and methodological concerns. My purpose is not to establish any particular ground-rules for defining or using identity in Hellenistic archaeology, but rather to stimulate discussion of the concept's present and future application, and the practical purposes we expect it to serve, by unpicking some of the theoretical issues involved.

The case against identity, in brief, is that it is vague and that it is fashionable. The problem with a theoretical question which is fashionable is, of course, that people start to invoke it, or even base entire studies around it, when, upon deeper reflection, it may not provide the most useful approach to the material in question. That much is a matter for individual conscience and communal academic policing. The accusation that 'identity' is an imprecise buzzword which does little to advance our understanding of ancient cultures, or provide any incentive to us to interrogate and criticise our own methodologies, is, however, a more pressing one.

The Pessimist's View: Identity in Roman Archaeology

It is easy to feel ambivalent about the word 'identity'. The increasing popularity of identity-based studies in Anglo-American archaeology in recent years has raised some difficult questions, and made us address some unpalatable truths: that sometimes we use 'identity' when we have little clear idea of what we mean by it, and that sometimes we even use it to avoid having to address and deconstruct cultural processes on a more intimate level.

The issue of Romanisation is a case in point. In the late 1980s and 1990s, a number of archaeological studies[1] began to examine the mechanics of Romanisation – a term of long standing[2] – in the western provinces of the Roman Empire. While the agenda was to provide new ways of looking at processes

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[1] Most notably MILLETT 1990 and WOOLF 1998.
[2] HAVERFIELD 1912.

of cultural and political change which went beyond one-sided models prioritising Rome and Roman culture, and imposing a bipolar Roman-native dichotomy, the 'New Romanisation' was open to criticism. Most crucial was the accusation that Romanisation, whatever its apparent new theoretical orientation, continued simply to be another way of saying 'acculturation' and gave undue emphasis to elite emulation of dominant Roman cultural models. Even with a shift in the parameters of the question, the very continued use of the term Romanisation – its semantic extension to refer to processes which didn't necessarily involve any 'Romanisation' *per se* – was also deeply problematic. Subsequent attempts to resituate the question have met with limited success, either because they advocated simply imposing some new universal model of cultural contact and change[3] or – and here 'identity' makes an appearance – because they side-stepped the issue by finding a less-loaded term to use. Identity has been touted as a way of "transcending the tired issue of Romanization"[4], but it has not offered as much in the way of actual progress as might have been hoped. With a new term – a term frequently invoked by archaeologists of other regions and periods – there has perhaps not been sufficient incentive to completely dismember and reconfigure questions of contact and change in the western Roman Empire.

The Hellenistic Perspective

If identity has become an issue of increasing prominence – and controversy – in Roman archaeology, this is old news to Hellenistic studies, where the question of who people were and how they defined themselves in the new cultural and political environments of the Hellenistic *oikoumene* has always been *the* central theme. J. G. Droysen's monumental *Geschichte des Hellenismus* (1836-43) developed the idea of the Hellenistic period as characterised by a Graeco-Oriental *Mischkultur*[5]. Whatever Droysen's original priorities (he was, for example, primarily interested in *Hellenismus*[6] as the stage of historical and cultural evolution between Classical Greece and the rise of Christianity), this has set the agenda for the subsequent development of the study of the Hellenistic world. Interpretations and perceptions of the encounter between Greek and Oriental have varied, but the encounter itself remains an ongoing preoccupation. Hellenistic identity, it seems, is something which speaks to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries' sense of fragmented, hybridised, constantly-evolving national and personal identities.

As well as the historical reasons for a focus on identity in Hellenistic studies, the nature of the surviving archaeological and textual evidence has inevitably tended to put questions of identity – especially ethnic identity – centre stage. The conquests of Alexander the Great, and the subsequent evolution of the various Hellenistic Successor states, meant the introduction of Greek culture, political control, and often sizeable immigrant populations, to the diverse lands of the former Persian Empire. This encounter is often highly visible in the architecture and material culture of the region, and Greek was only one of several written languages which continued in use. Those of us who work with such material also often have a very real sense of crossing disciplinary boundaries as we do so, whether because, as Classical archaeologists, we have to engage with the literature and methodology of other disciplines such as Near Eastern Studies, or textual criticism, or because, as is increasingly the case, our training has always straddled two or more academic departments.

As with the archaeology of the Roman Empire, however, we might highlight some areas of concern, ongoing topics of debate which lead us to question the dominance of 'identity' both as a theme and as a theoretical trope in Hellenistic archaeology.

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[3] WEBSTER 2001 is innovative in her proposal of a creolization-based model, but too doctrinaire.

[4] PITTS 2007, 693, who urges caution.

[5] See MOMIGLIANO 1970.

[6] More akin to 'Hellenistic civilisation' than the English 'Hellenism'.

Bollettino di Archeologia on line I 2010/ Volume speciale C / C5 / 5   Reg. Tribunale Roma 05.08.2010 n. 330 ISSN 2039 - 0076
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Some Problems in Hellenistic Identity

The Vocabulary of Identity

The preoccupation with ethnic and cultural interaction in the Hellenistic world has generated an increasingly sophisticated and ever-evolving vocabulary of cultural change and meaning, inherited or appropriated from a variety of sources, and given its own implications and application in the context of Hellenistic studies. Vocabularies of fusion, segregation, cosmopolitanism or multiculturalism have all been used with reference to the Hellenistic world, and these all need to be seen in the context of more recent intellectual and political history[7]. This terminology may be employed evocatively, rather than technically: sometimes a word is just a word. But often the terms we use in our conceptualisation of Hellenistic identity come loaded with their own theoretical and semantic baggage, of which it is important to be aware, whether or not we subscribe to it. An example is the term 'ethnicity' which has an extensive literature on the social sciences, where an ethnic identity is defined as a 'constructed identity', predicated upon a notion of common group origin and cultural traits, but with a variable relationship to objectively-observable characteristics. In this case, 'ethnicity' has transitioned over into archaeology and studies of the Hellenistic world, with its sociological connotations more or less intact[8].

This is not always desirable. Part of the reason for the success of ethnicity, as will be discussed further below, is that it does happen to provide constructive approaches to Hellenistic data sets, whether archaeological or papyrological. Where caution is needed is in the adoption of terminology without due reference to its history in its original field. Sometimes, Hellenistic material may suggest a new perspective, a reassessment of the issues involved, but we should never fall into the trap of believing that we can employ a term innocently.

One such case is the notion of 'hybridity' or 'hybridisation'. Concerned with "the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonisation"[9], it is easy to see why hybridity might be an issue of relevance to the Hellenistic world – and, indeed, the term has begun to appear on occasion in the academic literature. But 'hybridity' comes pre-packaged with a very specific technical sense in post-colonial studies, where, as well as historical focus on populations of mixed descent, and the development of hybrid cultural forms, the question of hybrid *discourse* has come to assume a certain prominence. The central text in post-colonial hybridity or hybrid-discourse theory is Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*[10]: it is cited to the point of ubiquity. But Bhabha's 'hybrid discourse' refers to something very specific, within the context of the field of post-colonial studies: it refers to a very modern, twentieth- and twenty-first century product of the post-colonial world, where literary works and public discourse have explored the 'in-between spaces' of the colonial situation, the new cultural forms and political ambiguities created by the interplay of people and cultures. Bhabha is a literary and cultural critic, not an historian, and his work is best cited for its treatment of the *discourse* of hybridity, not the dynamics of hybrid cultures (if we choose to use the term) themselves[11].

This critique of 'hybridity' may seem both pedantic and premature. But my purpose is to show how careful we must be, in employing technical vocabulary of cultural contact and change, to pay attention to its current theoretical use in other fields, neither citing blindly, nor being afraid to engage with debates outside our own discipline. In the Hellenistic world, we are faced with any number of things which we might choose to call 'hybrid': hybrid populations, created by immigration and intermarriage; hybrid material cultures, with input and influence from more than one cultural source; even hybrid forms of government or administration, where long-standing political, legal or religious institutions are incorporated within a new bureaucratic

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[7] WALBANK 1991/1992; BURSTEIN 1997, 12–13; Cartledge, GARNSEY, GRUEN 1997, 5.

[8] GOUDRIAAN 1988; JONES 1998; MAIRS 2007; MAIRS 2008.

[9] ASHCROFT, GRIFFITHS, TIFFIN 2003, 118.

[10] BHABHA 1994.

[11] See YOUNG 1995, for a useful clarification. Bhabha has also, it should been noted, come under heavy criticism for his dense writing style and use of jargon, winning the journal *Philosophy and Literature*'s 'Bad Writing Prize' in 1998.

Bollettino di Archeologia on line I 2010/ Volume speciale C / C5 / 5   Reg. Tribunale Roma 05.08.2010 n. 330 ISSN 2039 - 0076
www.archeologia.beniculturali.it

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framework. But one of the most interesting questions we can ask of such material is whether what we perceive as cultural or genetic hybridity was accompanied by any discourse of hybridity in the modern, post-colonial sense. Hybridisation as cultural process, and hybridity as discourse, are two very different things. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, we have a situation where the grey areas and ambiguities of cultural contact have become a topic worthy of exploration in themselves. In the construction of Hellenistic identities, what is most worthy of note is the lack, in the majority of cases, of any positive, public rhetoric of hybridity: in part, of course, because Greek cultural identity was, to whatever extent, bound up with structures of political power.

Part of the scholarly pleasure in investigating Hellenistic identities lies in trying to find appropriate explanatory or comparative models. This has traditionally meant a considerable level of engagement with other disciplines in the social sciences. But it is important to ensure that any borrowing of concepts or theoretical vocabulary is done in such a spirit of engagement, rather than appropriation without further reflection. Consideration of how the archaeological and documentary evidence from the Hellenistic world may or may not support the particular models of cultural change and contact developed with reference to other regions and periods is an area in which there is real potential for interdisciplinary dialogue.

Identity and the Archaeological Record

One of the most pressing concerns in identity-based studies of the Hellenistic world should be to make the case not just that 'identity' is a worthy topic of investigation, but that theoretical constructs of identity and its operation offer constructive, productive ways of approaching our data. This is obviously a debate which requires much longer than may practically be devoted to it here. I propose to address it through a single case study, the Hellenistic colonial city of Ai Khanoum in Bactria, modern northern Afghanistan[12]. I use this particular example in part to demonstrate that this remote, and comparatively neglected, region bears consideration alongside other regions of the Hellenistic world; but mostly because the archaeological evidence from Hellenistic Bactria is notoriously sparse and problematic. Our knowledge of Afghanistan and Central Asia in the Hellenistic period rests for the most part on numismatic evidence and a limited series of archaeological excavations at a restricted number of sites[13]. The available literary, epigraphic and documentary sources are, compared to regions closer to the Mediterranean, few in number and often fragmentary or lacking good archaeological or historical context[14]. Hellenistic Bactria is therefore a good testing ground for more theoretically-informed approaches to our ancient evidence; and it offers a useful case study for reflection on the potential pitfalls of such approaches.

The perceived 'problem' of Ai Khanoum lies in the diversity of forms of architecture, material culture and social practice attested at the site, and the fact that adherence to any particular cultural tradition does not appear to be determined by socio-economic status: there is no neat division between high-status Greeks on the one hand, and lower-status native Bactrians on the other. In a simplistic sense, some of the major institutions of the city are overtly 'Greek' (a classic semi-circular theatre set into the side of the acropolis; a large gymnasium with a dedication to Hermes and Heracles; a shrine to the city's founder, one Kineas, with a Greek inscription of Delphic maxims), while others draw on different traditions (an administrative quarter on a plan similar to that of Persian palaces; a main temple in traditionally a Mesopotamian architectural form with diverse – and some unusual - religious practices). Unfortunately, few domestic or funerary structures have been excavated. The dangerous temptation is to consider 'identity' at this site on a somewhat abstract level, as indicating 'cultural fusion' or Droysenian *Mischkultur* in action. But the fact remains that this city was planned, constructed and inhabited by people to whom it evidently made some kind of cultural sense. To

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[12] Considered in greater depth in MAIRS 2007, MAIRS 2008 and MAIRS forthcoming. The site of Ai Khanoum was published in eight volumes of archaeological reports by the Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan in the series *Fouilles d'Aï Khanoum* between 1973 and 1992; for a retrospective of the excavations, and the fate of the site in more recent times, see BERNARD 2001.

[13] See the useful discussion and literature review in FUSSMAN 1996.

[14] The Greek inscriptions from Bactria are now usefully collected in CANALI DE ROSSI 2004, with two subsequent discoveries in BERNARD, PINAULT, ROUGEMONT 2004.

borrow the vocabulary of hybridisation, this city, taken as a whole, displays a hybrid material culture, but did its inhabitants assert a hybrid identity? I would argue that they did not. The apparent cultural chaos at Ai Khanoum reveals, rather, a highly-structured approach to the construction and public display of their ethnic identity on the part of the inhabitants.

The identification of 'ethnic' behaviour in the archaeological record remains a contentious topic[15], still capable of being tarred by association with old approaches which equated material culture assemblages with ethnic groups. As noted above, an ethnic identity, in the modern anthropological literature, is defined as a 'constructed identity'. It may have a notional basis in common descent and/or language, but it is maintained through the active mobilisation of a particular repertoire of cultural traits, difference in which is perceived to mark the 'boundary' of the ethnic group[16]. The implications of this for the archaeological record are that: 1) we should not expect ethnic identity to be expressed through material-culture forms *per se*, but in the way material culture is used and perceived; and 2) not all forms of behaviour and material culture will have borne ethnic connotations – leaving us with the interesting task of attempting to determine what had ethnic resonance in the eyes of the agents, and what did not.

Returning to Ai Khanoum, we may make some remarks about expressions of identity and forms of public behaviour and material culture in this particular context. In some locations in the city, a particular kind of Greek identity is emphasised, bound up with political authority and idiosyncratically-Greek cultural institutions. The theatre and gymnasium are both of an excessively large size, given the probable population of the city, suggesting they served a constituency well beyond its boundaries. There is also the shrine of the city's founder, one Kineas, with the famous inscription of Delphic maxims[17] – an overt attempt to emphasise a connection to the centre of the Greek world. The epigraphic record, such as it is, is purely Greek, and inscriptions come only from the founder's shrine and gymnasium, with a few more Greek texts on ceramics and papyrus from the administrative quarter. But elsewhere in the city, things are more complicated. Perhaps the most perplexing case is the main temple, which is in an architectural form normally referred to as 'Mesopotamian', which had a central cult statue in classical Greek form, and where a wide range of cult practices are attested, ranging from burnt offerings on small pedestals in the courtyard, to libations to the earth at the back of the temple platform. There is no major 'Greek-style' temple anywhere in the city: the constituency of this temple is the same as that of the theatre, gymnasium and other major institutions.

The first point to be made is that many of the apparently confusing features of Ai Khanoum's urban landscape can be explained by taking an Achaemenid perspective. The simplest solution is that the form of the main administrative quarter, and the main temple, have their origins in Mesopotamia and Persia, and come from the time when Bactria was under Persian control. Unfortunately we lack local archaeological parallels at present, but Bactria has by no means been thoroughly archaeologically explored. But a complementary way of understanding the patterns of building and material culture at Ai Khanoum is to look at them in terms of the construction and maintenance of ethnic boundaries. This works in terms of simple urban zoning – all of the 'Greek' institutions, with the exception of the theatre (which is built against a hillside for practical purposes), as well as the centre of the city's administration, are located in a separate district, to which access is restricted by monumental *propylaea* off the main street – but also on a more subtle level. If we accept that the theatre, gymnasium, founder-shrine, and Delphic inscription mean that some notion of Greek identity was important to at least certain segments of the city's population, then we can view the city's broader, more complex assemblage of material culture in terms of a process of the selection and rationalisation of ethnic attributes. Greek identity is clearly expressed in certain arenas, through the display of certain cultural traits and elements of the population's cultural heritage. But in other areas, matters are more flexible. The overtly 'non-Greek' main temple does not have to contradict a strong Greek identity: it is perfectly possible that, to those whose notion of their Greekness was bound up in other institutions, what they did at the temple bore no ethnic connotations. Our own perceptions – and those of contemporary

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[15] History and theory: JONES 1998; more practical approach in SMITH 2003.
[16] BARTH 1969; ERIKSEN 1993.
[17] Classic discussion by ROBERT 1968.

outsiders – may of course be different.

Identity and Ethnicity

I have deliberately not, thus far, tackled the question of what we mean when we talk about 'identity' in the first place. It is probably more helpful to look at current scholarly usage, rather than attempt any prescriptive dictionary definition. In a post-cartesian sense, personal identity refers to an individual's sense of themselves as a discrete, separate entity, and of their relationship to their social and physical enviroment. The term's common usage in the social sciences and in archaeology is perhaps less bound up with notions of personhood and individuality, and indicates the ways in which individuals label themselves, and are labelled, as members of various groups, according to factors such as gender, age, class, race, ethnicity or profession.

With reference to the Hellenistic world, however, 'identity' more often than not has primarily cultural or ethnic implications. Our tendency is often to highlight the ethnic angle, because this is what is, to us, most striking about the material. Even where it was a topic of especial interest to the agents themselves, however, the ethnic aspect of an individual's identity cannot be separated out from other concerns. In order to understand the evolving ethnic identities of the population of Hellenistic Egypt, for example, we have first to understand that the initial immigrant Greek population, while numerically relatively small, was politically dominant and accorded certain privileges; that intermarriage between Greek men and Egypt women was, over several generations, fairly commonplace[18]; that individuals might qualify as 'Greek', for tax purposes, either through total or partial Greek descent, or through membership of certain professional groups[19]; and that an individual might, in a structured manner, cross the ethnic divide through use of Greek or Egyptian languages, legal systems or naming conventions. It is therefore all but impossible to discuss the ethnic identity of an individual in the papyrological record without also taking into account questions of gender and professional roles, as well as age, social status and any number of other 'identities'. Identity is not just ethnic, and even ethnic identity is not just ethnic. This is a fairly simple point, but it is still often the case, with Hellenistic material, that our ethnic and cultural concerns impede more holistic consideration of personal and corporate identities.

I introduce this final 'problem' in Hellenistic identity – that of the relationship between the umbrella category of 'identity' and its constituent ethnic, gender or professional (etc.) aspects – in part as a very conscious form of penance for the ethnicity-centric tone of the preceding discussion. We do 'identity' a greater service by being specific about what characteristics and forms of behaviour may be involved, and how they relate to one another, then by dogged adherence to an approach which prioritises one aspect of an individual or community's wider identity to the exclusion of others.

Conclusion

'Identity' is a term which it is all too easy to invoke casually. If it is to pre-empt or sidestep accusations that it is being employed merely as a fashionable buzzword, or a form of studied imprecision, then we need to think about where, in practical terms we are going with the whole enterprise, and what we seek to achieve by introducing identity as a concept. If use of the term is to continue to be justifiable, then it has to be made a functional methodological workhorse, not some glossy theoretical dressing on otherwise ineloquent material.

Much of the preceding discussion – perhaps too much – has been framed in the abstract. While the debate over identity and its abuses in archaeology has stagnated somewhat – not least because the cycle of quotation and re-quotation and re-statement of issues and problems in the literature in recent years has

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[18] See e.g. LA'DA 2002 on sex ratios.
[19] See discussions in CLARYSSE, THOMPSON 2006.

become self-perpetuating - the concept of 'identity' does, I would argue, have practical potential in orienting our approaches to ancient material. Awareness of the kinds of behaviour involved in the construction and assertion of identities can lead us to evaluate archaeological data in particular ways. For example, if we think in terms of ethnic behaviour which is selective in the forms of material culture and public display to which ethnic significance is attached, then it may be easier to see the social order underlying complex configurations of cultural traits in the archaeological record.

In choosing to invoke the notion of 'identity' in studies of the Hellenistic world, we are not only indicating an interest in the various ethnic, social, gender or professional identities of the past populations we investigate, but also committing to a certain analytical device.

The archaeological and documentary evidence from the Hellenistic world indicates that reflection on their own identities was enough of a concern to contemporary populations to justify the modern scholarly obsession; and 'identity' as a rhetorical or analytical device, carefully used, still offers great potential. But this use of identity as an analytical tool, in light of recent discussions, does require some justification. In many cases, it can be put to good, practical use in suggesting useful models for particular data sets, but the term is also in danger of discrediting itself by overuse. The value of theoretical introspection is in making us choose our battles, thinking more carefully about where and how we choose to introduce the notion of 'identity' in the first place.

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