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Le regalità ibride in Oriente da Alessandro ai Sasanidi

a cura di
Generoso Cefalo, Alessandro Magnani



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FATHER AND SON.

The Euthydemid Dynasty in Baktria and India. Between Immanence and Transcendence

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ABSTRACT

The present paper addresses the case study of Euthydemos I of Baktria and his claim to kingship as protector of the civilized Hellenistic world against the barbaric onslaught from the North. Its goal is to reframe the history of Central Asian kingship during the Hellenistic period. Within a *longue durée* perspective on how royal (sacred) power was narrated and performed. Studying monarchic self-representation and public performance strategies in the Hellenistic East is still hampered by considerable theoretical shortcomings. The most remarkable is that the region's history as an imperial space (or even a political center in its own right) still begins with Alexander III (the Great). However, for more than two centuries before the Makedonian conquest, the Achaemenid rulers developed a set of ideological tropes on kingship that set the benchmark for understanding and performing royalty from the Aegean to the Indus. The social construction of the Eastern (nomadic) enemy threatening the imperial borderland played a crucial role in this intellectual framework. Rooted in a longer tradition of Ancient Near Eastern thought on Empire, those narratives made Achaemenid kings distinctive and palatable to the multicultural audience of their Empire. As the Persian domain evolved into the post-conquest (Hellenistic) world, every power-to-be was forced to reckon with these concepts and their performative representation. Centuries after the demise of Achaemenid power, political agents and (would-be) kings tapped into the ideological framework established by the Persian kings; however, they filtered it through new cultural lenses to stage or claim validity and success within their own cultural context and political landscape.

Keywords: Achaemenid Empire; Baktria; Central Asia; Euthydemos I; Imperial Turn; Sacred Kingship

> καθ᾽ ὅλου δέφησιν ἐκεῖνος τῆς συμπάσης Ἀριανῆς πρόσχημα εἶναι τὴν Βακτριανήν.
> *In short, Apollodoros* (of Artemita: *BNJ* 779) *says that Baktria is the ornament of Areia as a whole*. (STR. 11, 11, 2)

1. Introduction. After the Flood. Kingship in the Hellenistic Far East: Themes and Issues

The study of kingship in the Hellenistic world is a complicated subject, which, despite an enduring tradition of scholarly engagement, still faces considerable methodological questions and theoretical challenges. This is particularly true for Central Asia during the time span between Alexander's conquest in the late fourth century BCE (ca. 329-327) and the abandonment of the Baktrian city of Āï Xānum: in other words, 'Hellenistic' Baktria under the early Successors, the Seleukids, and the so-called (a non-neutral term in itself) 'Graeco-Baktrian' kingdom.[1] The most outstanding of the problems scholars of this period face pertains to the fact that it is not even clear how many kings ruled North of the Hindūkūš between Diodotos' access to power, to be placed somewhere around the mid-3rd century BCE, and the abandonment of the royal city of Āï Xānum approximately one

1 In its final stages of research and writing, this paper benefitted from the support of a MSCA Post-Doctoral Fellowship (Grant agreement nr. 101268770), which I gratefully acknowledge. I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers of the splendid Ravenna conference on 'hybrid kingship' (November 26th-27th, 2024) out of which the present volume originated for their invitation and engagement with the ideas presented then and reworked here. The anonymous reviewers' comments strengthened the argument of the present paper and saved me from inconsistencies. All the remaining errors are my own. I dedicate these pages to friends, mentors (and critics) near and far. In gratitude for their life companionship: to *ġāzī* Tomas *efendi*, Luca, Elena, Carlota, Bekır, Giuseppe, Andrea, Stefano, and Silvia. To 'Aṭā, for what should have been an unforgettable trip across (parts of) the Graeco-Baktrian domains. To Ṣaba, Negār, and Behnāz, for their love and presence in my life, never asking, always giving. To Īrān and its people. May they at last be free of the gods (and kings) who claim mastery over them.
See HOO – WIESEHÖFER 2022. The name is retained here for clarity, but it needs emphasis that the essentializing nature of this *ethnikon* (Greek 'and' Baktrian) is, first, a modern construct nowhere attested in the sources and, more importantly, reflects understandings of cultural belonging and identity making now long outdated: HOO 2022, pp. 21-37.

century later.[2] While narrative literary sources only record eight rulers, the numismatic evidence supplies data on more than forty (kings and queens).[3] How to arrange these monarchs chronologically, to determine the extent of the territory they ruled, as well as understanding the sociopolitical principle(s) underlying their self-fashioning as *basileis*, remains thus open to discussion as the discovery of new evidence or a reappraisal of old datasets may upend the current state of knowledge at any time.[4]

A second obstacle is methodological. Ever since the foundational works on the history of Central Asian (and Indian) Empires in the Hellenistic period, how to culturally situate these polities has occupied center stage in scholarly discussion. Famously, Tarn vocally claimed Baktria as an integral part of Seleukid (hence Hellenistic – in his understanding, meaning *Greek*) history. At the same time, Narain responded by suggesting the conquerors' social, political, and cultural absorption into the framework of the Indic world.[5] Since then, more nuanced approaches to the question have been developed, and current scholarship has moved towards analytical frameworks that strive to appreciate Baktria as "a place of, and on its own", and not as the (political, economic, cultural) offshoot of some other 'center'.[6]

However, the study of kingship appears to remain constrained by a remarkable theoretical straitjacket. Despite acknowledging the complexity of Baktria's political formations (which implies the existence of multiple traditions from which to draw to validate claims to power), monarchical self-fashioning is still approached from the standpoint of Alexander's legacy and the (cultural, political, and economic) impact of his campaign on the localities of Central Asia – and beyond.[7] Alternatively, Baktrian kingship

2 COLORU 2009, pp. 168-172 for the standard account of the Diodotids' ascendancy. MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2018 offers a detailed reappraisal of the last days of Āï Xānum.

3 MORRIS 2020b on the available sources. Recent detailed numismatic treatments of the history of Hellenistic kingship in Baktria include BORDEAUX 2018 and GLENN 2020.

4 Cfr. JAKOBSSON 2020.

5 TARN 1938, pp. xix-xxiii. For the opposite perspective: NARAIN 1951, pp. 1-11.

6 Quote from HOO 2020, p. 563. MAIRS 2014 marked a watershed in approaching the question of Central Asian Hellenism (in itself a loaded concept: HOO 2022, pp. 38-70). For the most updated overview of current research questions and directions see HOO 2023a and HOO 2024.

7 HOO 2023b has recently remarked on how problematic such a concept is, as the currently available evidence does not substantiate the still ubiquitous claims of Alexander's transformative impact on the sociopolitical landscape of Central Asia. See furthermore DEGEN 2025 for a problematization of the economic side of the question of Alexander's 'revolution' across former Persian lands.

in the post-Alexander period is seen as part conversant with (or responsive to) the wider Afro-Eurasian world of the Hellenistic Empires, a competitive environment in which kingly prowess on the battlefield was a paramount instrument to assert authority over subjects or to claim acceptance among rivaling peers.[8] Once again, the implicit (or at times explicit) assumption is the fundamental Greekness of the cultural templates underpinning the worldviews of the Hellenistic rulers.[9] This assumption is problematic in several respects, as stressed by recent work on the ideology and society under the Seleukid dynasty, the most immediate but, as argued here, by no means the *only*, reference point of the Baktrian kings, at least until Parthia's rise to dominance in the Near East irretrievably established itself.[10]

Furthermore, perhaps the most severe pitfall in scholarship on Baktrian kingship is structural in that it does not account (enough) for the Ancient Near Eastern traditions of monarchical discourse, whose impact on the conceptualization of the king's persona as well as on the performative strategies to articulate royal claims over a timespan of almost three millennia across Afro-Eurasia is becoming increasingly apparent thanks to comparative scholarship on Empires.[11] As political formations dependent

8 MORRIS 2020a, pp. 70-71. See von REDEN 2020, pp. 29-32 for a recent treatment of the social and cultural premises underpinning the Hellenistic monarchies, with further literature. Cfr. most recently HOO 2024, pp. 391-396.

9 Arsakid Parthia, for once, is still too often considered not only as a 'chronological' newcomer on the competitive stage of the (Eastern) Hellenistic world, but as 'reacting' against, and accommodating to, the cultural, if not political and military, pressure of the neighboring powers rather than as a transformative force in its own right: see recently OLBRYCHT 2021 for a partial corrective. Arsakid ideologies of kingship do not enjoy the prominence they arguably deserve in comparative investigations on (divine) kingship, neither in general, nor according to the theoretical templates presented in this paper, as the very question of whether the Arsakid monarchs can be defined as divine remains open to debate (*e.g.* DĄBROWA 2014). The argument put forward here begs for renewed consideration of Arsakid kingship in discussions of royal strategies of self-representation among the Graeco-Baktrians, not least considering that Justin's synchronism (IUST. 41, 4) between Arsakes' assumption of kingship and Diodotos' 'revolt' (CHRUBASIK 2016, pp. 48-60, WENGHOFER 2018), while arguably primarily serving literary purposes from a Roman intellectual standpoint (MAIRS 2022) invites more sustained reflection on ideological cross-fertilizations and competition on both the political and the cosmological plane (cfr. DALE 2014 for the early-modern period).

10 For recent discussion among a steadily growing bibliography, see PLISCHKE 2014 and STROOTMAN 2023a. WÜNSCH 2022 offers a more conservative approach. HOO 2025 for an intriguing argument concerning the 'othering' process (FORSÉN – LAMPINEN 2024) of Parthia, compared to Baktria, in (later) Greek and Roman literary sources as possibly reflecting identity-building dynamics (if not outright ethnogenetic processes) in Baktria itself, at least at the level of its kings.

11 See recently ROLLINGER 2023a on the concept of Empire in the first Millennium BCE and DEGEN 2022a on Alexander. Compare HOO 2024, pp. 363-366 on "Pre-Hellenistic traditions of kingship", imply-

on the management of (spatial, political, social, religious, and cultural) differences, Empires rely on crafting narrative strategies to entice recognition, acceptance, and compliance from their subjects.[12] These 'languages of power' need to be at the same time distinctive enough to plausibly support the claim to exceptionalism, which is a hallmark of the imperial experience across world history, and sufficiently flexible to accommodate the cultural frameworks of the audiences they cater to: those imperial élites for which often the only shared reference point is the (aspirational) belonging to the ruling class of the Empire.[13] Hence, discursive traditions on imperialism develop out of such a structural need for rulers to elicit support and for (some among the) ruled to demonstrate, or claim, fluency in the vocabulary and culture of imperial power, which in turn signals participation (at least the claim thereof) in the social and political class that makes use of said jargon.[14]

Across Afro-Eurasia, staging the discovery and conquest of lands and people beyond the pale of previous rulers emerges as a staple of this imperial rhetoric. First consistently developed by the Neo-Assyrian kings, such a trope was taken over and repurposed by the Achaemenids, under whose watch the concept of Empire and imperialism was transformed apace with the unprecedented expansion of their rule.[15] Since the campaign(s?) of Cyrus II in the mid-6th century, Central Asia – particularly Baktria – became an essential part of this imperial narrative, as the Achaemenids transformed the region into a critically important borderland and a staging ground for performative acts of kingship.[16] As Baktria morphed into what has recently been called an "imperial space" (by which it is meant a polit-

ing a cultural discontinuity between a world before and one after Alexander's conquest which this paper sets out to challenge, or at least nuance.

12 BURBANK – COOPER 2010 for an influential comparative and world-historical exploration of the politics and aspirational visions of Empires (with the not insignificant drawback of a chosen starting point with Rome, thus sidelining at least three millennia of thinking with and about Empire: OELLIG 2023).

13 On imperial "official language" as it emerges from the sources on Alexander's conquest (and reworking earlier royal trope from Achaemenid discursive universe), see DEGEN 2022b. Sustained engagement with Indic sources on Empire-building and narratives thereof remains a scholarly *desideratum*.

14 CANEPA 2024 for a recent insightful discussion of the rhetorical and performative aspects of what he terms "Persian cultures of power" across Afro-Eurasia.

15 ROLLINGER 2023b for a synthesis of recent scholarship on 'imperiality' in the first Millennium BCE. See now furthermore the important considerations of Sam Blankenship in this volume.

16 Echoes thereof are still detectable in the literary sources, while material culture supplies additional, primary evidence. See recently TUPLIN 2020 and now FERRARIO 2025.

ical and economic center rather than a subject region, however important, of an imperial heartland located somewhere else), these traditions arguably provided considerable social and symbolic capital to the new would-be rulers. After all, narrative and performative strategies of imperial success and sanctioned rule tend to linger on across space, time, and even the social foundations of imperial authority. Indeed, even when transformed (barely) beyond recognition, at least for the contemporary observer, they gain strength from past experiences of sovereignty.[17]

It is against such a theoretical background that this paper suggests approaching the rhetoric and performative displays of Baktrian kingship in the Hellenistic period. It does so by way of a case study focusing on the establishment of the Euthydemid dynasty (ca. 230-175 BCE). The main reason to do so is that (some among) the members of this ruling family – Euthydemos I and his son Demetrios I - are among the few kings mentioned in the literary sources (especially Polybios) for which it is possible to sketch an outline of their reign in the broader political, cultural, and, as it shall be argued soon, religious context of their time. Furthermore, their rise to power on the local as well as the Afro-Eurasian stage is also reflected in the only specimen of epigraphic evidence so far discovered referencing a Baktrian king (the so-called Kūlob inscription from modern-day Tağikistān). This allows further first-hand insights into the vocabulary of the dynasty's understanding of kingship and, hence, may provide additional context for reconstructing the tradition in which it was steeped. In a second step, zooming in on Demetrios' visual language shall afford some insights into a so-far rather neglected aspect of Baktrian kingship: the interplay of cosmic visions of rule whose traditional reference points and innovative refashioning can fruitfully be explored through the prism of anthropological theory and ethnohistorical analysis.[18]

17 One remarkable case in point is the Caliphate, for despite the apparent radical alterity of its rulers' source of authority (a new god), they draw upon traditions of kingship whose core templates arch back to the Achaemenid kings, if not even the Assyrians: see MARSHAM 2021 for a recent overview and AL-'AẒMEH 1997 for a foundational discussion of Muslim (divine) kingship as born in the crucible of competing immanentist and transcendentalist visions of sovereignty in Late Antiquity (on which cfr. *e.g.*, STRATHERN 2017 and further below in this paper). MORRIS 2020a, pp. 88 on Baktria's transformation into an 'imperial space' with SAFA'Ī forthcoming for the region pivotal importance under the Achaemenids

18 HOO 2024, pp. 386-395 on kingship and the divine in Hellenistic Baktria, seen however through a Weberian, charismatic framework which, as argued below, needs further contextualization and a more

2. Not Your Classic Rebel. Euthydemos Rising

Euthydemos came to power around 230 BCE by overthrowing either the son of Diodotos I or, according to a reappraisal of the numismatic evidence, a relative of his, possibly named Antiochos Nikator.[19] It is reasonable to think that the would-be dynastic founder covered a military appointment of some importance under the Diodotids before his bid for power.[20] However, nothing is certain about where Euthydemos served, to say nothing of the social and political networks that may have come to his help as he launched his grab for the royal title. Little is known about the early phase of his reign. He may or may not have been in contact with the powerful satrap of Media, Molon, whose revolt against the authority of a young Antiochos III is said by Polybios to have relied upon the compliance of neighboring strongmen.[21] The rise of Arsakid Parthia confronted Euthydemos with a powerful competitor for overlordship in Central Asia.[22] The new king seems to have adopted a highly aggressive stance against the new adversary, defaulting on a previous treaty arranged by Diodotos II and resorting to armed conflict in the West of his recently acquired realm.[23] This policy change has been attributed either to an 'anti-barbaric' attitude of the new king or to the geopolitical constraints dictated by the 'interstate anarchy' characteristic of the Hellenistic world.[24] However, it is more productive to see Euthydemos' ac-

robust theoretical grounding, not least because its sociological take on (ancient) kingship, especially as pioneered in the foundational GEHRKE 1982, considerably overshadows the original 'religious' framework of Weber's own concept of charisma (ADAIR-TOTEFF 2021 with WEBER 2005, pp. 461-462, where charisma it is explicitly discussed as a God-given gift and its implementation on earth as a divine mission). As pointed out in STRATHERN 2017, pp. 22, rarely in the pre-19th century world has political authority given up on the opportunity to ground itself in religious vocabulary and discourse.

19 COLORU 2009, 176, GLENN 2020, 66-68. BORDEAUX 2018, 99-101 is skeptic (perhaps unduly so) on the existence of Antiochos Nikator.

20 LERNER 1996.

21 PLB. 5, 43, 6. See CHRUBASIK 2016, pp. 221-223.

22 OVERTOOM 2020, pp. 137-142.

23 Cfr. COLORU 2009, pp. 172-173 with PLISCHKE 2014, pp. 215-218.

24 COLORU 2009, p. 177, OVERTOOM 2020, pp. 132-149. In fact, it is arguably more historically pertinent (and analytically productive) to think of the heightened competition among Hellenistic kings in terms of the instability characteristic of "galactic politics" (TAMBIAH 1976, pp. 102-131 with discussion in GRAEBER – SAHLINS 2017, pp. 345-376) following the downfall of a former hegemonic power, in this case the Achaemenids, the latter in turn often being a consequence itself of said 'galactic' political, cultural, and spiritual arrangement (*contra* BARFIELD 2023, pp. 172-210 whose mechanical understanding of "secondary state formations" or, in his parlance, "shadow Empires" appears thoroughly unsuited to appreciate the historical nuances at work in the Hellenistic world, or elsewhere). Conflicting claims to

tions (as well as those of his predecessor Diodotos I and his rival Arsakes/Aršak I) as performative actions aimed at staging authoritative kingship in the eyes of their subjects *and* peers.[25] As would-be kings rivaled for élite acceptance across a vast and contested territory, enacting victory on the battlefield at the frontier of the territory each warlord claimed as his offered the most straightforward path towards authoritative rule as well as, the ethnohistorical record suggests, a dramatic resort of charismatic (in its original religious understanding as divinely sanctioned, awe-inspiring, and terror-infusing 'metapersonal', or unearthly, power) aura to assert oneself on the theatrically performative stage of royalty. For dynastic founders particularly, this amounted to a particularly alluring strategy of power-communication.[26] Indeed, this is how kingship had been performed and narrated in Central Asia since *at least* the time of the Achaemenid kings.[27] Judging from his remarkable monetary output, it can be argued that, eventually, Euthydemos succeeded in consolidating his power across Baktria. His expenditures may be suggestive of substantial investment in the military, arguably a way to reward the support of local powerholders in whose hands lay the recruitment of the famed cavalry and the management of its logistics.[28] The sources' spotlight again invests Euthydemos at the time of

universal rulership in a context of material *and* discursive incapability of asserting supremacy results in political instability until a new hegemonic force arises (Rome in the case of the Hellenistic world). Cfr. BRACK 2018 on the example of post-Chinggisid Eurasia.

25 WÜNSCH 2022, pp. 293-298.

26 SAHLINS 2009, p. 183.

27 DEGEN 2022a, pp. 332-362. HOO 2024, pp. 370-379 on "the warrior-king": the Achaemenid and broader Near Eastern precedent is significantly overlooked in her discussion, and the same goes for the more general religious undertone of (battle-related) violence as the ideal stage on which to perform not just divinely sanctioned 'political' authority ('charisma'), but the rather considerably more alluring 'supernatural' capacity of bringing material prosperity and fortune to both land and subject in the here-and-now as well as in the future, ideally 'forever' (LINCOLN 2008, SAHLINS 2009, p. 179). The fact that, lacking textual evidence, we know next to nothing of the social organization and religious worldviews of pre-Achaemenid Northeastern Central Asia complicates considerably our understanding of how Indigenous people may have accommodated Persian cosmologies of power into their own (cfr. GNOLI 1989, pp. 29-70 on the "Avestan Aryans"). Nevertheless, the dazzlingly rich material culture of sites such as Gonur Dêpe in Bronze-Age Margiana (SARIANIDI 2002 for an accessible and instructive introduction) compellingly suggest that immanentist visions of the world and of humanity's place in it were at play there as well, thus providing a suitable cultural environment for divinized imaginations of kingship to play out in Achaemenid times and beyond.

28 BORDEAUX 2018, pp. 104-106, GLENN 2020, pp. 69-82. On local magnates' engagement in Euthydemos' system of power cfr. MORRIS 2020a, p. 73 and LERICHE 1985.

the great campaign waged across the Eastern satrapies by Antiochos III.[29] Between 208 and 206 BCE, the Seleukid king besieged his Baktrian rival in a stronghold, which is usually identified with Baktra based on the testimony of Polybios. The feat achieved everlasting fame as one of the most remarkable military endeavors of antiquity.[30] However, research into the toponymy and historical geography of Hellenistic Central Asia suggests that the confrontation actually took place in Sogdiana (Zariaspa being Marakanda).[31] Numismatic evidence of Antiochos' coinage found in the area may support this hypothesis, which would accordingly significantly reshape current understandings of Euthydemos' geography of power as well as the social base of his tenure as king.[32] The diplomatic negotiations that developed out of the military deadlock in which both contestants found themselves engulfed is the focus of Polybios' longest fragment on Central Asian history, which also provides the most significant amount of information on Euthydemos and his self-fashioning against a rival king.[33] According to the *Histories*, Euthydemos' claimed authority over Baktria as the avenger of disloyal subjects (the Diodotids) and, most importantly for the present argument, as the bulwark against alleged nomadic hordes lurking from the North. Without him, Central Asia would have become "utterly barbarized" (ἐκβαρβαρωθήσεσθαι).[34] Several scholars still believe that the nomadic threat was real, or at least that Euthydemos played into a shared (Greek) intellectual discourse on identity and the struggle of the local im-

29 PLISCHKE 2014, pp. 265-279. DUMKE 2017 for a numismatist's take on the Central Asian leg of the campaign.

30 PLB. 29, 12. On Antiochos' siege of "Zariaspa in Baktria" (εἰς πόλιν Ζαριάσπαν τῆς Βακτριανῆς) cfr. PLB. 10, 49. SCOLNIC – WRIGHTSON forthcoming for a critical reassessment of Polybios' account, which deserves careful scholarly discussion as it promises (or threatens) to upend even one of the few so-far uncontested absolute chronological anchor points of Hellenistic Baktrian history.

31 See most recently RAPIN 2023 with previous references and detailed discussion of the available evidence with Falk 2025 for critical engagement with Rapin's theories..

32 ATAKHODJAEV 2013. Ongoing archaeological excavations at *both* Marakanda (Achaemenid Afrāsīāb) *and* Baktra have not yet brought to light evidence of the destruction that such a long military enterprise must have brought in its train (settlement displacements, stratigraphic layers of fire, and so on). The numismatic evidence, however, leaves little room to speculate that the Baktrian campaign did not take place on the scale it did, or at all (even more unlikely). Whether or not PLB. 29, 12 did refer to the Seleukid king's campaign or to another event (the fall of Āï Xānum, according to SCOLNIC – WRIGHTSON forthcoming) may for now remain open to discussion.

33 PLB. 11, 34.

34 PLB. 11, 34, 5.

migrants (colonists) to preserve it.[35] Both perspectives are questionable. For once, later administrative evidence survives, suggesting that 'nomads' were, in fact, an important component of local societies, to the point that they served as auxiliaries in, and, perhaps, even as standing members of, the Baktrian armed forces.[36] As for the claim that *Greek* settlers feared preserving their *Greek* identity, the literary agenda and ideological component thereof has been recently investigated and contextualized, suggesting that social, political, cultural (to say nothing of *ethnic*) exclusionism could hardly have been a viable basis on which to claim authority both as an autonomous Baktrian ruler or even a Seleukid appointee.[37] In fact, the visual strategies adopted during what can arguably be considered the first attempt at power building in Central Asia in the aftermath of Alexander's conquest (by a still-mysterious individual named Sōphytos, as testified by his coinage) reveals a much more complex and fluid situation on the ground, where semantic polyvalency and cultural translatability were instrumental in catering to as broad an audience as possible, on earth as much as in heaven.[38] In short, the language of power in Central Asia went beyond the grammar

35 COLORU 2009, p. 182, with references, but see DUMKE 2015. For a more nuanced argument (Euthydemos leveraging 'Greek' discourses on 'Otherness' - on which see SKINNER 2024) note STROOTMAN 2023b, p. 91 and now Hoo 2025, pp. 38-41.

36 MORRIS 2020a, p. 73 with literature.

37 WENGHOFER 2018 but see DUMKE 2021 for a more problematic approach to the numismatic evidence from South of the Hindūkūš. It may be pointed out that similar questions are never asked, certainly not with the same urgence, regarding the locals. Did the Baktrians ever feel threatened in their cultural or religious identity by the allegedly sweeping 'Hellenization' (whatever the word may actually mean: HOO 2022, pp. 73-125 on two prominent Central Asian case studies) carried out by the Seleukids (KOSMIN 2014, pp. 59-77) and, according to some, the *Greek* rulers of Central Asia from Diodotos onwards? And if so, why did they not react the way they could have? For what is worth, Curtius' account of the first 'revolt' against the post-Alexandrian political order (CURT. 9, 7, 1-11, with ILIAKIS 2013, pp. 190 and MAIRS 2022, pp. 236-239) makes quite clear that newcomers and older inhabitants (at least among the upper social strata) had no problems in ganging up together to pursue power politics. Furthermore, it may be about time to reconsider the extent to which a ruling *élite* entrenched in Baktria for almost a century may still be *functionally* considered 'Greek' rather than Baktrian. True enough, the *construction* of alterity as to buttress claims to kingship is not unknown in the ethnohistorical record (indeed, stranger-kingship may amount to one of the quintessential models of political formation and authority-building across world history, as argued most recently in GRAEBER – SAHLINS 2017, pp. 223-248 on the example of the Mexica). However, even such claims had to make cultural sense for the ruled as much as for the rulers, or else the cultural purchase of the framework would have been utterly invalidated.

38 HÄRTEL 2023. See BRACK 2018, p. 1151 (with further references) on "translatability" as a quintessential hallmark of immanentist religiosity – arguably a heuristically more productive concept than 'syncretism', 'hybridization', or some variation on the idea of *interpretation*, as the 'translation' act is predicated upon the goal of individuals and social groups to harness more-than-human powers to achieve earthly goals, the most basic of which being prosperity and well-being. From this standpoint, the plausi-

and vocabulary of Greek (or Makedonian) kingship.[39] As this paper sets out to show through the two following case studies, on the one hand, it tapped into a longer transcultural tradition of imperial rhetoric centered on the social construction of an 'enemy at the gate' conveniently located beyond a (culturally constructed and, ideally, 'constantly expanding') borderland.[40] On the other hand, it resorted to translocal (Indo-Īrānian) traditions of universal, divinely sanctioned mandate to govern (the world) to elicit unearthly powers in crafting the sovereign's persona as exceptional, awe-inspiring, and hence entitled to support.[41]

3. The Spear of the Baktrian Man. Communicating (Divine) Kingship in Baktria and India

The discourse on space (how to represent the world in words and through visual culture) is central to the development of Ancient Near Eastern imperialism.[42] The Achaemenid Kings, in particular, inherited an age-old tradition of Mesopotamian intellectual cartography and ethnography, which they further adapted to fit the unprecedented political landscape created by the establishment of the Persian Empire.[43] Central Asia played an essential role in this geography of power.[44] People form the Northeast (*Sakā* in Old Persian, Scythians for the Greeks) feature in one of the inscriptions at Naqš-i Rustam as representatives of the furthest edges of the earth.[45] To

bility of the argument according to which visual 'ambiguity' in the iconography of Sōphytos, and of future Central Asian rulers as well, was an intentionally pursued strategy, is significantly enhanced.

39 Note HÖLKESKAMP 2023, pp. 45-59 on the "syntax" of Rome's spectacle of political culture in the Late Republic.

40 STROOTMAN 2023c, p. 165-171 on the Near Eastern background of this Seleukid strategy of *social* death (often a prelude to the *physical* one).

41 STRATHERN 2019 for an anthropologist's insight into the role of religion(s) in world history politics (pp. 27-81 offer a thorough discussion of immanentism and transcendentalism).

42 See the detailed discussion in DEGEN 2024.

43 RAPIN 2018 on what he calls "the origin of cartography".

44 ROLLINGER 2023b, pp. 897-907.

45 The fact that, in the famous rock relief, the *Sakā* are duly represented as willing supporters of the Persian throne (a powerful visualization of Achaemenid political theology: LINCOLN 2008), while in the most foundational (meta)narrative of Persian imperialism they stand-in for the archetypical *materia vincendi* (FERRARIO 2026) is a point that may deserve further scrutiny: their *socially imagined* geographical (cosmological) position at the edges of the earth may have played a role in this: BALATTI 2021.

claim their submission – a feat no previous king had accomplished – became a hallmark of Achaemenid discourse on kingship at least since Darius I.[46] In another inscription, the relationship is made even more apparent, as Sogdiana – and its people – are singled out as coterminous with the Northeastern limits of the world, which, according to Darius, has been made one and the same with his Empire.[47] This claim to rule all the lands "of this Earth far and wide, with many people in it" became a standard repertoire of royal discourses of power. As such, it can still be detected in a foundational document such as the cylinder of Antiochos I from Borsippa, and it will linger on at the very least down to Sāsānid times.[48] Rather than a mere reaction to an actual state of political instability indicative of the Seleukids' shaky power base in the East, Antiochos' campaign in Central Asia should perhaps be seen as following in the footsteps of this tradition.[49]

This background provides a more suitable context to interpret the ideological subtext of Euthydemos' claims of authoritative rule. By presenting himself as the vanquisher of the Eastern barbarians, the Baktrian upstart capitalized upon the imperial geographies inherited by the Seleukids from the Achaemenids (through Alexander – who repeatedly exploited Near Eastern mental maps to validate his claims to Empire), furthermore defrauding Antiochos III of the opportunity of claiming the same feats as his forefathers Seleukos I and Antiochos I: somebody else got there first. Going one step further in the interpretation, it may even be suggested that the same 'barbarization' trope may have found fertile ground for reception within and (Eastern) Īrānian - Baktrian – cultural context. Indeed, Euthydemos could have fashioned his kingly persona as a follower of Īrānian kings of old in their mythic struggle (with clear cosmological undertones) against the evil people from Turān.[50] Known since the earliest testimonies of Īrānian

46 Cfr. DNa § 2 and ROLLINGER – DEGEN 2021.

47 DPh § 2. See ROLLINGER 2023b, pp. 917-921. Indeed, by having chased the Scythian *beyond* a body of water delimiting the Empire's borderlands, Darius accomplished a feat worthy of heroes and gods alone (ROLLINGER – DEGEN 2021, pp. 197-207).

48 See DEGEN forthcoming for further context.

49 Antiochos I in the East: PLISCHKE 2014, pp. 195-204. See most recently HACKL 2020 on the chronology.

50 Cfr. SCARCIA 1968 and YARSHATER 1983. I thank one anonymous reviewer for emboldening me enough to venture in this suggestion given the notoriously intricated methodological problems that come with leveraging Middle-Īrānian (or, *textually*, later literary evidence) for historical arguments pertaining to the Achaemenid period. See VAN ROOKHUIJZEN 2019, pp. 5-20 on mnemotopes and ancient history

epic tradition, the trope enjoyed a remarkable cultural resilience and, more importantly, narrative plasticity, not least in the fact that the topography of Turān itself appears to have 'migrated' from modern Balučistān (ancient Makrān), in the Southeast, to the North of Baktria and Sogdiana according to contemporary ideological and political needs – a classic feature of mnemohistories and memoryscapes. Feats – however violent and terrifying – of (political, social, and cultural) order-bringing and place-making are a distinctive characteristic of sacred (divine) kingship in immanentist societies, and it may be suggested that Euthydemos leveraged foundational Īrānian myth-historical templates to entrench his rule as exceptional and, indeed, more-than-human.[51] After all, as Sahlins memorably stated, *an event becomes such as it is interpreted. Only as it is appropriated in and through the cultural scheme does it acquire a historical significance*.[52]

The outcome of the negotiation between Antiochos and Euthydemos following the military stalemate, furthermore, strongly supports the idea that the perimeter of the ideological *and political* (or political *qua* ideological, if not religious) battleground might have been drawn based (also) on the cultural templates hinted at above. In this respect, a substantial piece of evidence comes from the ways *both* kings decided to narrate their encounter in Central Asia and its results. On the one hand, Polybios remarks that, by marching as far as Baktria (and beyond, towards the Paropamisadae), Antiochos had manifestly "displayed" overlordship over Asia and Europe.[53] A not-too-subtle periphrasis for 'the world', it is easy to detect the Near Eastern (Achaemenid) background noise of this royal claim, as the Persian kings repeatedly made a point in their inscriptions to rule 'peo-

with PROIETTI 2021, pp. 21-22 on mnemohistory, now with the important PROIETTI 2026 for an insightful and detailed state of the art.

51 Consider furthermore ZARGHAMEE 2025, pp. 165-201 on *possible* innuendos to Īrānian narratives of the (heroic) king as a demon-slayer and the cycle of *xvārənah* (or royal glory, cfr. the Akkadian *melammu*: ATAÇ 2007) in Darius' stories of his rise to kingship, and stories *about* Darius as preserved in Greek accounts, most prominently Herodotus.

52 SAHLINS (1985), p. xiv. I am, of course, deeply aware of the methodological challenges of drawing on later textualized traditions from the world of Ērān (Late Antique and (post) Islamic) as scaffolding for historical arguments about earlier periods. At the same time, the ethnohistorical record as interpreted by authors such as Sahlins compels historians to engage more resolutely, albeit as carefully as possible, with a trove of cultural traditions whose potential for research into the anthropology of history of pre-Islamic Īrān remains enormous and, to an extent, perhaps in need of a reappraisal.

53 PLB. 11, 34, 16: διὰ γὰρ ταύτης τῆς στρατείας ἄξιος ἐφάνη τῆς βασιλείας οὐ μόνον τοῖς κατὰ τὴν Ἀσίαν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς κατὰ τὴν Εὐρώπην.

ple of all kinds' and of being rulers of 'this Earth'.[54] On the other hand, Euthydemos' self-fashioning as a conqueror of Scythia allowed him to tap into the same discourse. Indeed, in the Kūlob inscription (likely commissioned in the aftermath of the confrontation and undoubtedly reflecting a new dynastic self-awareness), Euthydemos is presented as "the greatest of all kings" (τὸμ πάντων μέγιστον Εὐθύδημον βασιλέων).[55] To be the greatest among Kings is another cornerstone of Ancient Near Eastern monarchical discourse, most apparent in the Achaemenid royal inscriptions and well-known to, and claimed by, the Seleukids, not least Antiochos III himself.[56] Recent scholarship on the Seleukids has emphasized the importance of focusing on the dynasty's 'long-term developments', which implies taking account of its cultural and ideological relationship with past experiences of kingship across the vast swath of their Empire. In this approach, "'local' but also transregional and entangled worlds" (and worldviews) are indispensable to properly understand the history of the Īrānian Plateau and beyond – according to Canepa's definition, "Greater Iran" – from the Persian imperial momentum arguably down to the Sāsānid and beyond.[57] Similarly, in a groundbreaking work on the Kušān inscriptions, Stefan Härtel has noted a "sense of style" apparent from several passages through the *corpus* whose core elements can be related to the epigraphic production of the Achaemenids, Arsakids, and Sāsānians. In his words, this demonstrates that the cultural and discursive templates of Empire and kingship in post-Seleukid Central Asia still participate "in the literary history of Iran".[58] It may be time to bring the Baktrian kings back into this dialogue. After all, while adapting specific features to their own time, space, and audience, they, too, tapped into a shared pool of imperial tropes and performative actions, the origins and endurance of which for too long have been clouded by misplaced assumptions of cultural belonging. A closer look at how the

54 Old Persian *xšayaθiya dahyūnām vispazanānām* (characteristic particularly of Darius I, notably another upstart in dire need of substantiating his claim to royalty in the face of bitter competition). See SCHMITT 2014, p. 280.

55 *SEG* 54.1569, l. 4. BERNARD – PINAULT – ROUGEMONT 2004, pp. 333-356 still provides the best commentary on the inscription.

56 MUCCIOLI 2013, pp. 395-418 and STROOTMAN 2020. Se now WALLACE 2024 on "contesting greatness" in the Hellenistic world.

57 DARYAEE – ROLLINGER 2023, p. 11. See also CANEPA 2023.

58 HÄRTEL 2024.

challenge of (claiming) universal rule in Hellenistic Baktria was taken up by Euthydemos' son and successor, Demetrios, further strengthens the theoretical tenets of this paper and adds further nuances.

4. (White) Elephants and Godly Kings. After the Hydaspes

Demetrios' reign heralded a new era in the history of Baktria as an imperial space.[59] The Indian campaigns of this king broadened the geographical and cultural horizons of the Hellenistic Far East as never before: the impression the conquests enacted on contemporaries and later observers is reflected in the sources, as Demetrios is among the very few Baktrian kings who secured for himself a spot in the literary record.[60] Archaeological evidence retrieved from Eastern Baktria (the main temple at Āï Xānum) furthermore suggests that Demetrios may have gone one step further than his father in emphasizing the unprecedented nature of his achievement – and the exceptional nature of the man who accomplished them. Indeed, statues were set up in the τέμενος, and the spatial association of the ruler's figure with the (space of the) gods may have been intended to suggest the proximity, if not even the permeability, of the two realms – divine and kingly.[61] The signature monetary issues with the king's portrait donning an elephant helmet (not so much a scalp, as often stated), has further been interpreted within a framework of charismatic competition against the legacy of Alexander's conquest, the unparalleled epitome – from an Aegean perspec-

59 COLORU 2009, pp. 175-193, GLENN 2020, pp. 65-106.

60 *E.g.* STR. 11, 1, 1 (the parallel with the reach of Alexander's conquests is telling).

61 HOO 2024, pp. 387-388 with previous together, now, with Martinez-Sève 2026 (the definitive publication of Āï Xānum's main temple).. However, it may be questioned how unique, or even innovative, Demetrios' attempt might have been, even compared with his own father. Indeed, while the archaeological evidence from Āï Xānum is notoriously murky when it comes to stratigraphic layers predating the monumentalization phase of Eukratides (ca. 170-145 BCE), it may still be pointed out that recent excavations at Torbulok (Tağikistān) of a temple located in a theatrical scenario surrounded by breath-taking mountains and cunningly suggestive of the religious scenario described in the Kūlob inscription may indeed suggest that already under Euthydemos spectacular performances of royal epiphany may have been staged (such as processions following a victorious campaign as it is known it happened elsewhere in the Hellenistic world: STROOTMAN 2021) with the explicit purpose of engaging in a religiously suffused dialogue between the ruler and the subjects: CHANIOTIS 2011. See LINDSTRÖM 2017 for a preliminary report on the sanctuary.

tive – of more-than-human conquering king.[62] Against the background of the discussion carried out above, there are reasons to question the cultural and theoretical horizons of current debates on Demetrios' visual language of kingship. Bringing the ethnohistorical record into the picture only adds to the suspicions. To begin with, in pretty much every single society known to anthropologists, kings are *by definition* divine, as the sources of human life (hence the power governing them, which kings claim as their own) are located outside the earthly realm, in the domain of metapersons (gods, ancestors, or spirits).[63] It hence becomes apparent why the currently mainstream zero-sum-game-like framework for discussing Baktrian kingship, focused either on cultural containers (Greece, Makedonia, Īrān), the cross-fertilization (hybridity) of often murkily defined 'Eastern' and 'Western' traditions of royalty or, finally, the competition for charismatic sanction (Weber style through Gehrke, meaning often deprived of its original intrinsic *religious* foundations) between warring states – the Arsakids, the Seleukids, and the Baktrians, all of them basking in Alexander's shadow – does not suffice. Its shortsighted nature has already been mentioned, as divine kingship was an essential tool of Ancient Near Eastern Empires at the very least since the Assyrians – not to mention the fact that, as already implied above, the Achaemenid spin of such traditions massively shaped the language of Makedonian royalty, thus forcing scholars of 'Hellenism' in the Far East to look much further back than Alexander to properly understand the "pseudo-traditional" nature of visual and rhetorical innovations characteristic of Baktrian kingship after the Makedonian conquest.[64] The iconography of Sōphytos, furthermore, demonstrates that (Indo)Īrānian visual tropes to define divinely sanctioned power continued to offer, well after the Achaemenids' demise, coveted sources of political *and spiritual* capital for ambitious individuals, irrespective of their, often unclear, perhaps precisely because not so crucial in the eyes of their contemporaries, cultural background. If one then considers that the persona of Alexander never really established an iconographic tradition across the Hellenistic world, not even in his native Makedonia, where in fact his own lineage was

62 See now HOO 2024, p. 371, WALLACE 2024, 234-235. On Alexander's divine kingship see MITCHELL 2022, pp. 124-129.

63 STRATHERN 2019, pp. 117-131, SAHLINS 2022, pp. 16-33.

64 DEGEN 2024. On "pseudo-traditionalism" cfr. MURRAY 1980, pp. 153-172.

quickly extinguished in a bloodbath worthy of the most hubristic examples of African regicide known to anthropologists (parricide being another hallmark of divinely amoral, because all-powerful, kings), it becomes more difficult to understand how could Demetrios have profited from making the conqueror his only, or even primary, reference point to compete against for authority in an environment such as the Indian subcontinent, where from a local standpoint, in the early 2nd century BCE, memories of Alexander were vague at best and hostile at worst.[65] Such a claim becomes even more untenable once it is remembered that India was home to ancient and highly sophisticated traditions (in terms of literary production and ritual elaboration) of sacred kingship in which, as might have been expected, elephants played a paramount role, and indeed were closely linked with (world) conquering monarchs as well as primeval gods.[66] One may henceforth argue that, in the same fashion as Alexander's philosophical education in Takṣaśilā/Taxila acquainted the new king with some, arguably the most conducive to his success as monarch, templates of Indian worldview and rituals of kingship, a case could be made for Demetrios being instructed in the same rules of the game as he elbowed his way to power within a space already fluent in multiple languages of Indigenous as well as foreign (stranger, in anthropological parlance) kingship.[67] Imperial overlords are structurally bound to rely on administrative *and* religious specialists and the knowledge they are able to provide to perform their functions as rulers in the culturally appropriate fashion, irrespective of the coercive (military) power they are capable of bringing to bear.[68] It could hence be argued that,

65 Discussion in STONEMAN 2019, pp. 163-165, KUBICA 2023, 141-143 (Alexander in India) and now KOVACS 2024, 594 (Alexander as a visual reference (or not) for kingship traditions across the Hellenistic world).

66 TRAUTMANN 2015, pp. 98-100 and OLIVELLE 2023, p. 6.

67 Note particularly KUBICA 2023, p. 33 on Takṣaśilā as a prime center for higher learning and *one* plausible location for these sorts of dialogue in kingship (performance) to have taken place. IORI 2023 for a recent treatment of the Persian footprint in the Subcontinent – Persian*izing* languages of power (CANEPA 2024) must have been among the cultural references of Demetrios' audience.

68 DÜRING – BOOZER – PARKER 2020, RÜPE – BIRAN – PINES 2024. While this is certainly true of transcendentalist traditions, in immanentist visions this may not always be the case, as the king tends to appropriate much more assertively priestly functions: indeed, immanentist religious frameworks typically do *not* have a separate class of religious specialists (a clergy) entitled to the interpretation and cultural sanction of an otherworldly law to which the king is meant to abide (STRATHERN 2019, pp. 118-141). Against this background, it becomes even more intriguing to approach afresh, to name but a notable example, the *vexata quaestio* of Menander's affiliation with (or conversion to?) Buddhism, as it *may* have been hinted at in a famous passage from Plutarch (*Mor.* 821d-e), which at the very least suggests that the king

as he crossed the Hindūkūš into India, Demetrios could not have avoided engaging with representatives of the *brāhmaṇāḥ*, who acted as gatekeepers of said spiritual (and arguably to some extent administrative) knowledge in order to plausibly and palatably don the trappings of *Indian* kingship in the eyes of at least *some* of the (would-be) imperial élite whose expectations and ambitions he was compelled to cater to.[69] Endorsement by such a powerful social constituency secured Demetrios a critical reservoir of more-than-human (metapersonal) sanction, which none among his contemporaries and very few among his predecessors could rival. A comparative approach to the available evidence, supported by recourse to the ethnohistorical record and anthropological theory, in other words, allows to demonstrate how traditional forms and vocabularies of monarchy could be innovatively repurposed to adapt to new cultural and political contexts in the unending quest for exceptionalism in the playground of Afro-Eurasian politics. The Greeks may have come, seen, and even conquered. However, India (and Īrān) at the very least fought back, and bitterly so. In this respect, even some 70 years after the publication of his *magnum opus*, Narain seems to have been onto something after all, perhaps even more than what he might have thought himself.

5. Conclusion. Sources of Social Power: Kingship in Baktria Beyond Charisma and Hybridity

West, East, either, neither, or what? How to locate Baktria (intellectually, geographically, politically, culturally: the list could go on) and its histories remains a work in progress, requiring collaborative research and openness towards new approaches. For good reason, this has been claimed as a task fit for post-colonial times.[70] This paper sought to move one step in this di-

may have been perceived by *some* of his subjects as a righteous king according to a post-Aśokan understanding of sacral (divine) kingship in the Subcontinent (STRATHERN 2019, pp. 195-204), particularly considering that, in his coinage, Menander's iconography is strikingly consistent with an immanentist template of the heroic ruler. This issue, however, needs to be the subject of a further project.

69 Note that, in Babylon, Alexander acted in the very same way (DEGEN 2022a, pp. 250-301). Not only that, but before him, Cyrus and, after him, Antiochos can demonstrably be seen as having followed the same patterns.

70 HOO 2023c.

rection by proposing a new intellectual framework (which might be called 'imperial') for studying how kingship was narrated and enacted on the ground in Baktria under the Seleukids and beyond. The documentary basis conducive to such a project is still thinner than one may wish for. Hence, a certain degree of speculation cannot be avoided. If nothing else, the above discussion made a case for moving beyond cultural containers and focusing instead on the persistence of traditions of kingship for a better understanding of the imperial phenomenon in Central Asia. An argument was also presented for overcoming entrenched chronological boundaries (Achaemenid, Alexander, even, perhaps particularly so, 'Hellenistic'), as 'Empire' in Afro-Eurasia is a practice older and geographically wider than what any given dynasty could meaningfully claim, and any king(maker) could remember. This may be a fruitful way to get better insights into the social and intellectual world of the Hellenistic Far East, which, since Cyrus' conquest in the sixth century BCE, may have been far less Far than what our literary record would have us believe.

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