Afro-Eurasian Transformations 1

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Contextualizing Imperial Borderlands

9th Century BCE – 9th Century CE and Beyond

Edited by Robert Rollinger and Julian Degen

Harrassowitz

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Afro-Eurasian Transformations

Ancient Worlds and Beyond



Edited by Robert Rollinger,
Melanie Malzahn, Nina Mirnig,
Bernhard Palme, Kai Ruffing,
Florian Schwarz and Sören Stark

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Central Asia and Beyond

"The Year in Which the Mede Came" Empire-Building and Borderscape Fantasies in Early Teispid-Achaemenid Central Asia*

Marco Ferrario

> "οὕτω δὴ τὰς πέντε πόλεις ἐν δυσὶν ἡμέραις ἑλών τε καὶἐξανδραποδισάμενος ἦει ἐπὶ τὴν μεγίστην αὐτῶν τὴν Κύρου πόλιν. ἡδὲ τετειχισμένη τε ἦν ὑψηλοτέρῳ τείχει ἤπερ αἱ ἄλλαι, οἷα δὴὑπὸ Κύρου οἰκισθεῖσα".
> "After thus capturing the five cities in two days and enslaving the survivors, Alexander marched against the largest of them, Kyropolis. This was fortified with a higher wall than the rest, since Kyros had founded it".
>
> – Arr. *Anab.*, 4.2.4

1. Introduction: The Greatest Battle

With the obvious exception of its momentous significance, concerning the conquest of Central Asia and its subsequent incorporation within the imperial project of Cyrus II the Great, nothing is known with certainty.[1] The memory of the sporadic sources available to

* Thanks are due first and foremost to Robert Rollinger and Julian Degen, whom I owe the invitation to the enthralling conference out of which this paper originated. Moreover, in deepest gratitude for patient standing by and kind support, what follows is dedicated to Maurizio Giangiulio, Gregor Weber, Miguel John Versluys, Tourağ Daryāy, Henry Colburn, Gunnar Dumke, Christian Mileta, Sören Stark, Matthew Canepa, Giorgio Rota, Simonetta Ponchia, Ol'ga Osadčeva, Maša Rosenkrantz, Ėlina Meïer, Beate Häberle, Sirodž Mirzaaxmedov, Husniddin Raxmanov, Lauren Morris, Elena Franchi, Angela Alaimo, and Giorgia Proietti. Furthermore, to Zach, Mariana, Emma, Emily, Ėl'ja, Katja, Cristina, Hannah, Anna, Iroda, Miraziz, Claudia, Maddi, Bekir, Lada, Chiara, Giulia, Carlota, and Guido. To Ḫaleh Roya, Amu Baġer, 'Aṭā, Behnāz, Māmānğān, Nānī, Amoo Taġee, and Sambool, who showed me the best of the East (Coast). To Mark, in grateful memory of an inspiring friendship. To *ġāzi* Tomas *efendi*, for infamous memories coped with ludicrous adventures and, at last, Alpha and Omega, to Negār, to whom, as shown in the *Avestā*, only irises and lilacs properly belong.

1 Kuhrt, 2021 offers an up-to-dated overview of the first expansionist phase of the Empire. On Cyrus' imperial project see most recently Waters, 2022a : 108–156; 2023.

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us (exclusively literary and decades, when not centuries, later than the events they narrate) revolves around only two events: the founding of a massive settlement at the Empire's outmost fringes, Kyropolis, and the death of the conqueror in an epic battle – according to Herodotus the greatest ever fought among non-Greeks – against an army of *Sakā* under the command of Princess Tomyris.[2] At a minimum, this raises two considerations: that the events were somehow (causally?) connected, at least in the perception of posterity, and that Cyrus' activism in Central Asia can be taken as indexical of this space's paramount importance within the broader context of the emerging Empire.[3]

The *nature* of this nexus and the *reasons* for its relevance are the subject of this paper's investigation. The second section is devoted, in a first segment, to a review of current scholarly visions on the function of Kyropolis and, by implication, the dialectic between the Persian Empire and the peoples of the Central Asian steppes.[4] Next, I will undertake a deconstruction of the model outlined above. As it will be my attempt to show, the information we have about the history of Kyropolis is essentially functional to an imperial narrative of universal dominance within which the concept of an outmost borderland to be annexed to the Empire, or at least pacified (i.e., subdued through the deployment of force) plays a critical role.[5]

If this is true, it follows that such (meta)history needs adequate scrutiny, and if possible suitable contextualization. Both of these aims are pursued in the third part of this contribution. Through a comparative assessment of the frontier dynamics and imperial strategies of extraction and control attested, on the one hand, in the broader Ancient Near Eastern world during the 1st Millennium BCE, and, on the other, in Inner Asia, this paper strives to elucidate the dialectic of interests (of economic, social, and political nature) underlying the founding of Kyropolis, and in so doing to place on a new footing the debate concerning the development of the Achaemenid political and administrative apparatus in Central Asia.[6] In other words, this contributions seeks to offer a new methodological framework to approach «borderscapes» in 1st Millennium BCE Central (Eur)Asia.[7]

Against this background, a further step will be taken in the fourth section of this paper, the objective of which is to adequately emphasize the formative role of the local populations (which of course means primarily, but not only, the corresponding élites)

2 On Kyropolis and its foundation see Arr. *Anab.*, 4.3.1–4, Cohen, 2013 : 254 and Briant, 2021 : 55–56. (The stories surrounding) Cyrus' death are thoroughly discussed in Bichler, 2021, Mitchell 2023 : 126–152: cf. now moreover Waters, 2022a : 157–164. The main narrative comes, perhaps unsurprisingly, from Herodotos: 1.201–216.

3 The crucial strategic role of the area in which Kyropolis was built (still a bone of contention among scholars: compare Cohen, 2013 : 252–255, Rapin, 2018 : 272, Rapin 2025 : 132, Ferrario 2025a : 354) can be argued by Alexander's effort in taking control of such a space, which unfolded according to distinct Achaemenid templates: Degen, 2022 : 332–361.

4 See already Ferrario 2023a.

5 Rollinger / Degen 2021.

6 Henkelman, 2017 for a seminal contribution on the development of what he calls «The Imperial Paradigm». See moreover Kuhrt, 2020.

7 Brambilla 2015 for a theoretical introduction to the concept of borderscape(s).

within the dynamics underpinning – if not *driving* – the formation and development of the Persian Empire in such a complex anthropic and natural space as Central Asia.[8] To this end, the material covered in the preceding paragraphs will be supplemented by some anthropological considerations concerning the relevance, for an adequate history (and historiography) of Empires, of the political traditions of what we have come to call, sometimes with implicitly dismissive or at least condescending implication, stateless peoples.[9] The latter, I intend to show, decisively contributed to the emergence of the new Teispid (later Achaemenid) order in Central Asia. The vestiges of this sort of imperial ethnogenesis, and its consequences in the social, political, and economic realms, are still clearly discernible, as exemplified by a particularly striking example in the cartography of power that emerges against the backdrop of the accounts provided by Alexander's historians.[10]

The role an Empire assigns to its borderlands, it has recently been argued, says quite a lot about the dynamics behind the Empire's functioning as such.[11] Summing up the main lines of argument developed in the preceding pages, the concluding section of this essay can be read as an enticement to consider the Central Asian offshoots of the Persian Empire no longer (not *only*) in the terms of a *Perilous Frontier* but also – most importantly – as a *creative space* for negotiation of *mutual interests* among numerous social actors, each bent on pursuing his – or her – own agenda (or that of the reference group) in the shadow of the first superpower in Eurasian history.[12]

2. The Great (Persian) Wall

Perhaps not too surprisingly, in the case of Kyropolis as well, the terms of the debate were set by Pierre Briant.[13] In fact, the French scholar deserves credit for having developed the concept of controlled hostility, which he conceives of as a complex of sociopolitical practices, fundamentally geared on the principle of unequal exchange and binding gift,

8 Barfield, 2020, Kidd 2024 on landscape affordances and economic strategies in liminal anthropic areas.

9 Beckwith, 2009 for a broad-brush account of Eurasian history from the perspective of the steppes. Cf. most recently Hämäläinen, 2019 on *Lakota America*. Favereau, 2021 : 206–273 discusses the rise of the Russian principalities, and especially of Moscow, as a fallout of what she terms «The Mongol Exchange».

10 Rapin, 2013; 2018, Heckel 2021. Note moreover Goršenina / Rapin, 2020 for an historical and historiographical treatment of this topic.

11 Favereau, 2021 : 224.

12 Versluys 2025 provides a compelling theoretical discussion on the concept of frontier-zone as a space for innovation during the Hellenistic and Roman period. Following in the footsteps of Robert Rollinger's scholarship (2021c; 2023), it is contended here that a similar case, indeed an antecedent, both chronologically and, more important, *structurally*, can be made with regards of the Teispid-Achaemenid Persian Empire.

13 Briant, 1984 : 49–103 remains a foundational assessment. The book is particularly valuable because it squarely situates Central Asia into the broader context of 1st Millennium Ancient Near Eastern History: see moreover Briant, 1985.

through which the Great King and his satraps aimed to regulate relations with the Central Asian peoples, and in particular with the *Sakā* inhabiting the steppes of Sogdiana and Chorasmia.[14]

This highly influential interpretive model has been elaborated and enriched with further relevant implications in numerous contributions by historian and archaeologist Wu Xin.[15] In her view, the Central Asian satrapies established by Cyrus' conquest would serve as a space of precarious sovereignty and perennially unstable control, from the early days of the Empire to its demise at Alexander's hand.[16] The predominant driver in this scenario would be the danger posed by the activity, conceived as (if not eminently, certainly *predominantly*) predatory of both the *Sakā* peoples and, at times, the imperial subjects themselves – which implies, it should be noted, that the two categories are thus understood as fundamentally distinct from one another – to the detriment of Persian infrastructure and settlements. This would be especially true in a region, such as Baktria, whose importance within the Achaemenid power structure in Central Asia is evident from the extent of infrastructural investments documented both archaeologically and through primary (mainly archival) evidence.[17]

Such and so much would have been the intensity of this agonistic (adversarial) relationship between the representatives of the Empire and the populations settled along – and *across* – its Northeastern borderlands that it would even have spilled over into imperial art, for example through a conspicuous seal production. According to the scholar's understanding, the latter would in fact not only preserve evidence of a creeping conflict in Central Asia during at least the 5th and 4th centuries BCE, but would even allow the reconstruction of fragments of a powerful ideological discourse conveyed by the imperial court and directed to the élites dispersed across its territories.[18] Indeed, the latter would have been exhorted, following the example of their King, to seek glory on the battlefield in order to distinguish themselves within the imperial ruling class. To this end, precisely because of the renowned bellicosity of the Central Asian peoples, the Northeastern borderlands would have provided a privileged staging ground of imperial self-fashioning.[19]

---

14 Briant, 2002 : 316–323; 394–406; 726–733 respectively on unequal exchange, binding gift(s) and tribute, and the strategy of controlled hostility (with particular focus on Central Asia). Waters, 2022a : 158–159 on Kyropolis' role within this framework. On the Achaemenid Empire and the Eurasian steppe pastoralists see most recently Jacobs / Gufler 2021, Minardi 2023.

15 Wu, 2010.

16 Wu, 2012.

17 Wu, 2020 and Briant, 2020 for two recent overviews devoted to the assessment of what Henkelman, 2017 calls «the Imperial Signature» in Achaemenid Central Asia (especially Baktria). Further relevant discussion in King 2025.

18 Wu, 2014. A thorough (commented) catalogue of Central Asian related seals featuring warfare scenes has been provided by Tuplin, 2020b. While somewhat critical of the arguments developed by Wu (note especially pp. 373–378), Tuplin does not exclude that Central Asians might in fact have been repeatedly troublesome, therefore forcing the King, or his lieutenants, to actively intervene in local politics. The overarching analytical framework thus remains that of controlled hostility. Ferrario 2022 for a different approach.

19 Compare e. g. DNb § 11.

It will be worth pointing out that, making good on the considerable sophistication underlying them, both models evoked above ultimately trace back to two major discursive strands (to which, as will be seen in the next section, a third can perhaps fitfully be added). The first of these goes back to Herodotos and his account of Cyrus' fateful expedition against the Massagetae, while the second stems from the darkly hued narrative of Alexander's campaign in Central Asia. In both cases, the territories of Baktria, Sogdiana, and Chorasmia are conceived and consequently described as a lawless (and cultureless) space. At the same time, their respective inhabitants stand out in the narrative because they are challenging to conquer and almost impossible to control.[20] Given these premises, it is not difficult to understand why Strabo characterizes Kyropolis in terms of a «bulwark of Persian power»: the last outpost of imperial sovereignty (if not civilization) in a context otherwise not only impervious to any effort of administrative control, but fundamentally hostile and therefore constantly in need of policing interventions and military enforcement.[21]

Such a *mis*representation of the Central Asian space and the peoples of the steppes finds striking parallels (not least in its dealing with a point of view external – and, to a reasonable extent this time truly hostile – to the context under scrutiny here) in Chinese literary sources, the latter having been foundational in underpinning an interpretative framework of the dynamics regulating the interactions between Eurasian Empires and the peoples straddling their (steppic) borderlands that had been as influential as it is partisan.[22] In the case of the Persian Empire, there are equally cogent reasons to suspect that the above perspective, masterfully epitomized by the definition of Kyropolis coined by Strabo, conceals far more than it unveils.[23]

This is suggested in particular by what it is known about the state of relations between the (neo)Ēlāmite Empire and the pastoral communities by which it was surrounded.[24] Indeed, the plentiful surviving epigraphic material shows how, in this case, an adversarial-type model proves dramatically inadequate to account for a complex and multifaceted dialectic within which not only do the mountain barbarians prove perfectly capable of taking advantage of the fruits of Ēlāmite culture (some products of which, especially sumptuary items, they seem to have *actively* sought, and not passively embraced). More-

20 Wu, 2017, explicitly labeling Central Asia under the Achaemenids as a «land of the unrule-able».

21 Strab. 11.11.4. The very same discourse is to be found again in Polyb. 11.34.5, when Euthydemos of Baktria hints at «uncountable hordes of nomads» (πλήθη γὰρ οὐκ ὀλίγα παρεῖναι τῶν Νομάδων) threatening the satrapy's border to cut a deal with Antiochos III, who at the time was besieging him in the aftermath of the former dethronement of the Diodotids. Hoo, 2025 : 43–45 reads the passage in terms of Euthydemid historiography – taken up by Polybios – socially and narratively constructing an «alien» enemy. Cf. Strootman 2023 with Lampinen 2024 on "Othering" strategies in the Ancient Near East and Beyond.

22 Barfield, 1989 for an influential treatment of the topic and Di Cosmo, 2002 for a painstakingly critical assessment, if not an outright rebuttal, thereof, now with Saussy, 2022. Beckwith, 2009; 2023 turns Barfield's model upside-down and looks at the same object from the viewpoint of the steppe, and particularly of what he calls, perhaps provocatively, a Scythian Empire.

23 Compare also Stark 2023 on the Central Asian borderscape of the (early) Seleukid Empire.

24 Waters, 2022a on Ēlām as an Empire (but cf. Bartelmus, 2023), while Balatti, 2017 : 135–150 surveys both Neo-Ēlāmite and Assyrian sources concerning Ēlām which deal with mountain people.

over, and more importantly, the Empire itself reaped far from negligible profits from such a peaceful, sustained cooperation.[25] By virtue of the importance of the Ēlāmite precedent for the structuring of the Persian administrative apparatus, the above parallel leads to the question of whether it is not appropriate to look at a site such as Kyropolis and the history associated with it, particularly in the context of the dawning phase of the Empire, from a similar standpoint.[26]

The rationale for such a methodological rekindling can be defended based on a simple comparison: from Assyrian sources we learn that the fruit of a *single* expedition into Ēlāmite territory yielded the powerful neighbor 1500 head of cattle, which provides a clue of no small account as to the wealth of livestock accessible to the Ēlāmite Empire through the good offices maintained with the inhabitants of the Zagros and the surrounding mountainous areas.[27] These numbers pale when compared with the requisitions of livestock *systematically* carried out by Alexander's lieutenants during the two-year Central Asian campaign.[28] Again, the picture that emerges from the sources is one of a flourishing (agro)pastoral economy within which Central Asian communities played a role of absolute prominence and thanks to which the Persian Empire was able to maintain an administrative apparatus (not least in its ritual functions) in every way comparable to what is known based on the record coming from Persepolis.[29]

The remaining sections of this paper set out to explore in more detail the hypothesis of the eminently *proactive* (rather than primarily defensive) role of Kyropolis within the Central Asian context against the backdrop of the rising Persian Empire, and in particular its economic function within a negotiating dynamic in which Cyrus, his lieutenants, *and* the representatives of local populations emerge as protagonists, albeit in different and (sometimes) conflicting roles. Before moving on, however, a few more words are in order regarding the paramount importance, from the standpoint of ideology and self-representation of both the Empire and its initiator, of the founding of Kyropolis and (by implication) the *space* that saw its beginnings.

2.1 … yadi abi draya avārsam: Deconstructing a Narrative

That the expedition (and especially the *death*) of Cyrus in Central Asia must have left a significant mark on the historical memory of the developing, and further expanding, Empire seems evident upon careful assessment of a detail in the Bīsutūn inscription, commissioned by Darius I at the end of the *annus mirabilis* that sealed his ascension to the imperial throne. This is the inclusion, at the prominent end of its least of defeated rebels, of an individual named Skunkha, identified as a *Saka* strongman both by the caption accompa-

25 Henkelman, 2005 on the dynamics underpinning Achaemenid sacrifice practices and economic exchange around Persepolis, bringing into foreground the (Neo)Ēlāmite precedents of the patterns attested by the archival evidence.

26 Waters, 2014 : 21–25; 2022a : 1–33 on Ēlām as the foreground for Kyros' rise.

27 Henkelman, 2003 : 119 with further literature.

28 Arr. *Anab.*, 4.25.4, Curt. 9.8.29.

29 Tavernier, 2017. See Kidd, 2024 on «agro pastoralism» in Central Asia and its socioeconomic multifaceted features.

nying the relief and by the unmistakable pointed hat.[30] Matthew Waters has perceptively observed that the addition of this individual to the monument (at the time – probably 519 BCE – already completed) required the erosion of part of the Ēlāmite version of the inscription, the first of the three to be carved, and its subsequent transcription in the lower part of the monument, below the Akkadian version and to the right of the Old Persian rendering.[31] The scope of such an undertaking needs no further comment. It follows, Waters points out, that the figure of Skunkha (and in particular his – alleged – submission) should be understood as bearing a message which was crucial to the self-representation of Darius' *persona* and his achievements. Although difficult to prove, there is the concrete possibility that the primary reason for Skunkha's inclusion within Bīsutūn's narrative lay in a comparison (oblique, as he was never *directly* named, yet evident to anyone aware of the text and of the tradition in which it was embedded) with the mighty Cyrus. If the latter had died in Central Asia, his rightful successor Darius had outperformed him by taming those who killed him and vanquished his army.[32]

Two implications of such a framing of the ideological narrative presented at Bīsutūn are of particular momentum for the present discussion: the competitive aspect of the confrontation with Cyrus implied by Skunkha's presence in the relief and the fact that the victory over the latter (and by implication Cyrus' death at Tomyris' hands) took place in a liminal space, a borderland located at the edge of the (known) world. Both of these elements are in fact deeply rooted in the tradition of kingship in the Ancient Near East, not least in the (neo)Ēlāmite tradition in which Cyrus' political consciousness undoubtedly must have taken shape.[33] Given this background, the list of explanations given by Herodotos to justify Cyrus' campaign in Central Asia acquire unsuspected historical depth, while at the same time supporting the hypothesis of a conscious allusion by Darius to the failure of his illustrious predecessor, by which his own role as the expander of imperial power is further emphasized. Indeed, according to the Halikarnassian, «there were many weighty reasons that impelled and encouraged him [*scil.* Cyrus] to do so [namely moving against the *Sakā*]: first, his birth, because of which he seemed to be something more than mortal; and next, his victories in his wars: for no nation that Cyrus undertook to attack could escape from him».[34]

30 Ferrario, 2024 for an anthropological approach to Skunkha's story.

31 Waters, 2014 : 76.

32 Rollinger / Degen, 2021 : 212–213.

33 Rollinger, 2014a; 2017; 2021c; Rollinger / Bichler, 2017. On Kyros' (family) Neo-Ēlāmite background see most recently Waters, 2022a.

34 Hdt. 1.204.2. Compare Xerxes' speech at the eve of his invasion of Greece as reported in Hdt. 7.8A.1–2. Crucial here is the concept of «expander of the realm» (clearly distinguishable also in the passage concerning Cyrus' Central Asian expedition), the Ancient Near Eastern and especially Ēlāmite, background of which is too prominent to be overlooked: see recently Ferrario 2024, with previous literature. To give but two prominent examples, in their inscriptions, both Šutruk Naḫḫunte II (717–699 BCE) and his successor Hallutaš-Inšušinak I (699–693) claimed to be «expanders of the realm»: see Henkelman, 2003 : 80–85 and Gorris / Wicks, 2018 for a recent overview – with extensive previous bibliography – of Neo-Ēlāmite history.

To what has been remarked so far, a further consideration, so to speak, of a cosmological order, could be added. In the *Nabonidus Chronicle*, a fundamental text for understanding the imperial ideology of Cyrus (and his Near Eastern, in this case Mesopotamian, forerunners), the space to the East of the Zagros Mountains -in addition to the territory of the Medes is it possible that allusion is made to some Central Asian territories, undoubtedly known to the Ēlāmite world? – are identified through the use of a term of Sumerian origin (*Gu-tu-um*^{ki}). The *ethnikon* designated the barbarians *par excellence*, sworn enemies of the Mesopotamian rulers, whose victory against them featured as a staple of their own royal self-representation.[35] By virtue of this precedent, it does not seem far-fetched to put forward the hypothesis that, with the founding of Kyropolis, an unmistakable act of territorial appropriation in a space beyond the horizon of any of his predecessors – in and beyond the kingdom of Anšan – Cyrus was pursuing the intent of signaling as clearly as possible both to local élites and, perhaps above all, to the developing Thespian ruling class, the ideally universal extent, insofar as it could encroach into the depths of the land of the Gutians, of the reach of the Empire he was creating.[36]

Assuming the soundness of this hypothesis, the agonistic subtext of the incorporation of the victory against Skunkha within Bīsutūn's narrative would emerge with further clarity: at the very moment when he explicitly declared to have outclassed even the triumphs of the founder of the Empire, Darius simultaneously made himself his avenger, quelling to obedience the archenemies of any Ancient Near Eastern kings(hip), who moreover were responsible for the death of Cyrus and guilty of opposing the will of Ahuramazdā and his right-hand man in the person of the new King.[37] From this standpoint, both the founding of Kyropolis and Darius' expedition against Skunkha appear no longer, or not only, as an act of conquest, but as the culmination of a process of domestication of the ultimate boundaries of the known world: the cultural and narrative construction of a borderscape.[38]

35 Cf. *NC* iii.24–28. Gopnik, 2017 on the Medes and their relationship with 1st Millennium Ancient Near Eastern polities (note also Balatti, 2017 : 287 and Matthews / Nashli, 2022 : 454–468). Zadok, 2002: 90 on Gutians and Lullubians – on which note also MacGinnis, 2020 : 38 and Yamada, 2020 : 167 – as archenemies of Ancient Near Eastern monarchies, while Hulin, 1954 reports Ēlāmite language discovered on silver bent bars in a Kābul hoard, a possible testimony not only of Ēlāmite knowledge of, but possibly even of contacts (Vidale, 2018 for a survey, Alizadeh, 2020 : 43) with Central Asian polities.

36 Note Lanfranchi / Rollinger, 202 1: 61 and now Rollinger 2025 for a long-term history of Near Eastern monarchical ideology.

37 Cf. DB_p col. V § 74. I owe this suggestion to Noah Kröll (Universität Innsbruck), whom I would like to thank here. A further hint at the likely embedment of Skunkha's story within a highly charged Near Eastern (imperial) discourse is provided by Darius' claim to have given the rebellious *Sakā* another leader: could such a process have involved something akin to the *adê* oath so crucial, for example, in the Assyrian strategy of empire building (Toptaş / Akyüz, 2021 : 83 for a possible example thereof taking place in Media)? The likely implications of Darius' hint at a successor of Skunkha shall be addressed in more detail in section 4 below.

38 Potts, 2020 : 62 argues that this is the ideological background of Assyrian and Ēlāmite interactions with the Zagros people, a compelling precedent for the Teispid-Achaemenid involvement in Central Asia.

A first provisional conclusion thus seems to emerge from what has been argued above: at least in terms of ideology and imperial self-representation, already in the time of Cyrus, the Central Asian borderlands of the rising Empire likely featured much more as a field of *action* and *projection* of royal majesty and power, thus a space to be *expanded* much more than a frontier to be guarded and *defended*. That said, however, I believe it is possible to further treasure the implications of this long-distance dialogue between Darius and Cyrus in order to more deeply explore the reasons that might have prompted the latter to undertake such an endeavor as founding Kyropolis.

A good starting point for this purpose may be one of the inscriptions of Aššur-nāṣir-apli II (Ashurnasirpal II: 883–859 BCE), in which the Assyrian ruler boasts of his conquests in what was then one of the most coveted, and challenging, borderlands of the Near Eastern world, namely the Syrian-Anatolian Plateau.[39] In commenting on this text, James Osborne has pointedly remarked that limiting oneself to reading the inscription *solely* in terms of a testament, however emphatic, to Assyrian power (as Aššur-nāṣir-apli presumably wished) entails the severe methodological problem of obfuscating the historical, social, and political context to which the inscription itself indirectly alludes.

In the case at hand, the bare list of goods looted by the Assyrians (valuable textiles, metals, wood carvings, and further it goes, almost *ad nauseam*) provides a cogent clue to the affluence of Anatolian communities – in all likelihood the primary reason for Aššur-nāṣir-apli's interest in the region – as well as the military strength they were able to bring to bear if threatened by foreign intruders. A (contrapuntal) reading against the light of evidence such as this, in other words, suggests that the Northwestern frontier zones of the Assyrian Empire (but the same is true of its Eastern borderlands, as will be discussed shortly): 1. far from just serving as an hapless source of supply for the ruler and his court, as imperial rhetoric was more than willing to claim, had in fact access to raw materials that the latter *wanted* – since they were *not* available in the regions under Assyrian control, if not utterly *necessitated*; 2: offered material products that the Assyrians were *unable* to produce and, finally, 3. its inhabitants were more than capable, if necessity arose, to defend that wealth.[40]

Put another way, the fact that Aššur-nāṣir-apli chose to exemplify his own superiority as a conqueror compare to *any* of his predecessors by availing himself of the example of a campaign (somewhat more similar to a pirate raid of the kind Near Eastern sources were so ready to blame on the people at their borderlands) in Anatolia only underscores the power and wealth of those for whom the role of passive victims is reserved in imperial discourse.[41] By virtue of such a precedent, both Darius' emphasis on his overthrow of Skunkha and the founding of Kyropolis acquire, alongside the ideological component (if

39 See *RIMA* 2 A.0.101.1, iii, 71–84. On Aššur-nāṣir-apli (Ashurnasirpal) II and Assyrian 9th century expansion see e. g. Liverani, 1988 : 670–675, van de Mieroop, 2016 : 250–261 and now Shibata, 2023 : (esp. 217–232).

40 Compare Fabian, 2023 on the *inner* socioeconomic dynamics of the Armenian highlands between 300 BCE and 300 CE.

41 Osborne, 2021 : 149.

not a cosmological vision: the triumph of the conquering King beyond the borders of the map), a perhaps more prosaic but equally relevant dimension, namely the economic one. Testing this proposition, however, presupposes an adequate contextualization of Kyropolis in both space and time, which brings us to the third section of this paper.

3. Blurred Lines. Imperial Whirlwinds From the Inside Out

It will be worthwhile at this point to revisit Strabo's definition of Kyropolis as a stronghold of Persian power in Central Asia. Recent studies (both specifically devoted to the region and from a global, comparative historical perspective) have highlighted the two-faced nature of devices such as walls and fortresses: far from functioning *exclusively*, or even *predominantly*, in a defensive capacity, such objects often prove to be a powerful *offensive* weapon of Empires, kingdoms, and even modern nation-states.[42] Transformative features of (and an inescapable presence in) the landscape, they play a pivotal function in regulating movement in and out of a given region, can become nodes of attraction for the development of commercial activities – for example, seasonal markets and fairs – of local and (supra)regional significance, and are ultimately able to act in concert with other infrastructures (bridges, ports, customs, post stations) in order to strengthen the infrastructural power of a given political formation. These affordances ought to be conceived as an often-indispensable premise in the process of negotiating power relations *within*, *outside*, and *across* a given territory.[43]

In Central Asia, the Hellenistic fortresses of Uzundara and Kampyrtëpe offer tangible examples of the polyvalence of settlements in all likelihood comparable to Kyropolis, and indeed it is reasonable to assume for both, not least by virtue of their respective strategic locations (perched on the Susiztag range in one case, guarding a ford of the Amudaryo in the other), a precedent from the Achaemenid era, if not an even older one.[44] In Chorasmia, Kalalȳ-gȳr 1 stands as perhaps the most obvious, though by *no means* the *only*, example.[45] Together with Kiuzelȳ-gȳr by far the most imposing settlement in the area

42 Particularly relevant here are Di Cosmo, 2002 : 143–158 and King, 2021 : 353–361 (the latter of special concern to the present argument because is focused on – late: 4th century – Achaemenid Baktria). See furthermore several of the contributions collected in the present volume.

43 See the relevant section in this volume for further case studies. Petrie, 2020 and Coloru, 2021 discuss the development of precisely such infrastructure in Achaemenid-ruled Southwest Asia, and their role in shaping the local environment for the Empire's (and as it is argued here at least *some* local élites) greater profit.

44 Morris, 2021a : 174–191, 194 on Uzundara, while Morris, 2021b : 479 (with Bolelov, 2018 : 100–116) explore the possible function(s) of Kampyrtëpa (close to modern Termiz).

45 Wu, 2014 : 247 interpreting the unfinished (imposing) monumentalization of the site as indexical of fading Achaemenid power around the Amudaryo delta, but contrast Minardi, 2015 : 64–84; 2021 stressing the paramount importance for the Empire to upkeep smooth communication, and arguably *economic* trade channels with the pre-Aralic steppes, and through them to the regions further to the North.

dated to the (early) Persian presence, both appear to have been particularly qualified not only to control, and in all likelihood tax, the movement of livestock (especially the much prized local camels) along the main regional transhumance routes, but also to fulfill the function of a collection point -and in some cases processing – of semiprecious stones such as turquoise.[46]

The presence of column and capitel fragments of clearly Achaemenid-inspired manufacture at important mining sites (most notably the Sultanuizdağ mountains in the Kyzylkum desert) ought to be taken as a strong clue supporting the presence of imperial infrastructure in the region.[47] Stated otherwise, far from being an isolated case, it is conceivable that Kyropolis represented one among the nodes, if not the most prominent by virtue of the eponymous founder, of a dense administrative network aimed at making the greatest profit achievable from the exploitation of local resources.[48] A point not to be overlooked, the archaeological evidence suggests that the development of such an apparatus was not (exclusively) the result of an *ex nihilo* creation by Cyrus and his circle, but on the contrary consistently relied on extensive and sophisticated local infrastructure and relational networks: Kyropolis, therefore, was *not* born, nor did it exist, *in vacuo*.[49] To what has been said so far it can be added that, in Baktria, the beating heart of the would-be satrapy, Čašma-ye Šifâ, the oasis of Ulanbulak (where Termiz would have arisen) and probably, further to the Northwest, a critical ford of the Amudaryo – in the environs of a place known as Zamm to Islamic-era sources – seem equally to have been part of the same project within which Kyropolis has been assumed here to represent the most advanced pivot in the catchment area of another crucial Central Asian river, namely the Syrdaryo.[50]

It goes without saying that an endeavor of this magnitude cannot be taken as the result of improvisation. On the contrary, its conception as well as the acquisition of the means and skills necessary for its implementation required decades, if not centuries, of imperial training on the part of Cyrus and his acolytes, the origins of which must be sought in the geopolitical and cultural context of the Ancient Near East of the (early) 1st Millennium BCE.[51] Hence, the investigation concerning such precedents, and their hermeneutic potential with regard to the Central Asian context in which Kyropolis arose and developed, will be the focus of the next section.

46 DSf §10 famously mentions Chorasmia as the main source of this valuable stone. At Kiuzelȳ-gȳr turquoise was already processed in the 7th century BCE (Vinogradov *et al*., 1965 : 130–131): Achaemenid interest in Chorasmian mining industry is likely older than Darius' monumental frenzy: see Manilov, 1974 and now Ferrario, 2023b, with further literature.

47 Pruger, 1989 : 196–197.

48 On Achaemenid infrastructural power and its consequences on the different imperial localities note most recently Makvandi, 2020, Henkelman / Jacobs, 2021, King, 2025 and Henkelman, forthcoming.

49 Trudnovskaja, 1979 : 108. Masson, 1953 is still a seminal overview of Central Asian (especially O'zbek) mining history.

50 On the Balḫ oasis and its surroundings note Marquis, 2018 together with Lhuillier *et al*., 2021. On Zamm note Schwarz, 2022 : 80–82; this volume.

51 Lanfranchi, 2021 on the Assyrian precedent as a model for Achaemenid «imperial training».

3.1. Draining the Swamp: Bābil, Aššur, Ēlām, Pārsa

The Teispid-Achaemenid Persian Empire can legitimately be considered the crowning achievement of a centuries-long process of imperial formation that radically transformed the Ancient Near East and whose legacy can be discerned far beyond the traditional chronological partitions of this region's history.[52] This however implies that, in turn, the emergence of Cyrus and his extraordinary trajectory as conqueror (and administrator) stems out of an impressive and multifaceted legacy, which cannot be ignored if one wishes to understand the success – even in Central Asia – of the new political creature which Cyrus' actions so painstakingly shaped.[53]

The depth and scope of the Ēlāmite influence on the Persian imperial model has already been mentioned.[54] This section, conversely, considers the dynamics of control devoted to so-called marginal areas (which means nothing else but spaces particularly resistant to imperial claims and attempts at subjugation) deployed by the leading Empires of the multipolar system characteristic of the 1st half of the 1st Millennium BCE, namely, alongside the aforementioned neo-Ēlāmite polity, Urarṭu, Assyria, and the wide spectrum of Median city lords.[55] Such a choice is justified by the fact that, as will be attempted to show, the geopolitical scenario of the area of contention between the previously mentioned political formations (particularly the Eastern Taurus and Northwestern Īrān, especially the slopes of the Zagros) offers interesting insights and abundant comparative material on the basis of which it might be possible to imagine the modes of territorial appropriation enacted by the developing Persian administration in Central Asia, for which the above-mentioned precedents must have provided an influential model.[56]

This is suggested not least by considerations involving the ecology and demography of the areas under scrutiny in this paper.[57] The physical and anthropic geography of the (shifting, *overlapping* and steadily *contested*) imperial borderlands under discussion here – characterized by a fragmented landscape, exceedingly differentiated internally and

52 Lanfranchi, 1988 : 791–817, Rollinger, 2014b; 2021b; 2025, van de Mieroop, 2016 : 308–345, Waters, 2021. Oellig, 2023 for a history of the concept of «imperial successions».

53 On Empires and their memory, or the memory thereof, note Rollinger / Gehler, 2014 and Gehler / Rollinger, 2022 : 25. Kyros' rise in the shadow of Ancient Near Eastern 1st millennium politics is explored by Waters, 2014 : 35–51; 2022a : 34–107; 2023, with previous bibliography.

54 Liverani, 1988 : 744–748, Waters, 2013, Basello, 2018, Henkelman, 2018.

55 Dubovský, 2018 and Waters in this volume on Ēlām and Assyria. Liverani, 1988 : 733–743, Salvini, 2014 and van de Mieroop, 2016 : 223–234 address Urarṭu as an Empire (Lanfranchi / Rollinger 2021 on its competition with Assyria for borderlands control). The «Median dilemma» is surveyed in Rossi 2010; 2017, Jacobs / Stronach 2021 (from the archaeological standpoint), Rollinger, 2020; 2021a, and Waters, 2022a : 56–63, pointing out the importance of taking control of the space under Median control as a springboard for Kyros' Central Asian campaign. It is argued here that dealing with Median polities and the landscape in which they flourished provided the rising Empire with useful templates to be adopted and adapted further to the East.

56 Waters, 2022a : 28 on Kyros' family members apprenticeship, while being held hostages, at the Assyrian court.

57 Consider Weaverdyck *et al*., 2021 : 301–304 on landscape affordances and their affecting imperial-building strategies.

marked by a low-density but extremely dispersed demography, both conditions that complicate in no small measure the setting up of an apparatus of extraction and control by an external power in the absence of active (and interested) local cooperation – does indeed present significant points of contact with the Central Asian scenario in which it is likely, at least according to the most recent outcome of archaeological investigation, Cyrus stumbled upon during his own Central Asian campaigns.[58] Such a comparison entails the elaboration of an appropriate historical context within – and building upon – which to situate Kyropolis in order to understand better its importance not so much (nor perhaps especially) for the purpose of defending newly acquired territories from threatening hordes of steppe nomads, but on the contrary as the springboard for further expansion of Persian power in Central Asia.

By virtue of what has been argued so far, a closer scrutiny of the modes of provincialization, reorganization, and control (for purposes, primarily, of revenue extraction) characteristic of especially the Neo-Assyrian Empire along the entire arc of its Northeastern borders seems inescapable.[59] The latent, and not infrequently exceedingly overt, violence characteristic of this process – in itself a far from linear, much less teleological business – ought not obscure an essential aspect for the purposes of the present discussion, *viz*. the interest, when not even the *necessity*, on the part of the Assyrian Empire to gain access to natural resources and skilled labor both located *beyond* its direct reach, in and beyond those borderlands that the rhetoric so prominent in the inscriptions is much keen to represent, tendentiously, as an inert backdrop for the display of royal majesty.[60] Behind closed walls, so to speak, the imperial archives offer on the contrary an impressive sampling of what the Assyrian court sought to gain possession of through its expansion into the complex, fragmented, litigious, but extremely prosperous world of the mountain and pastoral communities scattered across its (ideally ever-)expanding frontier zones: camels, a possible indication, at least in the case of the Median world, of sustained networks of exchange

58 Cifarelli, 2019, Thomalsky, 2019 and especially Boucharlat, 2020 : 413–416; Fuchs, 2023 on Northern Īrān before the Achaemenids: note moreover Ponchia in this volume. The Urarṭean world preceding Achaemenid takeover is explored in Kroll, 2014; 2015, Khatchadourian, 2016, Binandeh *et al*., 2017, Ristvet, 2018, and Grekyan, 2023. Osborne, 2021, provides an informed treatment of the Syro-Anatolian City Culture within its regional and broader Near Eastern context. On the Zagros peoples and polities see e. g. Balatti, 2017, Binandeh, 2020, and the sweeping overview in Matthews / Nashli, 2022 : 393–498. Central Asian landscapes and demography before the Achaemenids, and the consequence of both on the making of the Northeastern satrapies are tackled by Lhuillier, 2018 and Minardi, 2021.

59 Fuchs, 2017a (on Anatolia); 2017b (on Western Īrān and Ēlām), MacGinnis, 2020, Nishiyama, 2020, Squitieri, 2020 and Yamada, 2020 provide up-to-date insights on the topic, with extensive bibliography. The reason for this focus is not least due to the scale of available evidence: see Lanfranchi, 2021 on Assyria as perhaps *the* model of Persian Empire-building.

60 Vér, 2020 : 221 and Yamada, 2020 : 182. MacGinnis, 2020 : 48–50 points out that the notorious Assyrian deportations ought to be conceived (also) as a strategy to acquire skilled workforce at convenient prices from territories otherwise difficult to subdue: Matarese, 2021 on the Achaemenid development of this Assyrian (and wider Near Eastern) precedent.

with Central Asia, fine wool, and even precious stones, to list but a few particularly prized items.[61]

To this end, the most characteristic strategy adopted by the Neo-Assyrian rulers may rightly be considered to have been the establishment of *kārun* (emporia, trading colonies, customs stations) at strategic nodes in the territories under conquest or exploitation – for example, garrisoning river fords, on a model that, as noted, the Persians seem to have had well in mind in Central Asia, perhaps beginning precisely with the founding of Kyropolis guarding the Syrdaryo catchment area – and bearing the name of the ruler responsible for their foundation.[62] Of pivotal importance in the context of the present discussion is the fact that such settlements were almost never built *ex novo*. In the vast majority of attested cases, we are dealing with an explicit act of imperial appropriation of *already existing* networks and infrastructure. This is most incontrovertibly demonstrated by the renaming (Assyrian style) of the aforementioned dwellings, with and in the broader social context of which, however, the role of local experts, middlemen and other powerbrokers must have remained of fundamental importance, in fact continuing to shape and drive the infrastructure on which the Assyrian exploitation mechanism rested and from which it was able to expand further.[63] Such an inference is supported by the mention, frequent in the imperial archives in reference to these settlements, of far from negligible (in both number and size) caravans in transit along routes over which, through the *kārun* system, the Assyrian administration attempted to exercise some form of control, and consequent-

61 Boucharlat, 2020 : 415 on the possibility of Ḫurāsān acting as a transmission belt of sort between the easternmost reach of the Median polities and contemporary Central Asia, a possible avenue for the camels encountered by Tukultī-apil-Ešarra (Tiglath Pileser) III while campaigning against the Medes: MacGinnis, 2020 : 43. *SAA* 17.136 on wool.

62 See *CAD* 8, s. v. *kāru* A for the meaning(s) of the word, together with Dezső / Vér, 2013 : 351–352 and Vér, 2020 : 218. On their location controlling river fords note Squitieri, 2020 : 114–116 and Radner, 2021 (on the institutional development in the area of Zamua). Compare Binandeh / Kargar, 2008 on Mannaean fortresses acting as trading posts between and across competing imperial polities.

63 Examples of this phenomenon are legion: under Šarru-ukīn (Sargon) II, Kišessim was renamed Kār-Nergal, Ḫarḫar became Kār-Šarrukīn (Alibaigi *et al*., 2016 for a possible identification, stressing how valuable Zagros' resources where for Assyria), Kišešlu was turned into Kār-Nabû and Bīt-Bagāia acquired the new name of Kār-Ištar. The already mentioned Aššur-nāṣir-apli was equally conversational with the practice, and the same is attested for Adad-nērārī III. Even lower ranking officials took part in the process: around the middle of the 8th century BCE, the governor of Sūḫu, a man named Ninurta-kudurri-uṣur, built a new town on the Euphrates and, in a flight of creativity, called it Kār-Ninurta-kudurri-uṣur. Piller, 2010 : 68 notes the existence of a similar system in the highlands of Urarṭu. Concerning the Achaemenid period, note e. g. PF 1318 and NN 3000 recording a certain Išbaramištima acting as a professional guide to and from India. According to Makvandi, 2020 : 206 (referencing both tablets), the Persian road system was conceived as a powerful tool aimed at tapping into, and further expand, *local* and wider patterns of resources – and human – circulation. See Kidd, 2024 : 790 on (travel) guides as a core business of desert-steppes based families in Central Asia down to the 19th century and their role of crucial assets in fostering imperial ambitions of exploration and conquest.

ly to derive profit in the form of taxes and other fiscal levies.[64] The establishment of an imperial settlement within strategic ganglia of the economic and social fabric of borderland communities could prove fruitful in other ways as well. For example, it served – quite literally – as the breeding ground for a massive livestock development plan aimed at supplying the imperial cavalry with superior-class mounts.[65] The documentary situation regarding Persian-ruled Central Asia is far more compromised, and this is all the truer when it comes to the auroral phase of the Empire. There are, however, several elements that can be brought forward to support the hypothesis that such dynamics were at work during the years when Cyrus expanded Persian control in Central Asia. Of these, in all likelihood, the most compelling come from careful scrutiny of a recently published body of evidence known as the *Aramaic Document from Ancient Bactria*.[66] For example, the mention (*ADAB* B8) of «camels grazing on a pasture on a hill», the now-famous dispute between Vahuvaḫšu, his subordinate camel drivers and a member of the satrapal administration named Bagavanta (*ADAB* A1: note that the bone of contention which caused the filing of the complaint to which we owe our knowledge of the episode most likely concerned fiscal issues pertaining to the taxation of a caravan and its cargo) and the probable record (*ADAB* D2) of silver credit granted by the Achaemenid bureaucracy to members of local pastoral communities in exchange for a counterpart in livestock *surplus* help strengthen the hypothesis of an application, this time *Persian* style, of the Assyrian *kārun* model in Central Asia.[67]

Recently, Matthew Canepa has put forward, and backed with very convincing argument, the hypothesis that one of the main reasons behind the success of Achaemenid imperialism in Central Asia is to be found in a shrewd policy of recruiting local élites, whose landed estates would have been integrated into the satrapy's infrastructural system, in this way transforming a rather unassuming local squire into an emissary of Persian authority.[68] The crucial aspect of this proposition, which for that matter finds countless parallels in the history of Cyrus' imperial predecessors, not least Assyria itself, is to be envisioned in the emphasis it puts on the *interests*, and the ability to pursue them, that representatives of local communities must have identified in the possibility of becoming part of the

64 *SAA* 5.202; 5.224, where a caravan at least 200 strong is referred to. MacGinnis, 2020 : 52 suggest the paramount role of the *kāru* system in extracting revenue from taxing movement of men and goods based on the evidence provided, among others, by the two mentioned records.

65 *SAA* 5.171, commented in MacGinnis, 2020 : 51.

66 Naveh / Shaked, 2012. A thorough investigation of this invaluably precious body of evidence from the standpoint of economic history has not been provided so far, despite its enormous potential (but see the relevant discussion in King 2025).

67 King, 2021 : 348–351 is critical for an assessment in the terms suggested here of *ADAB* A1 (however, he does not discuss the historical parallel provided by the *kāru* system. On the Aramaic tallies the most comprehensive study is Henkelman / Folmer, 2016. King, 2023 on «camels of the King» from a comparative, multilingual perspective on archival sources from Baktria and Persepolis.

68 Canepa, 2020 : 52 on the Afǧān site of Altin 10.

seamlessly unstoppable growth of the Persian imperial system.[69] From this perspective, the dynamics of local competition at the (micro)regional level that undoubtedly characterized the sociopolitical landscape of Central Asia during the 6th century BCE – as they still characterized it more than 200 years later, when Alexander appeared on the scene – should therefore be credited with playing a *constitutive* (and not, or not only, oppositional) role in the development of the Persian administrative and infrastructural network in Baktria, Sogdiana, and in all likelihood Chorasmia, of which Kyropolis it is reasonable to assume represented a focal point, but by no means an exceptional or an isolated one.[70]

The evidence discussed in this section perhaps allows a(nother) tentative assessment to be drawn: in the face of a rich and well-established imperial tradition of managing the landscape – and the inhabitants – of ecologically and politically complex, dynamic territories, in the course of the Central Asian campaign Cyrus and his advisers must not have been slow to recognize in the area of Kyropolis (but the same could be said of the other settlements mentioned earlier) a strategic node of crucial importance from which to build and *expand* the economic, political, and administrative system already tested, with considerable success, in the kingdom of Anšan and neighboring territories in the first trial phase of the Empire.[71]

In particular, the example of the Neo-Assyrian *kārun* offers a cogent (and to the best of my knowledge hitherto rather unexplored) model from which to *re*think the function of Kyropolis within this system, no longer in a purely defensive fashion, but rather as a powerful instrument of both the Persian conquest of Central Asia and the imperial extractive machinery in territories not (or only indirectly) subject to the political control of the newly established satrapies.[72] This same template, moreover, has the additional benefit of placing adequate emphasis on the *proactive* role of local communities in shaping, not infrequently adapting them to their own interests, an otherwise thoroughly tested imperial strategy. The latter is an issue that deserves further study; for this purpose, however, it is necessary to shift the angle of observation once more, this time to the other end of Afro-Eurasia, as the next sections further details.

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69 Payne *et al.*, 2016 on imperial cosmopolitanism as a strategy of «assimilation and subordination of elite cultures». Osborne, 2021 : 162 elaborates on the built environment as indexical of exactly these patterns across the world of the Syro-Anatolian City Culture during its interaction with Assyria (Gopnik, 2010 for a comparable case study in Armenia and Northwestern Īrān). Note moreover Vér, 2020 : 226.

70 MacGinnis, 2020 : 44: in 719 BCE, Šarru-ukīn II fought at the side of a certain Iranzu in Mannaea against the latter rival Miatti of Zikirtu. The cooperation between the former provided considerable gains for both: it granted Assyrian power safe(r) access to Mannaean wealth and networks, while it empowered Iranzu against his local competitors. If anything about Herodotus' tale concerning Cyrus' clash against Tomyris can be given some credit, a scenario comparable to the above could be envisioned, in which the princess felt Persian encroachment in her territories as a threat to her local overlordship. Darius' intervention against Skunkha might have been motivated by comparable interests: cf. Ferrario, 2024 : 348–350.

71 Henkelman, 2018 with references.

72 Lanfranchi, 2021 : 141 conceives of such dynamics as the establishment of an «imperial suction pump».

3.2. *Making Barbarians? All Under Heaven, and Beyond*

The interrelationships of Chinese political formations with the Eurasian steppe communities, not only, albeit unquestionably prominently, in the territories of today's Mongolia and Manchuria, go back much further than the era of the antagonism between the Hàn (漢) and the Xiōngnú (匈奴) Empires, with the latter, moreover- and contrary to a still rather widespread opinion – being first and foremost a product, as mentioned earlier, of an inveterate historiographical tradition. Moreover, such acquaintances can – and should – *not* be described in exclusively, nor perhaps primarily, antagonistic terms.[73] Since the Bronze Age (at a minimum from 1250 BCE onward, but this is likely to be an overly conservative estimate), a wide spectrum of clues is available, from archaeology to linguistics, that consistently points in the direction of the existence not only of an extensive and complex network of exchanges – whose directionality seems, at best, to have been biunivocal in nature, in any case *not* a Chinese monopoly – between power formations such as the late Shāng (商) dynasty and a thriving, diverse, and extremely complex universe of pastoral communities settled across the steppes to the North, East, and even West.[74]

Numerous examples of the above dynamics can be adduced. Among the most conspicuous is undoubtedly the textual evidence of the so-called *mǎ* (馬) people, who were recruited as military experts by, and remarkably active at, the Shāng court. The word, it has been remarked, not only denotes the (by all intents and purposes significant) rank of these individuals within the military hierarchy, particularly in the cavalry, of the Chinese polity, but moreover implies that the prestige of these individuals was intrinsically linked to their much coveted skills in the art of animal husbandry.[75] On top of that, the grave goods of women of lofty status, such as those discovered in the tomb of Princess Fù Hǎo (婦好, consort of king Wǔ Dīng 武丁), strongly suggest, if not an ethnic origin, certainly close ties of prominent members of the Shāng aristocracy with the steppe world. These

73 Di Cosmo, 2002 still provides the most insightful account of the rise of Xiōngnú power in the context of Chinese (attempt at) expansion in the steppe, now to be complemented, if not superseded, by Miller, 2024. Leese-Messing, 2019 for a refreshing outlook at the dynamics China's imperial formation.

74 Note especially Honeychurch, 2015 : 189–191 and Anthony, 2007 : 397–405 on the spread on both horses and chariots in China, which seems to postdate the earliest known evidence for the adoption of herding practices across Mongolia (1400–1300 BCE): Honeychurch *et al*., 2021 : 35, 46 and the comments in Honeychurch, 2015 : 189–191. A thorough and up-to-date discussion of the Shān period is now available thanks to the contributions collected in Childs-Johnson, 2020 : 227–361.

75 Fellner *et al*. forthcoming. Worth stressing in this context is the parallel, emerging both from the *ADAB* tallies and from the archival material excavated at Persepolis, of the role played within the Achaemenid administrative apparatus by «semi-external» specialized pastoralists: Henkelman, 2005, Henkelman / Folmer, 2016. That these individuals, or higher-ranking members of their societies, could negotiate respectable position within, or in relation to, the Persian political hierarchy is suggested by Arrian (*Anab*., 3.8.3), for he is aware of *Sakā* units joining the Baktrian satrap Bessos at the eve of Gaugamela as an outcome of *ad hoc* agreements between their leaders and the Great King. The Chinese evidence suggests that one reason thereof might have been not only these men's horsemanship mastery, but also – perhaps critically – their ability of supplying satrapal ranks with superior mounts (likely not just horses).

may have been negotiated, maintained, and perhaps even stirred, through the involvement of settlements located *outside* the Chinese political horizon (thus under control of native communities) at least as early as the late 3rd Millennium BCE, as evidenced by the sensational discovery of a site known under the name of Shímǎo (石峁, located in modern Shǎnxī province 陕西).[76]

The relevance of these parallels for the Central Asian context, particularly during the period when it is possible to assume that Cyrus was active in the region, is suggested by the recent discovery of a site such as Taksaï I, located in Southwestern Qazaqstan.[77] Remarkable here, too, is in fact the presence of richly decorated tombs hosting a female individual, whose grave goods not only suggest her active involvement in the field of horse breeding, but at the same time point in the direction of the «golden lady» belonging to a society with a remarkably diversified economy. Similar to the case of Shímǎo, a significant component of the latter can be recognized in a sustained productive activity (including a considerable agricultural *surplus*) that granted, through exchange networks of *at least* regional scope, an economic return for the local élites, and conversely for the entire community they presided over. Should the comparison suggested in the previous section with the Assyrian *kāru* system hit the mark, the evidence discussed here would provide further support for a scenario that would see Kyropolis as perhaps the most conspicuous outcome, following the Persian conquest, of two complementary, if not convergent, strategies (one external, of Near Eastern extraction, and one indigenous, rooted in Central (Eur)Asian traditions and social practices) of land exploitation and circulation of the resources derived from it.

Such a pattern has been archaeologically recorded in the case of Kyzyltëpe, in all likelihood the most crucial Achaemenid settlement in the upper Surxondaryo valley (modern Southern O'zbekiston).[78] Not unlike Kyropolis located along the fringes of an ecological ridge between a fertile alluvium and a mountain range crossed by numerous transhumance routes, the territory of Kyzyltëpe is likely to have represented in the eyes of the developing satrapal bureaucracy an ideal opportunity to reproduce in Central Asia that system of administrative units deputed to the supervision and increase of imperial live-

76 Honeychurch *et al*., 2021 : 37 notes the existence, starting at least around 2000 BCE, of indigenous craft production centers in the steppes embedded in far-reaching *interregional* exchange systems aimed at the circulation of wealth and resources, in which herds (not only horses) played a critical role, including developing an increasingly sophisticated indigenous political culture. On the role of Shímǎo as a harbinger of innovation emanating from an alleged periphery note Versluys forthcoming (with further literature).

77 Sdykov / Lukpanova, 2014 : 75–76, 131.

78 Wu, 2020 : 603–608 with extensive previous bibliography concerning the (history of the) excavations at the site. Note Lyonnet / Fontugne, 2021, arguing for an earlier date for the first steps in the settlement's development, which would only but further buttress the hypothesis sketched here: in shaping its own administrative and economic system in Central Asia, Persian power was in fact tapping into extended, pre-existing networks, upkept, and supplied by indigenous communities and (and for the benefit of) their élites. On the landscape affordances of the Surxondaryo valley (and its mountainous surroundings) for imperial economies see Weaverdyck *et al*., 2021 : 313–317.

stock through institutionally regulated economic relations with surrounding communities that in Southwestern Īrān boasted decades, if not centuries, of honored service.[79]

The most recent developments witnessed by archaeological research devoted to the origins of pastoralism in Central and Inner Asia (especially, but not exclusively, in Mongolia) make it possible to suggest a local origin of the system taken up and further developed at Kyzyltëpe – and by virtue of the argument developed so far, also presided over by the establishment of Kyropolis – by the imperial administration. In particular, the centuries spanning the so-called Spring and Autumn period and continuing into that of the Warring States (respectively Chūnqiū Shídài 春秋時代 and Zhànguó 戰國, ca. 750–350 BCE) are characterized in the steppe world by the development of an intra-community system of labor control and exploitation of landscape resources centered on horse and camel herding, whose role in the genesis of political institutions capable of regulating interactions between prominent individuals and entire groups within a radius of several hundred kilometers cannot be underestimated. What is even more critical, such findings can be fruitfully compared with compellingly similar case studies recorded across the Central Asian archeological horizon of earlier centuries.[80]

What has been discussed so far should have helped to lend further plausibility to the following hypotheses. 1. The foundation of Kyropolis, it is reasonable to think, pursued an objective, if not offensive (inserting itself by conquest into economic and sociopolitical networks deeply rooted in the fabric of indigenous societies), at least cooperative in nature, aimed at profiting – for example, through taxation and/or recruitment of specialized personnel – from the circulation of men and resources that the settlement's location was able to secure, or at least helped negotiating. 2. Far from amounting to an infrastructural development *ex nihilo*, there are good arguments for believing that such a site emerged from a local precedent by virtue of the approval (and perhaps even through the active, because far from disinterested, contribution) of individuals or groups who from their, and their extended groups, integration within the administrative – not to mention economic – structures of the rising Persian power expected considerable profits.[81]

79 Note e. g. PF 352 and 363, mentioning two locales, Pumu and Gisat, located at the borderlands between Fārs and Ḫuzestān, already known from the Ēlāmite period (detailed discussion in Henkelman, 2005 : 157–164). Such evidence only strengthens the suspicion that, behind the hill-grazing camels of *ADAB* B8, a comparable system might have been in place, and this since the very beginning of the Persian takeover in Central Asia. Morris, 2021c : 696–700 on Empires as catalysts of economic development in (Hellenistic) Central Asia.

80 Honeychurch, 2017 : 519–528. Note Barfield, 2021 for a shrewd analysis of Central and Inner Asian burial mounds as indexical of indigenous political consciousness and as a mean of (re)negotiating power in the steppes. Rouse, 2020 explores the strategies of regional integration taking place during the 2nd Millennium BCE in Central Asia.

81 Such a scenario, let it be noted in passing, might provide a possible context against whose background one may attempt to make better sense (if any at all), of Herodotos' account concerning Tomyris' grudge against Kyros' presence in *Sakā* controlled territory. Leaving aside her son's death on the battlefield, it could be suggested that Persian interest in the steppes was perceived by *some* local strongmen as a threat to their own primacy, possibly to the advantage of internal rivals, who on the contrary were more than ready to strike a deal with the newcomers. It is not preposterous

Although admittedly dating almost a Millennium later than the period under study here, by virtue of their richness and overwhelmingly detailed accuracy, historical sources from the Táng period (唐, 618–907 CE) prove extremely valuable in order to further flesh-out the sociopolitical and economic context in which, as argued in this chapter, it is reasonable to imagine that Kyropolis developed.[82] In fact, these accounts show that the development of the tremendously effective imperial cavalry (nearly 700000 strong at the time of the system's apogee, before the revolt of General Ān Lùšān 安祿山 – incidentally of Central Asian extraction himself – marked a devastating setback from which it never fully recovered) was the product of a flourishing network of economic and sociopolitical entanglements with the Northern steppes, the maintenance – and if possible expansion – of which was in the interests of both the Chinese court and the local powerholders, whose role in the development of the entire infrastructure must be considered no less decisive than that of the solicitous imperial bureaucrats.[83]

Such a scenario perhaps makes it possible to rethink on a more complex and evidence-based ground than just the tributary and unequal exchange model the dynamics of interaction between the ascendant Persian political, administrative, and economic apparatus in Central Asia and the peoples of the steppes, as evidenced, for example, by the celebrated Pazyryk burial furnishings.[84] More specifically, the pinnacle position of the livestock component in the economy of these groups, and the key role of equines and other ungulates reared on the steppes (as decisive factors in increasing mobility) in establishing, controlling, maintaining, and expanding economic circuits of transregional scope leaves open the possibility that the sumptuary objects of unmistakable Achaemenid manufacture – including a luxurious carpet and uncountable specimens of jewelry – so popular among the élites of the Eurasian steppes were acquired in the context of relations of a distinctly *commercial* nature.[85] Both the case of Assyrian-developed *kārun* and the one

here to note that Temüjin (Činggis Ḫān) rose to power within a context of *intra*-steppic competition over the control, and the resulting revenues, of people and resources: Favereau, 2021 : 26–62, May, 2022. For individuals like Tomyris, Kyros' represented a much bigger concern than the at the time relatively unassuming Borjigid scion, having already mastered much of the Īrānian Plateau (Waters, 2022a: 34–81).

82 For an exhaustive treatment of the evidence at stake here note Skaff, 2012 : 241–271, now with Ferrario, 2023a : 78–80.

83 Skaff, 2017 for further details.

84 Stark, 2020 : 80–82 stresses the local agency within such dynamics of exchange. The now accepted lower date of (some of) the burials – on which see Francfort, 2021 – is not an obstacle to the argument developed here: as suggested, for example, by an instructive anecdote preserved by Xenophon (*Anab.*, 7.3.18: Ferrario, 2023b : 776–770), prestigious objects originating in Achaemenid territories were handled as family, if not group, heirlooms, and must have circulated for generations before being stored in a burial, an act which by itself only further stresses their meaning for the owners, who made a point of removing them from their social life in order to privately enjoy them in the netherworld.

85 Linduff / Rubinson, 2021 : 26–64 on the Pazyryk economy. Morris, 2021a : 181–184, 191–194 on local (mobile) élites as conspicuous actors in both production and consumption (with Shablavina, 2021 suggesting that steppe élites *commissioned* at least some of the luxury items which found their

considered here of the Táng-era livestock economy (but industry would not be inappropriate a label given its scale) further suggest that native merchants and other intermediaries were understood, and prized as such, as an indispensable building block for the smooth functioning of the entire infrastructure, from which, moreover, they expected, as well attested by the litigation reported in *ADAB* A1, gains sufficient enough to justify the involvement, however illegitimate it was, of high-ranking members of the imperial administration, even to the point of defying their superiors' orders.[86]

There is, however, room for further interesting considerations. Even if one were to opt for remaining within the etiological paradigm of the tributary economy, some proper understanding concerning the meaning of words such as tribute or treasure (*baziš* in Ēlāmite, from the Old Persian *bāǧi-*, meaning «part [pertaining] to the King») in the administrative texts from the Persepolis archive would still be needed.[87] As demonstrated by Christopher Tuplin in a meticulous study of the known attestations of the words framing the concept in the so far available body of evidence, it refers, in its broadest extent, to a rather varied repertoire of goods, including silver, foodstuffs, animals, and even labor power, the main characteristic of which is that they were mobilized within the imperial economy at the behest of an overarching authority: often the satrap, sometimes the King himself or a woman belonging to the imperial extended household.[88] The relevance of such an observation in the context of the present argument seems apparent once coupled with the evidence, recently catalogued by Rhyne King, of a peak coinciding with the 12th month of the administrative calendar (thus concomitant with such an important recurrence as the new year) of documents attesting trips to the imperial court, in all likelihood fulfilling tax collection purposes.[89]

Such capital (mobile and otherwise) had to be collected and recorded locally in the first place. A reasonable assumption would be that centers such as Kyropolis were used, among other things, for this critical administrative goal. A not insignificant corollary of this assumption is the role, at once political and economic, played by the imperial settlements, and particularly those scattered across the Empire's borderlands, within this system. Indeed, they not only served as a privileged point of access for external actors with

way into the steppes from the Achaemenid Empire). See now Leese-Messing, 2023, Morris, 2023 for two enlightening discussions of the *political* side of trans-imperial economic exchange across the spaces of Central Asia and China.

86 Note moreover that the record, in the Persepolis archive (NN 2252: Safaʿī, 2025 : 248 fn. 6) of a certain Kabba allocating grain for *garments* suggests that the economic branch of Kyropolis' administration most likely relied of well-established templates in order to profitably deal with surrounding pastoralists communities – and or their better-off representatives.

87 Schmitt, 2014 : 150–151 on the meaning of *bāǧi-*.

88 Tuplin, 2020a : 236–241.

89 See King, 2022 on the subject. Note in particular NN 0431 (King, 2022 : 7): in the year 20, 10th month of Darius' reign (502 BCE), Zakurra the Gāndḥārān travelled to Susa together with 10 men, 280 subordinates (*puhu*), 12 camels and 31 mules. So far, no *direct* evidence concerning Baktria, Sogdiana or Chorasmia is attested, but given 1. Baktria's role in the political, administrative, and economic framework of the Empire's East (Wu, 2020) and 2. the *systemic* nature of the Imperial Paradigm (Henkelman, 2017), its existence can be confidently assumed.

representatives of Persian power (*and vice versa*): cases such as Uzundara – or Ṭawāwīs (طواویس), among the most renowned frontier markets in the Buxārā oasis of the 9th and 10th centuries CE – particularly aptly illustrate the flywheel function such settlements played for both short and long distance trade: for they ought to be envisioned as the pillars of the imperial infrastructure *and* the economies of scale the latter contributed in generating and supporting.[90]

In this section an attempt has been made to show how, apart from a whole array of Ancient Near Eastern precedents (the importance of which for an adequate understanding of the genesis of what might be called the Kyropolis project has been emphasized above), a substantial and varied Central Asian record leaves little doubt as to the existence of a distinctly *endogenous* sociopolitical and economic background particularly conducive to the development of a settlement such as Cyrus eponymous foundation. It was from—and by virtue of—these premises that the Persian administration was able to insert itself so successfully within the Central Asian sociocultural fabric. The burgeoning imperial infrastructure, in fact, should not be deemed as an *external* (let alone *foreign*) entity, from which the locals aimed to defend themselves or, at most, to plunder when needed or as wished, and which therefore needed to be constantly defended. On the contrary, it must have been understood (at least also) as a golden opportunity to be exploited for the pursuit of primarily local political ends, that is, internal to the power relations of and between Central Asian communities.

Rather than a collision (the still hovering spectrum of a clash of civilizations), we would thus be faced with an *overlapping* (or, alternatively, an intertwining) of interests, sometimes *simultaneously,* and often on different scales and for various reasons, converging *and* competing.[91] The most conspicuous product of these dynamics would have been a political, economic, and administrative system that remained viable for more than two centuries (as the *ADAB* prove beyond any doubt), and on which the heirs of Cyrus' imperial project built a not insignificant part of their fortunes.[92]

90 Schwarz, 2022 : 134–136 and Stark forthcoming on Ṭawāwīs and its place in the broader regional economy of the time, arguably a compelling parallel case study against which to (re)think Kyropolis' role in Achaemenid Northeastern Central Asia. For an excellent discussion of Eurasian Empires, beyond the most studied cases of the Rome and the Hellenistic world, as main drivers of local and transregional economies note e. g. Dwivedi, 2021 (focused on South Asia), Fabian, 2021 (devoted to the Arsakids), Leese-Messing, 2021 (addressing the Chinese Empire) and, critically, Morris, 2021c (dealing with Central Asia in the Hellenistic and Kuṣāṇa period).

91 On the concept of imperial overlap see Strootman, 2019 : 11.

92 Morris, 2019 on the rise of post-Achaemenid Central Asian Empires, but note the distinctive background noise of much, if not all, of their administrative and infrastructural apparatus, a point repeatedly stressed in Henkelman, 2017.

4. North of the River: Theorizing (Non) Imperial Landscapes

What has been argued in the preceding sections entails the need to dwell somewhat more extensively on a crucial aspect of the interpretive scenario proposed in this contribution, namely, the prominent position of the local context (which primarily implies the individuals and groups living therein and shaping its histories) in orienting – one might say co-constructing – the social, political, and economic affairs of Kyropolis. A common denominator of all the interpretative models discussed in the introductory section of this contribution is, in fact, the merely reactive role entrusted to the indigenous communities with which the Persian administration had to deal from the very dawn of the imperial paradigm in Central Asia.[93] This is particularly true in the case of the scenario that here has been termed agonistic (or adversarial; and the same could be said of the controlled opposition model), with the added, detrimental, implication that such an interpretative outlook implies too sharp, and ultimately fallacious, a distinction between two social components – for the sake of the argument to be called the nomadic and the sedentary – of a human landscape such as the Baktrian one, which a growing body of scholarly research has shown to be far more dynamic and complex.[94]

From the Xiōngnú Empire to the one established by Temüjin, and from the Golden Horde to the Comanche and Lakota imperial formations passing through the seminal restructuring phase of the Central Asian sociopolitical universe following the deconstruction of the Oxus civilization (which would be utterly mistaken to understand as a collapse), the more recent historiography devoted to the so-called stateless peoples or horseback political systems has substantially contributed to a more refined understanding of the eminently *political* dimension (underpinning several phases and tradition of community building) of social practices centered on mobility and an economy that was not exclusively – or even predominantly – agricultural, while emphasizing the centrality of institutions such as fairs and markets in the economy, *stricto sensu* and from a symbolic perspective, of the steppe dwelling peoples.[95]

93 Note especially the discussion in Briant, 2020, at least in part smoothing his previous positions on the topic.

94 Cerasetti, 2020, for examples, interprets different mobility regimes as a social *positionality*, fulfilling among other things economic needs of a given group (a point further developed in Kidd, 2024). Chang, 2018 is critical for a thorough rethinking of the socioeconomic landscape of prehistoric Central Asia, providing insights which should become common currency in the scholarship on the Achaemenid Empire in this part of Eurasia.

95 Honeychurch, 2015 discusses at length the paradigm of mobility against the background of Xiōngnú Empire building trajectory (and compare Chin, 2014 : 143–188 on Chinese economic thinking in relation to their enemies in the steppes), while Togan, 2022 addresses the political landscape of pre-Činggisid Mongolia over the *longue durée*. Hämäläinen, 2008; 2019 has revolutionized our understanding of native-American politics. Parmenter, 2010 offers an insightful assessment of pre-Colonial Iroquoia, exploring how mobility and a bewildering range of landscape affordances not only shaped local societies, but crucially affected the space of maneuver available to the first European settlers. Favereau, 2021 : 107 stresses the critical role of markets in herding societies and their willingness of establishing them to take (better) advantage of *rival* polities both within and beyond the

In the wake of this substantial—and steadily growing—historical and anthropological literature, the relatively modest methodological *caveat* of this last section is to take seriously its most relevant conclusions. This entails, consequently, to rethink the dynamics underlying the establishment of Kyropolis, which accordingly ought to be taken no longer (at least not *only*) as exemplifying the dynamics shaping an imperial frontier in opposition to a political, if not even ethnic or cultural otherness perceived as scarcely or not at all to be framed within the constituent mechanisms of the ascendant Persian Empire. On the contrary, it seems far more plausible, if one wished to raise a still somewhat cautious hypothesis, that the furthermost (known) Persian settlement in Central Asia arose as the outcome of a *negotiation* between representatives of the newly established political body (perhaps even Cyrus himself) and at least some components of the multifaceted local society – likely fiercely competing with each other – who saw in the latter primarily a resource to be exploited in order to enrich themselves and increase their power firstly on a local scale and secondly, by virtue of the new pan-Eurasian dimension into which interaction with Cyrus' political vision projected them, literally on the global stage.[96]

Against such a background, the space for a conflict of a structural (almost ontological) nature between two individual litigants (paraphrasing the title of Di Cosmo's seminal book, one would be tempted to say *Ancient Pārsa and its Enemies*), shrinks until it almost completely fades away.[97] Put another way, the seemingly so threatening *Sakā* must have seen in the coming into being of Kyropolis a way to profit from imperial resources at least to the same extent that Cyrus and his lieutenants aimed to exploit their own.[98]

Yet, I would contend that there is in fact room enough for an even more radical proposal, the somewhat speculative component of which needs to be stressed, but which may nevertheless still be worth considering, and which is put forward here as a prompt for further discussion. An inexhaustible ethnographic literature on the mechanisms underlying so-called stranger kingship (a paradigmatic case study, let it be said here in passing, of the distinct political consciousness, and remarkable agency, of individuals and groups that a long tradition of implicitly Eurocentric scholarship has too often been inclined to dismiss as tribal, segmentary, or other more or less derogatory sobriquets) offers incontrovertible

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steppe world. On post-BMAC Central Asia see Luneau, 2020 and Rouse, 2020, the latter notable for the emphasis it lays on the role of pastoral societies in shaping both ecologies and politics of the wider Central Asian space.

96 Rollinger, 2024 on the globalizing effect of the establishment of Persian power across Eurasia (noting especially its fallouts *beyond* its political reach).

97 Favereau, 2021 : 114–116 notes the *local* importance of fostering *transregional* trade in and across the steppes: far from (at least primarily) representing a threat to local – élites -, Cyrus' coming on stage is much more likely to have been seen as an economic opportunity of unprecedented scale.

98 For examples by acquiring horses (and camels?) to support the infrastructural and communication system of the empire, including the *pirradaziš* (Colburn, 2013, Hyland, 2019), which was still up and running in Central Asia at the eve of Alexander's invasion, as demonstrated most glaringly by *ADAB* C1. The beasts needed to be trained and attended to for them to properly perform their tasks, which required non-conventional skills, of which steppe people were indisputable masters: Favereau, 2021 : 128.

evidence of how many and what kinds of opportunities the latter offered to the elders of native communities to pursue – on multiple chessboards and at different geographical, economic, and in some cases even cosmic scales – eminently *local interests*.[99] By virtue of this massive documentation, could it not be the case that Kyropolis arose as a result of the involvement, more or less unintentionally and more or less in spite of themselves, of the structures and individuals at the head of the ascendant Persian Empire within socio-political dynamics that were foreign to them and instead entirely functional to the (re) structuring of power relations within the *Sakā* world?[100]

If ever any concrete evidence was needed to support the existence of emic narratives (i.e., a local perspective) concerning the encounter (among some) of the peoples of Eurasia with the expanding Persian Empire in Baktria, Sogdiana, and the broader Central Asian world – and the meaning(s) of said encounter to those involved in them – it is sensationally provided by a splendid comb carved in poplar wood recently found in one of the Taksaï mounds, which bears a striking resemblance, but with reversed protagonists, to the war-themed sigillography known from the Achaemenid (courtly, or at least high-ranking élite) environment.[101]

Were it possible to draw an overarching historical and historiographical principle from the numerous (not infrequently tragicomic) examples of misunderstanding with which the anthropological literature devoted to the colonial encounter so famously overflows, this would be the abysmal difference that runs between what *really* happened (the event itself, the phenomenon) and what *exactly is that happened* (its meaning, the noumenon). The white man was convinced, or so at least he purported to understand, that he was regularly buying, which means lawfully, according to well-understood and *universal* princi-

99 Sahlins / Graeber, 2017 : 223–248 on the concept of stranger kingship against the background of examples drawn from Mexica America and pre-Colonial Africa. Concerning native (if not nativist) politics taking advantage, when not subverting, foreign imperial law systems devised for their submission, Kivelson, 2006: 204–206 records a set of mind-boggling, sometimes hilarious, examples featuring Siberian shamans and even humble commoners nailing celebrated Tsarist explorers (such as the notorious Vladimir Vasil'evič Atlasov, ca. 1661–1711) to their responsibilities in order to obtain compensation for the latter mischiefs. Graeber / Wengrow, 2021 can be taken as a massive cumulative case advocating in favor of the extremely sophistication of non-state people's political cultures, their cosmologies, and the effects of *both* on Empires claiming sovereignty over them according to principles the premises of which they did not share. This very same topic is thoroughly explored in Kendirbai, 2020 against the backdrop of Tsarist encroachment in Qazaqstan, Kalmukia, and Baškiria between the 16th and the 19th century.

100 Sahlins / Graeber, 2017 : 166–168 discussing cases of conquest drive and even Empire building as an outcome of the allegedly conquered politics and interests, including «greater political security [which by itself casts more than one doubt on the feasibility of the adversarial relationship model]; judicial means of resolving disputes and curbing feuds; a wider range of exchanges, notably by the establishment of markets where peace is enforced by regional authorities [which sounds pretty much like the context in which Kyropolis was established]; a wider social range of intermarriage; and dividends from the ruler's distributions of wealth [which provides at least one framework for the presence of artifacts such as the Pazyryk carpet or Achaemenid luxury vessels across the Eurasian steppes]».

101 Sdykov / Lukpanova, 2014 : 221–224, 290.

ples, Māori's land, but, in Māori's eyes, the very same transaction involved acquiring the newcomers as subordinates.[102] In the context that is the subject of this study, is it not possible to speculate that the founding of Kyropolis had *one* – set of – meaning in the eyes of its patron (the outshining of any predecessor – and rival – by means of reaching the borders of the world, conquering new subjects, taking possession of a new pool of resources, human and material), while from the point of view of its subordinates, or presumed such, the same event was understood in a rather different way, namely as the inclusion within *their own* sociopolitical and economic frameworks, and according to *their own* rules, of an unexpected, extraordinarily lavish source of profit?

After all, providing prosperity is one aspect among the civilizing benefits of the stranger king that is acknowledged by all sides involved in the contested process of his establishment (and taming by the newly acquired subjects). It certainly was part of the cosmological, and therefore inherently *political*, according at least to the evidence on pre-modern kingship recently discussed by Marshall Sahlins and David Graeber, self-understanding of the Persian Great Kings, at a minimum starting with Darius I.[103] Going back to a subject already partly addressed in the preceding pages, should one not been keen to dismiss out of hand Herodotus' account of Cyrus' fateful expedition into Massagetic land (along with its far from unlikely framing in the context of the activities that presided – among other things – over the founding of Kyropolis), it is difficult not to give in to the temptation to read in Tomyris' unwavering opposition an outcome, certainly not the only possible one, of a much more complex system of interactions, confrontations, and negotiations between the greatest Empire the world had hitherto known and its (already deemed as such or would-be) subjects in Central Asia.

As always in history – and as all too often, with the benefit of hindsight, historians are all too keen to forget – things could have turned out differently. Indeed, this had already been the case while Cyrus was still alive, at a crucial stage of his imperial project's expansion to another borderland (the Northwestern one) that had been the object of the

102 Sahlins / Graeber, 2017 : 220, and compare now Nabel, 2025 on child-fosterage and political preeminence between Rome and the Arsakid Empire. The encounter between (at least *some*) of *Sakā* communities and (some of) their representatives with the Persian stranger-Kings, in the person of Cyros first and, later, Darius, could be taken as another fitting case study, and this regardless whether one is dealing with a tradition, as recounted for example in Herodotos – or for what matters Bīsutūn – or an actual historical event: and this because, as the story behind Skunkha's featuring in the inscription clearly suggests, for the purpose of an individual (or his group, or even an Empire) self-understanding, the two are actually one and the same thing.

103 Sahlins / Graeber, 2017 : 167. On Ahuramazdā as provider of «happiness for mankind» (*šiyāti martiyahyā*) see e. g. DNa § 1: given that in the royal inscription the King acts on behalf and as the main instrument of the god's will, it follows that this is *his* duty as well. When it comes to Cyrus, his statements on the matter are somehow less straightforward. However, in his claim to have restored law, order, and peace after the disgraceful reign of Nabû-na'id (Nabonidus, 556–539 BCE), the new King of the Land is tapping into the very same patterns: see Waters, 2022a : 92–97 for a commentary on the main ideological strands entailed in the Kyros' cylinder. Klinkott 2024 on Darius' «dynastic aura» as a strategy of Empire-building.

interests of, and a source of considerable trouble to, his Near Eastern forerunners for centuries already.[104]

Following the patterns of an «eternal return » of sorts, though with some, crucial differences, things would indeed turn out differently once again more than two centuries later for Alexander when, at the end of a no-holds-barred campaign lasting no less than two years, Oxyartes succeeded in getting himself appointed as *praetor Bactrianorum* by the new stranger king who had appeared on the stage.[105] This move, at the same time, allowed the new overlord-subject to cast aside a not insignificant number of cumbersome *internal* enemies (because they had been members of more powerfully networked families and/or because of the position they covered within the now evanescent Achaemenid imperial structure), not least by virtue of the good offices of his daughter (the famed Rōxanē) who had married the foreign conqueror, and later gave him an heir to the throne.[106]

Finally, although it was certainly *not* the main point of the message he set out to convey, it is perhaps not preposterous to assume that it had turned out differently also in the time of Darius, when the new stranger king of the *Sakā* – at least according to his self-tailored narrative as it was eternalized at Bīsutūn – replaced the vanquished rival with

104 This is suggested by a vexed passage of the *Nabonidus Chronicle* (7 II, ll. 15–18), dated to Cyrus' 9th year, c. 547 BCE: «In the month of Nīsān, King Cyrus (II) of Parsu mustered his army and crossed the Tigris downstream from Arbela and, in the month of ʾIyyār, [march]ed to [U][rarṭu] (*ana* ^{kur} [*Ú*] – [*raš – ṭu il – li*] *k*). / He defeated its king (or: put its king to death), seized its possessions, [and] set up his own garrison [there]. After that, the king and his garrison resided there» (cf. Rollinger / Kellner, 2019 for an extensive commentary on these lines). Given the complexities of the Urarṭean political landscape in the 1st Millennium BCE (Lanfranchi / Rollinger, 2021 for a recent discussion), it should not be ruled out: 1. that the king referred to as defeated in the Chronicle was *not* the *only* strongman in the area, from which it follows that Cyrus' intervention could have been welcomed by some of its rivals. 2. That the king who «resided there» with his garrison might not have been Cyrus himself, but one of his supporters. It bears consideration here that in the Bīsutūn inscription one Dādêršiš is mentioned by Darius quashing on his behalf upheavals in the same area: if the Old Persian (col. II § 26) and the Ēlāmite (§ 23) explicitly identify this individual as an Armenian (*Dādêršiš nāma Arminiya*/^{1}*da – dur* $_{x}$ *– ši – iš hi – še* ^{1}*har – mi – nu – ia – ir*) the Akkadian one (§ 23) calls him an Urarṭean (*ár – ki* ^{m} *da – da – ar –* ⌜*šu*⌝ *a -na* KUR *ú – ra – áštu*). The geopolitical context dealt with in the text (Hyland, 2014) makes it very unlikely that such an official had been appointed by Darius: it follows that he, or perhaps even his family (compare the situation of Darius' father Vīštāspa in Parthia) had been rewarded for their collaboration with influential positions by Cambyses, if not by Kyros himself.

105 See Flynn, 2025 for a recent compelling argument in favor of interpreting Alexander's self-fashioning as a divine king according to what anthropologists call «immanentist kingship».

106 Curt. 9.8.9–11. See Rapin, 2013 and Heckel, 2018; 2020 : 171–200; 2021 for some thoughtful remarks on the local geopolitics affecting Alexander's agenda and (mis)deeds in Central Asia. Faver-eau, 2021: 101 stresses the importance of female pedigree in Central and Inner Asian political culture. The marriage of a native princess with a stranger king as a paramount mean of enhancing one's own family or group is a well-attested ethnographic phenomenon (Sahlins / Graeber, 2017 : 169), and likely was critical in establishing Darius' very own claims to Kyros' imperial inheritance in Pārsa and Ēlām (Henkelman, 2018 : 811).

another representative of that unfaithful people (*avaį Sakā arīkā āha*: an internal, or at least local, rival of Skunkha?) *just as it was his wish*.[107]

From his point of view, in so doing Darius had just pushed the Persian man's spear one step further than even the mighty Cyrus had been able to do when he founded Kyropolis, the last outpost advertising imperial glory at the edge of the world and in fact projecting its power *beyond* it. Truly, the enemy had been fought, and defeated «far away from Pārsa».[108] From the standpoint of those who replaced Skunkha at the head (of a certain faction) of the pointy-caped *Sakā* (and it is not out of place here to note that, after all, there is nothing in the *outline*, if not in the *actions* or *words*, of Tomyris that qualifies her as a mere Herodotean literary creation), the meaning*s* of *what* had happened in all likelihood did not coincide, or at best did so only partially, with the fact as such – what had *actually* happened.[109]

5. (Not Concluding): The Dawn of Everything

This contribution has started from a reinterpretation of *one* – according to Herodotos, its chronicler and historian, the most widespread and the most likely – among the stories circulating in antiquity concerning the death of Cyrus and his plausible, contextual activity as city-builder in Central Asia from premises opposite to those still dominant in modern scholarship on the topic. Rather than seeing in it a myth-historical (and therefore as such of doubtful reliability) parable of imperial overstretch, with consequent, *terminal* failure, and – or – a symbol of the (ant)agonistic nature of the relationship between the Empire – throughout the course of its entire centuries-long historical trajectory – and the world of the Central Asian steppes, in the preceding pages a case has been built to show how both events acquire far greater historical depth and better sociopolitical context if they are viewed as the *beginning* of a complex, dynamic, and ultimately extremely *profitable* relationship for both parties involved. Such relationship(s) were indeed so profitable, as noted above, that in order *not* to give them up some of the epigones of Cyrus and Tomyris, Darius, and Skunkha (such as Bessus, Spitamenes, Oxyartes, and even a rather unassuming – in the context of world politics with which our sources are concerned, but clearly somebody to reckon with in the *local* arena – Chorasmian kinglet) would go so far as to turn their backs on their rightful king in order to save the Empire and, consequently, their own position within, and their profits from, it.

In pursuit of this goal, the second section of the present contribution has been devoted to deconstructing the narrative conveyed by the available sources (few in number,

107 DB_p col. V § 74: «*avadā aniyam maθištam akunavam* || *yaθā mām kāma āha*». See now Ferrario 2025b.

108 Dna § 4: «*Pārsahyā martiyahyā dūraį ṛštiš parāgmatā* [...] *Pārsa martiya dūraį hacā Pārsa parataram patiyajtā*».

109 Note Sahlins / Graeber, 2017 : 139–222 on the atemporal dimension of history and of the traditions upon which the latter is often not only based but *understood*, and as such (re)enacted.

chronologically later, and secondary in nature). In doing so, the goal has been to bring into light, through as exhaustive a scrutiny of the primary evidence as possible, the ideological and symbolic (it will be worth reiterating: *political*) background that a foundation such as Kyropolis probably had in its proper Ancient Near Eastern context of imperial genesis and competition in which Cyrus acted and understood himself. Such an attempt at contextualization has been developed further in the next section, the focus of which was the economic aspects of the Central Asian campaign of the Teispid conqueror. Finally, the argument came full circle by shifting the gaze, metaphorically and literally, across the borderlands, with the overarching goal to tease out the protagonism of those actors whom the voice of the kings, and the chroniclers (and bards) of their deeds, usually tend to leave in the shadows, but who were (are, and remain) the undisputed leading characters of social life life along the frontier zones, ancient and modern, as well as of their economies of (and at) the edges.

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