

Introduction

This issue of *Studia Hercynia* presents the proceedings of the conference ‘Ritual Matters. Archaeology and Religion in Ancient Central Asia’, which took place on November 2–4, 2017 at the Eurasia Department of the German Archaeological Institute in Berlin.

The conference was the second meeting of the ‘Hellenistic Central Asia Research Network’ (HCARN), established at an inaugural meeting organized by Rachel Mairs in Reading (2016). These two were followed by a third HCARN conference organised by Ladislav Stančo at Charles University Prague (‘Seen from Oxyartes’ Rock: Central Asia under and after Alexander’, 2018), the bi-weekly online lecture series ‘Ancient Central Asia and Beyond’ (running from January 2021 to March 2022), and the fourth HCARN conference organized by Milinda Hoo and Lauren Morris at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität at Freiburg (‘Entangled Pasts and Presents: Temporal Interactions and Knowledge Production in the Study of Hellenistic Central Asia’, 2022). And we look forward to a fifth HCARN conference planned for spring 2024 in Nanterre! Through these activities – and in less than ten years! – HCARN has become an important international research network and its events platforms for discussion between archaeologists, historians, linguists, art-historians, and numismatists working on various aspects of Hellenistic Central Asia.

The conquest of large parts of Central Asia by Alexander the Great and the beginning of the Hellenistic era is seen as a significant change for Bactria and beyond, not only in material but also in immaterial culture, the latter including religion. Religions thus were considered an attractive topic for the HCARN group and were therefore chosen as the main theme for the Berlin conference. Contributing to this decision was the fact that from 2013–2018 a project affiliated with the Eurasia Department of the German Archaeological Institute focused on excavations of a Hellenistic sanctuary at Torbulok in southern Tajikistan. In evaluating the archaeological contexts of Torbulok that bear witness to ‘ritual matters’ the question arose as to whether these contexts could somehow be linked to a religion or, more precisely, to a cult tradition?

The theme and title of the meeting may need a brief explanation. For the definition of ‘Hellenistic’ we refer to the HCARN website www.bactria.org: ‘The “Hellenistic Period” is commonly understood as the period between the death of Alexander the Great and the rise of the Roman Empire with reference to the Mediterranean world. In applying the term “Hellenistic” to Central Asia, we make no assumptions about the primacy or otherwise of Greeks and Greek culture, but use the term chronologically, as a catch-all for a fascinating and especially intensive period of cultural interaction across the region from the Iranian Plateau to the Indus, and from the steppe to the Indian Ocean.’ The terms religion and ritual are more complex. ‘Religion’ can be defined as a broad range of human behaviours conditioned by the belief that powerful deities control every feature of human existence from the moment of conception to death and beyond. These behaviours include actions associated with the formal worship of the gods, such as prayers, sacrifices, and dedicating objects to the gods, but also the funding, planning and building of shrines. They are not limited to this, however, but also embrace the conception, naming and representation of deities as well as dealing with death of humans, including burial customs. ‘Ritual’ is, in a narrow sense, a sequence of actions performed

according to a certain formal and often ceremonial procedure, usually with a high symbolic content. However, the term is used here in a not quite correct but practicable broader sense, namely for cult practices that are documented by written sources, iconography or archaeology.

Thus, 'Ritual Matters' was a call to consider the evidence for cult practices before making assumptions about religious traditions or even religion(s). This order of reasoning is particularly relevant for Hellenistic Central Asia, where no indigenous contemporary sources report on religious concepts.

One of the assumptions about religions in Hellenistic Central Asia is linked to ancient and modern colonialism, conceiving of Hellenism as a 'Hellenisation'. This 'Hellenisation' would have led to the adoption of all aspects of Greek religious life as a package, especially in regions such as Bactria. However, on-the-ground archaeology, while discovering individual elements comparable to Greek cult practice, has never found them as a package. Moreover, no evidence has yet been found in Bactria for one of the most significant Greek rituals, namely animal sacrifice with a specific division of god's and men's share.

The other assumption is that Zoroastrianism, a religion well attested only since the Sasanian period (224–642 AD), was common already in pre-Hellenistic Central Asia. This assumption often leads to circular interpretations of cult practices, ritual objects, and iconography of the 2nd and 1st millennia BC as evidence for a much later religion – instead of assuming here a cult tradition that was later integrated into Zoroastrianism.

The 28 papers presented at the conference challenged these assumptions with different considerations and with evidence from different regions and periods of pre-Islamic Central Asia. I would like to thank all the presenters, namely (in the order of the programme) Wu Xin, Frantz Grenet, Rachel Mairs, Milinda Hoo, Alberto Cantera, Johanna Lhuillier with Julio Bendezu-Sarmiento and Philippe Marquis, Marc Mendoza, Victor Mokroborodov, Nargis Khojaeva, Anjelina Drujinina, Laurianne Martinez-Sève, Lauren Morris, Hanna Gołąb, Michele Minardi, Alison Betts, Michael Shenkar, Barbara Kaim, Rolf Strootman, Gunnar R. Dumke, Razieh Taasob, Ladislav Stančo, Hafiz Latify, Olga Kubica, Juping Yang, Sören Stark and Fiona Kidd, Luca Maria Olivieri and Elisa Iori, and finally, Paul Bucherer-Dietschi.

Of the total of 28 papers presented, this volume now includes only nine. This is due to various reasons: Some presenters had not intended their papers for publication and others had designed their papers for other publications. Several authors had intended to publish in this conference volume, but then preferred to publish the paper more quickly and elsewhere, for which the editors have their fullest understanding.

The conference would not have been possible without the generous financial support of the Eurasien-Abteilung of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, for which I thank the department's director Svend Hansen. The conference programme and poster were designed by the department's graphic designer Anke Reuter, for which I thank her warmly. My special thanks for her great support go to Kristina Junker, then a PhD student in the Torbulok project, who supported me in all organisational work and took on many tasks independently. A big thank you also goes to the student assistants Neele Theunert, Aksinya Kudryashova, Constantin Leuschner, Julia Schmidt, and Nils van der Straeten, who organised and supervised the coffee and lunch breaks and thus ensured that the conference participants were in a consistently good mood. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to my 'Central Asian' colleagues in Berlin who chaired the sessions: Aydogdy Kurbanov, Elise Luneau, Kristina Junker, Lilla Russel-Smith, Lynne Rouse, Mike Teufer, Nikolaus Boroffka.

Because the conference was organized at the Eurasia Department of the German Archaeological Institute the publication of the proceedings was planned for the series *Archäologie in Iran und Turan*, published by the Department in which various important monographs but also

conference volumes on ancient Central Asia have appeared. However, to publish the volume in this series has met with a number of difficulties, all of which we overcame by the generous support of the Institute of Classical Archaeology, Faculty of Arts, at the Charles University and the editorial board of *Studia Hercynia*. Here, my warmest thanks go to Ladislav Stančo, Jakub Havlík and the journal's editors Peter Pavúk and Jan Kysela, who carefully did the final editing, for which my special thanks go to him.

Gunvor Lindström

