Western, Eastern, both, or neither? Translocalism as alternative approach to syncretism and hybridity in Hellenistic Bactria

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ABSTRACT
Ideas of Hellenistic Central Asia as a cultural melting pot, resulting from the fusion of Eastern and Western cultures after Alexander the Great, continue to have considerable scholarly and popular appeal. While the Western component of the supposed melting pot generally stands for Greek influence as a dynamic actuating force, the Eastern component often seems to refer not to 'eastern' from a Bactrian perspective, but rather to a static idea of continuous local culture – essentialized as Eastern from a classical Mediterranean-centred point of view. Focused on the Niched Temple at Ai Khanoum and the Oxus Temple at Takht-i Sangin, this paper aims to rethink conventional taxonomies of 'Western', 'Eastern', and the convenient 'hybrid' by examining cultural interaction and religious syncretism from a translocal approach, sharpened by the situated perspective of communities of practice. Communities of practice are formed by people who share a set of practices which are learned by doing. Consideration of such communities not only grants analytical space for actors with different levels of learned participation but also for various potential identifications beyond ethno-geographical ones. This article explores the concept for Hellenistic Bactria and addresses heuristic problems of common assumptions of community and identity while drawing attention to various synchronous interactions and forms of identifications behind etically identified Hellenism, syncretism, and hybridity.

KEY WORDS
Hellenistic Bactria; Ai Khanoum; Temple with Indented Niches; Takht-i Sangin; Oxus temple; identity; syncretism; hybridity; translocalism; community of practice.

INTRODUCTION: BACTRIA 'BETWEEN EAST AND WEST'

Ancient Bactria is no longer an alien periphery. Apart from a substantial increase in specialized studies of what is now commonly referred to as the Hellenistic Far East, Bactria has come to taken centre stage in more mainstream narratives of Hellenistic history as the ultimate example of what 'the Hellenistic' entails.[1] For Peter Thonemann in his *Oxford Very Short Introduction of the Hellenistic Age*, Ai Khanoum's Delphic maxims – brought to Afghanistan by an educated traveller named Klearchos who inscribed them on a stone stele in the *temenos* of Kineas – would embody precisely those movements and interactions characteristic of the Hellenistic world.[2] Oftentimes, such relics of movement and interactions are taken to embody 'Greeks in the East', as vividly

1 This paper was originally written in 2018 and is based on theoretical reflections in my doctoral dissertation (Hoo 2022). A draft was presented at the second Hellenistic Central Asia Research Colloquium 'Ritual Matters' in Berlin, 2017. I thank Gunvor Lindström, Ladislav Stančo, and Jan Kysela for comments and editing.

2 Thonemann 2016, 1–3. For the Delphic maxims, see Robert 1968; Rougemont 2012, no. 97a–c. A comparable evocation of 'the Hellenistic' has also been made by Walbank 1981, 60–64.

described by John Boardman in his similar-titled monograph.[3] Boardman's *Greeks in Asia* is about 'what happened when Greeks met easterners', tracing 'the Greeks, the "Greek", and the more broadly "classical" in Asia'.[4] We all have a general idea about what is meant by 'the Greek' and 'the classical', but what *precisely* do these terms imply methodologically? Boardman's clarification is both candid and confusing: by Greeks, he means Westerners who came from the East, but it is *their* classical Greek culture whose contributions to the East he seeks to examine.[5]

Research on the Hellenistic Far East has been propelled by similar interests in the coming together of – to speak in Boardman's terms – Westerners, Easterners, and 'their' respective cultures, however heterogeneous they may have been. With the major discoveries of Ai Khanoum and Takht-i Sangin, Bactria has become the paradigmatic cultural melting pot, where 'the Greek heirs of Alexander' created 'a surprisingly rich mixture of eastern and western traditions'.[6] While the idea that cultures mix, merge, and melt is not wrong *per se*, it does not add much explanatory value: what culture is not inherently mixed? Moreover, ubiquitous catchphrases of East-Western inbetweenness such as hybridity and syncretism to describe and characterize Bactria's material culture only seem to uphold groupist culture-historical views that predefine and (al)locate Eastern cultures (Iranian, Indian, Chinese) as geographically distinct, essentially consistent, and ontologically juxtaposed to equally unitary Western cultures (Greek and Macedonian), before they mix and merge.[7]

Focusing on pre-theoretical assumptions that scholars tend to make when assessing culturally mixed material, this paper reflects conceptually and comments critically on the heuristic tools we use to make sense of the cultural melting pot that Hellenistic Bactria supposedly was. Often, as will be shown, incongruent interpretations follow from the habitual practice of identifying and classifying 'original' Western and Eastern traditions in the hybrid mix – the essential ingredients of the melting pot. This practice is deeply rooted in a problematic yet widely used global geography which structures (knowledge of) the world according to ideas of continental reification (Europe and Asia as immutable territorial entities) and geographical diffusionism (unidirectional movement of influence from West to East).[8] Although deep historical cross-influences and other interconnecting aspects that undermine the consistency and unity of lumpish longitudinal divisions of East and West have long been recognized, monocultural (and often Hellenocentric) ideas of distinct Western as opposed to Eastern traditions often still inform the conceptual frameworks and methodologies scholars use to analyse and interpret 'mixed' material culture.[9]

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3 Boardman 2015, 86.

4 Boardman 2015, 8.

5 He refers to the Eastern i.e. Indo-European roots of the Greeks – pointing out that the original homeland of Indo-Europeans was in Central Asia; citation at Boardman 2015, 16.

6 Holt 1999, 17. See also Bernard 2005. The view of Bactria as an intriguing place 'between East and West' has been popularized in lavishly and beautifully illustrated museum publications which highlight the region's material eclecticism on the 'Crossroads of Asia' (Errington *et al*. eds. 1992). See also Hiebert – Cambon eds. 2008; Aruz – Valtz Fino eds. 2012.

7 See further below, and footnote 65.

8 Such an approach has been termed by James M. Blaut as a 'Eurocentric colonizer's model of the world' (Blaut 1993; see also Blaut 1987; Lewis – Wigen 1997). Blaut (1993, 1) defines diffusionism as 'a theory about the way cultural processes tend to move over the surface of the world as a whole. They tend to flow out of the European sector and towards the non-European sector. This is the natural, normal, logical, and ethical flow of culture, of innovation, of human causality'.

9 With 'mixed' material culture, I refer to objects, art, and architecture which embody both Western and Eastern-categorized elements, and therefore receive various labels that indicate their

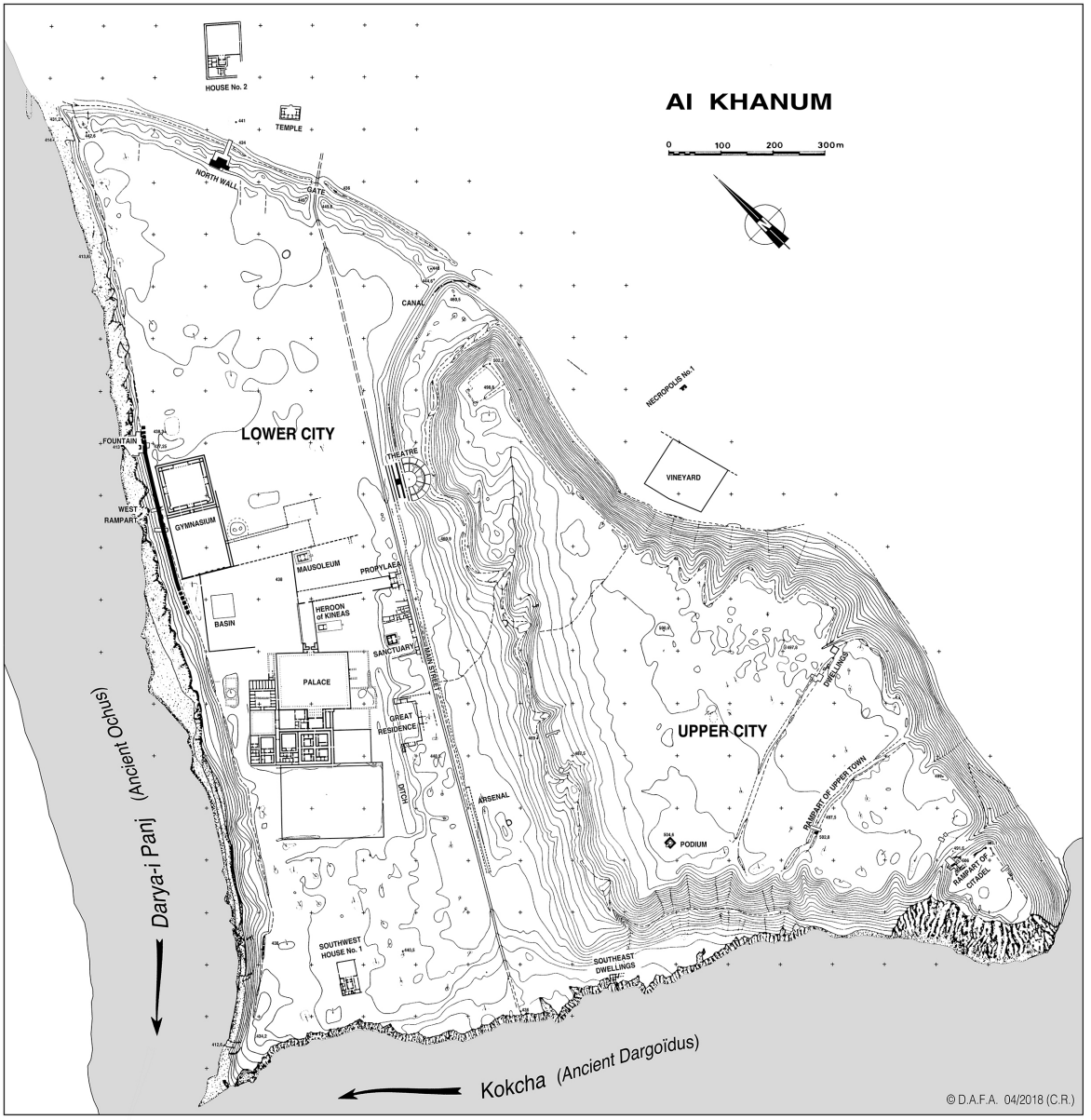

Fig. 1: Plan of Ai Khanoum during the reign of Eucratides, ca. 150 BCE. The main sanctuary with the Niched Temple is located in the lower city along the main street (© DAFA: J.-C. Liger, C. Rapin, courtesy of Laurianne Martinez-Sève).

Attempting to address this perennial problem differently, I propose a *translocal* approach to cultural interaction, religious syncretism, and their implications for communities in Hellenistic Bactria. The term translocalism captures the dynamics of belonging to (and identifying with) more than one location in the face of increasing global connectivity, while acknowledging that place and local emplacement are still important factors in people's lives.[10] To illustrate such an approach, I discuss the heuristic concept of communities of practice to reflect on 'ritual

taxonomic ambiguity: hybrid, syncretic, creole, or a convenient hyphenated word combining the recognized influences ('Graeco-Bactrian').

10 See further Hoo 2022, 240–243.

matters' across conventional cultural categories. This perspective draws attention to an often taken for granted variety of identification forms based on (trans)local practice, rather than reducing identity to a solely or predominantly ethnic or cultural ascription. The Temple with Indented Niches at Ai Khanoum and the Oxus Temple at Takht-i Sangin serve as case studies to illuminate common interpretations of Bactria's cultural mixture and to explore how a translocal perspective sheds different light on various synchronous interactions behind etically identified (typologies of) Hellenism, syncretism, or hybridity.[11]

AI KHANOUM: THE NICHED TEMPLE

At Ai Khanoum on the banks of the Panj and Kokcha River, dated to the early 3rd century until the mid-2nd century BCE, two temples (one outside city walls and one in the lower city) and an open-air podium on the raised 'acropolis' have been unearthed by the Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan led by Paul Bernard in the 1960s and 1970s (**Fig. 1**).[12] These structures have attracted considerable debate as the city's most intriguing and culturally surprising features because of their decidedly non-Greek character and their presence in what has been described as an extraordinary Hellenic urban landscape – a Greek *polis*, even, marked by the theatre, gymnasium, mausoleum, and the Greek inscriptions.[13] As Bactria's only extensively excavated monumental city of the Hellenistic period, it were these foreign features that sparked wide scholarly and public interest.[14] Although the theatre and gymnasium date to the very last decades of the city's life-span, Ai Khanoum famously came to represent an exotic outpost of Hellenism on the fringes of the Hellenistic world, sometimes even exemplary for what Hellenism in the East entailed.[15] Within this idea of Hellenism – often used to frame and explain the supposed Greekness in material remains – the architecture of Ai Khanoum's temples is often regarded as culturally anomalous: aspects that do not quite fit the expected urban landscape of a Greek city.[16] Built from local mud bricks, oriented towards the sun, with massive

11 The emic/etic distinction is widely used in anthropological literature and refers to the divergent perceptions of (in this case) historical reality as experienced by insiders (emic views of ancient people) and outsiders (etic views of the modern observer).

12 For general overviews of Ai Khanoum see, for instance, Bernard 2001; 2009; Francfort *et al*. eds. 2014. Martinez-Sève (2015) has determined the site's chronology to extend from the early 3rd century (associated with Antiochus I) to around the mid-2nd century BCE, after which the city experienced a wave of destruction and a short-lived period of reoccupation.

13 See e.g. Bernard 1967, 71; Bernard 1982; Aruz 2012, 3; Frye 2012, 105. Recent scholarship has been more nuanced in assessments of the city, see e.g. Mairs 2013a; Mairs 2014a, 57–101; Mairs 2014b; Hoo 2015; Martinez-Sève 2016; Hoo 2018.

14 Public interest was furthered by the successful worldwide travelling exhibition *Afghanistan, les trésors retrouvés*, shown in several European countries (e.g., Paris, Musée Guimet 2006), later as *Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul* (2006–2016), which introduced Ai Khanoum and the Afghan heritage to a vast and varied audience. See e.g. Cambon – Jarrige eds. 2006; Hiebert – Cambon eds. 2008.

15 Thonemann 2018, 1–5. For Ai Khanoum as an outpost of Hellenism, see: Bernard 1967, 77, 91; Bernard 2008, 83. Although Bernard has nuanced his opinion in later publications, the notion of Ai Khanoum as an outpost of Hellenism has become a recurring trope to describe and present the city in wider scholarship (Mairs 2014a, 22). For Ai Khanoum as a paradigm for Hellenism in the (Far) East, see Holt 1999, 9–14; Mairs 2013a, 88.

16 Colledge (1987, 142) for instance, puzzled by the presence of Mesopotamian religious architecture in 'the Greek settlement' of Ai Khanoum, illustratively wonders, 'Why here?'

thick walls, and raised on high, sometimes stepped platforms, the city's religious structures featured distinct elements that had little in common with Greek temples as known from the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean. Because Ai Khanoum's religious architecture and its relation to the urban and wider Central Asian context have been discussed in more detail in previous scholarship, I limit myself here to a brief overview of the city's central shrine: the Temple with Indented Niches.[17]

The Temple with Indented Niches (**Fig. 2**), or the Niched Temple hereafter, was located on the main street in the urban centre in the lower city (*la ville basse*), just south of the monumental gateway to the palace complex. The Niched Temple was the renovated version of one of the oldest structures in Ai Khanoum, which had been founded by Antiochus I and was rebuilt several times. Five architectural phases have been identified, starting from the early 3rd century BCE to roughly the 1st century BCE, when the edifice was destroyed by a fire.[18] Set within a wide sanctuary, with thick, white-washed walls and raised on a high-stepped platform, the main temple retained its basic features and squared ground plan throughout its use-life, characterized by a broad, east-oriented antechamber opening up to the main cult room.[19] In the second half of the 3rd century BCE, probably under the first Graeco-Bactrian kings Diodotus I and Diodotus II, the edifice was levelled and its internal organization modified: the high podium transformed into a three-tiered stepped platform, two narrow, corridor-like side chambers ('sacristies') were added to the flanks of the main chamber, and the temple's outer walls were embellished with niches formed by triple indentations which gave the shrine its archaeological name (**Fig. 2**).[20] In the last 'post-Greek' or 'post-palatial' occupation phase after 145 BCE, parts of the edifice came to function as storage place before being destroyed by the city-wide fire.[21] Scholars have interpreted the temple's white-washed exterior, the high-stepped podium, and the decoration of indented niches as 'Iranian', while its squared ground plan with a central chamber, antechamber, and flanking corridor-like chambers, have been analysed as 'Near Eastern' based on close similarities with religious architecture in Syria-Mesopotamia (Dura Europos), Iran (Bard-e Nešānda), and Central Asia (Takht-i Sangin, Dil'berdzhin).[22]

Although these architectural elements have frequently been grouped as 'Oriental traditions' – implicitly opposing all things Eastern, to Western material culture – the objects, found in the temple and the wider sanctuary, led to considerable debate on the temple cult and its religious community.[23] Ivory furniture fittings, plaster casts, and marble fragments of a co-

17 Also known as the *temple à niches indentées* or *temple à redans* in the archaeological reports. More extensive discussions on Ai Khanoum's temples in their urban and regional context can be found in Bernard 1990; Rapin 1992; Martinez-Sève 2010a; Francfort 2012, and for the Niched Temple in particular Martinez-Sève 2010b; Mairs 2013a; Martinez-Sève 2021 on its wider sanctuary. For the excavation reports on the main sanctuary, the temple, and the small objects found there, see Bernard 1969; 1970; 1971; 1972; Francfort 1984; Martinez-Sève 2013.

18 Bernard 1971, 419–429, updated in Martinez-Sève 2010b; and recent publication in Martinez-Sève 2018a (on the last stages of the temple); Martinez-Sève 2021 (on the chapels in the wider sanctuary).

19 The temple's three-tiered platform was later replaced by a single podium that could be accessed by a ramp or a staircase.

20 Bernard 1973, 92; Martinez-Sève 2010b, 201–202.

21 Bernard 1970, 327; Bernard 1971, 429; Francfort 1984, 2–3. Francfort (2012, 124) comments that the added storage function did not have to exclude continuing cult activities taking place on temple grounds. Further essential discussion in Martinez-Sève 2018a, 382–405.

22 Bernard 1969, 334–336; Bernard 1976, 250–252; Colledge 1987, 142–146; Downey 1988, 75–76; Bernard 1990, 51–54; Rapin 1992; Shenkar 2011, 128.

23 Bernard 1969, 337; Bernard 1976; Shenkar 2011, 127.

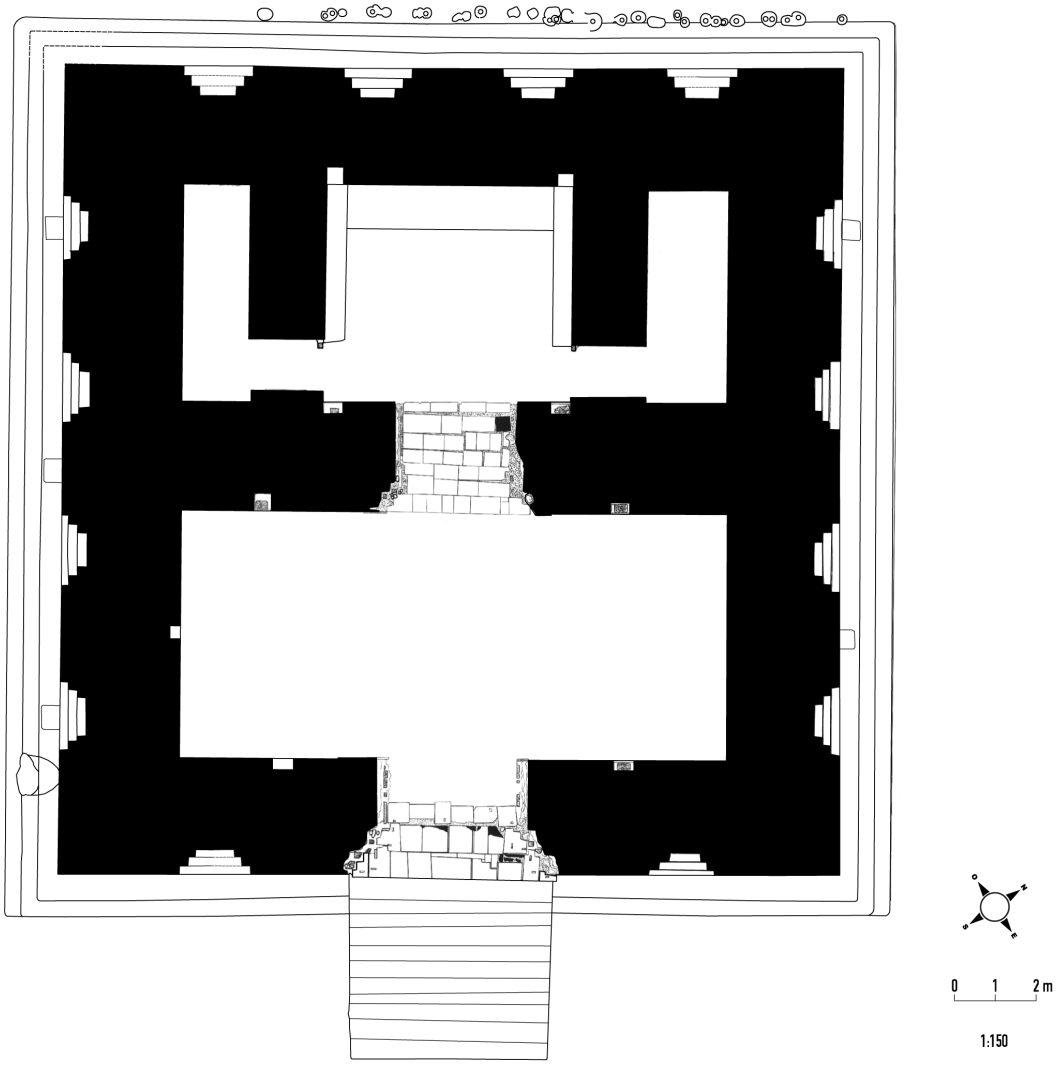

Fig. 2: Ground plan of the main temple at Ai Khanoum (phase III: *le temple à niches indentées*), beginning of the 2nd century BCE. © DAFA: J.-C. Liger, A.-B. Pimpaud, courtesy of Laurianne Martinez-Sève.

lossal sandaled foot of a larger-than-life cult statue, labelled as Greek in form and style, led the excavators to propose the worship of a Greek deity.[24] Much attention has gone to the sandaled foot, which had been carved in a naturalistic, Greek style and decorated with a winged thunderbolt, alongside two rosettes and a palmetto motif. The thunderbolt, in combination with the visual depiction of thundering Zeus on contemporaneous coins of Diodotus I and Diodotus II, have further prompted scholars to hypothesize that the recipient of Ai Khanoum's main cult was Zeus, or a syncretistic, composite deity, such as Zeus-Ahura Mazda, Zeus-Mithra, or Zeus-Oxus.[25] Scholarship has eagerly welcomed these Greek aspects of the main sanctuary, as they allowed for the interpretation that Ai Khanoum's Eastern religious

24 Bernard 1969, 337–341; Bernard 1970, 327; Francfort 1984, 35–37, 117.

25 For Zeus-Ahura Mazda, see Bernard 1970, 327. For Zeus-Mithra, see Boyce – Grenet 1991, 162–165; Grenet 1991; Rapin 1992, 120. For Zeus-Oxus, see Martinez-Sève 2010a, 13. Cf. Francfort 1984,

architecture could readily have accommodated its inhabitants' presumed Greekness – something which would fit well with the town's theatre, gymnasium, and Greek inscriptions.

Other objects unearthed in and around the Niched Temple, however, point to a multiplicity of cult and votive practices. In use throughout the Graeco-Bactrian period, a series of vessels were found buried upside down in libation pits, aligned at the back wall of the temple, which hint at practice of chthonic rituals for a (sub)terranean deity rather than for (or alongside) a ouranic god like Zeus.[26] A large stone basin was excavated for practices related to water, the importance of which may be confirmed by the presence of a water pipe leading from east to west at the south side of the sanctuary, and a connecting drain leading towards the centre of the courtyard.[27] Numerous small limestone pedestals, shaped in the form of column bases, were unearthed in the temple's antechamber and in the east section of the sanctuary, some dating to the shrine's oldest layers.[28] Francfort suggested that these pedestals may have served to support incense, small statues, or functioning as portable altars; he argued that whatever their purpose was, their presence in other Bactrian temple contexts suggests that this particular cult practice was probably considered a local tradition by its users.[29] Among the cultic objects were also a number of schist bowls and vessels with coloured incrustations – including a rhyton and several compartmented *pyxides*, identified as local craftsmanship – as well as votive offerings of ivory and terracotta figurines of animals, fertility goddesses, and Persian horsemen in what have been classified as Asiatic and Persian styles. A silver plate with a depiction of the Anatolian goddess Cybele on a chariot drawn by lions was found in one of the side chambers. Furthermore, minerals and precious stones were unearthed on several places inside the temple while large clay sculptures and plaster casts of human figures in naturalistic style were found in the shrine's main chamber, indicating not only a local workshop in the wider sanctuary but also the possibility of statues of donors or kings placed within sacred premises.[30]

Despite the variety of cult objects and practices, and the consensus that the shrine's architecture was recognized as distinctly non-Greek, the significance of Ai Khanoum's Niched Temple has mainly followed the lines of scholarly interest in the importance or impact of Hellenism – understood as 'Greek influence' – and the maintenance of Greek settler identity.[31] This makes sense in the historiography of Ai Khanoum wherein its urban status as 'a Greek city' has rarely been questioned, due to the presence of a theatre, gymnasium, a mausoleum, and Greek inscriptions which record Greek names (alongside Iranian and local Bactrian names). In a reflexive urge to view the temple against the expectations of a Greek city, scholars have

124–125; and especially Francfort 2012 who proposes a cult of Oxus-Cybele, rather than Zeus or Zeus-based worship, see Martinez-Sève 2018b in response.

26 For the libation vessels, see Bernard 1970, 327–330; Bernard 1971, 427; further discussed by Francfort 2012, 116–119; Martinez-Sève 2018a, 402.

27 The location of the stone basin in the sanctuary is unknown, as it had been displaced and reused; see Francfort 1984, 89; Francfort 2012, 110. For the water pipe and drain, see Bernard 1974, 298; Francfort 2012, 113.

28 Francfort 1984, 81–84.

29 Francfort 1984, 82, 84; Francfort 2012, 112. Similar pedestals have been found particularly at Takht-i Sangin (Litvinsky – Pichikyan 2002), and most recently *in situ* at the newly discovered site Torbulok in Tajikistan (referred to in Russian terminology as 'microbases'), see Lindström 2017, 170.

30 Bernard 1969, 329; Francfort 1984, 14–29, 39–47, 73–79, 81–84, 93–104; for the wider sanctuary, see Martinez-Sève 2021; for considerations of a possible ruler cult, see now Mairs 2022; Hoo forthcoming.

31 Most explicitly in Francfort 1984, 117, but see also Mairs 2008; Francfort 2012; and most recently Martinez-Sève 2016.

therefore focused their attention mainly on its meaning for a supposed Greek community who would have engaged with, and practiced their religion at the Temple with Intended Niches. A much reproduced interpretation, Frank Holt argued that the Greeks of Ai Khanoum 'consciously favoured Hellenism while conforming to local conditions as a necessary expedient.'[32] For Holt, the Greeks of this 'brave new world' that was Bactria lived in an ethnic survival-mode; they craved and preserved their Greekness in all aspects of life, while indigenous Bactrians either lived in social isolation from Greek elites or fully assimilated to Greek culture, behaviour, and religion.[33] Boris Litvinsky similarly saw in Ai Khanum 'a Greek city with a predominantly Hellenic population, thinking, speaking, writing, and reading in Greek and worshipping Greek gods', whereas 'the native Bactrian residents, though few in number, were evidently utterly hellenized.'[34] Other scholars, too, suggested that the Greeks at Ai Khanoum must have had no problem with practicing Greek religion in non-Greek temples. The 'Greek' marble sandaled foot, it was argued, must have represented Zeus, possibly in syncretized form with a Near Eastern or Iranian deity because of the temple's 'Oriental' architecture.[35] While this may well have been the case, the argument reflects a rather traditional, essentialist stance in which architectural and sculptural styles need to equate with ethno-cultural contents and meaning. Accordingly, by virtue of the methodological complication created by the premises that 1) a Greek styled foot must represent a Greek god, and that 2) Mesopotamian or Iranian styled architecture requires a Mesopotamian or Iranian deity, scholars have sought refuge in the notion of syncretism and cultural flexibility. It would have been through such commendable flexibility that the Greeks of Ai Khanoum were able to integrate contradictory (i.e., non-Greek or not overtly Greek) elements without compromising the integrity of their assertion of ethnic Greek belonging.[36]

TAKHT-I SANGIN: THE OXUS TEMPLE

In the case of the Oxus Temple at the site of Takht-i Sangin in southern Tajikistan, not only the lines of inquiry have been slightly different, but also the interpretational language of the art, architecture, and cult practices. While the Niched Temple has been given meaning within the perimeters of Hellenism as the expression of ethnic Greekness, the sanctuary at Takht-i Sangin is often described and presented as an Eastern-Iranian or Bactrian temple site. Located some 100 km downstream west of Ai Khanoum at the river junction of the Vakhsh (ancient Oxus) and the Panj – which together form the Amu Darya River – the Oxus Temple is at present the largest Hellenistic-period sanctuary in Bactria. It was excavated by several archaeological teams: first by the *Yuzhno-Tadzhikskaya Arkheologicheskaya Ekspeditsiya* (South-

32 Holt 1999, 46.

33 Holt 1999, 120–122. Note that the theatre and the gymnasium – often referred to as the pillars of Hellenism – were constructed relatively late in the history of the city. This does not particularly bespeak such an immediate craving for the preservation of Greekness (if the theatre and gymnasium were actually considered by its emic users as Greek indicia); discussion in Hoo 2018; Hoo forthcoming.

34 Litvinsky 2010, 36–37.

35 See footnote 24.

36 Mairs (2008) calls this 'ethnically neutralization or rationalization of "contradictory" non-Greek buildings and practices'. Later, Mairs (2013b and Mairs 2014a, esp. 102–103) nuances her interpretation of Greek ethnicity, focusing more on a Hellenistic Bactrian cultural identity, rather than an ethnic Greek identity.

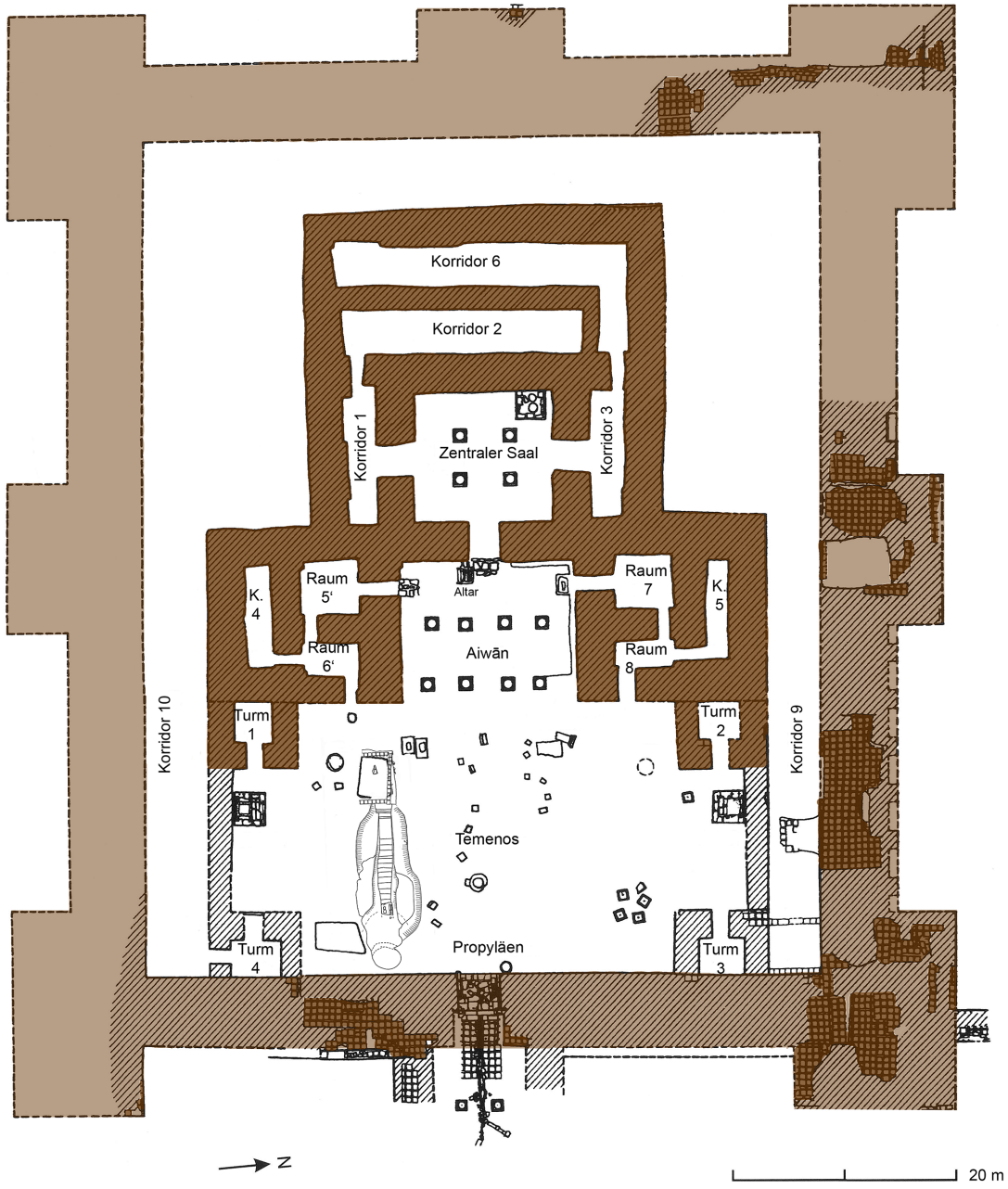

Fig. 3: Ground plan of the Oxus sanctuary at Takht-i Sangin, second half of the 2nd century BCE. © DAI, Eurasien-Abteilung, courtesy of Gunvor Lindström.

ern Tajik Archaeological Expedition) headed by Boris Litvinsky and Igor Pichikyan from 1976 to 1991 and then, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, by Anjelina Drujinina of the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan in cooperation with the Miho Museum in Japan. The small finds from the Oxus Temple were examined most recently by Gunvor Lindström, in the frame of a project that focused on votive practices in Hellenistic Bactria. It is perhaps the involvement of these various parties in the site's excavation that resulted in different conceptualizations of the temple, its constituency, and the role of Hellenism.

The sanctuary of the Oxus (**Fig. 3**) was founded and constructed around the early 3rd century BCE and showed considerable longevity in cult activity from its erection in the Hellenistic period until Kushan times around the 3rd century CE.[37] At least triple the size of Ai Khanoum's Niched Temple, its sheer monumentality suggests that the Oxus Temple was one of, if not the most important sanctuary in Bactria. The colossal temple was set within a massively walled square precinct which included a courtyard and, at a later stage around the second century BCE, high towers on each corner.[38] After a second phase of disruption in the second quarter of the 2nd century BCE, the sanctuary was restored and reconstructed around the mid-2nd century BCE, during which the many votive offerings were removed and compiled in the corridors.[39] In the late 1st century BCE, the sanctuary was rebuilt again, and continued to function as such for the next three centuries. Like the temples at Ai Khanoum, the Oxus Temple was oriented towards the east and constructed from local mud bricks, with a flat roof, and massive exterior walls. The shrine's ground plan followed the same basic structure as the Niched Temple which, as described above, had been compared to religious architecture in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Iran: a central chamber, a preceding chamber, and side chambers – all constructed in strict symmetry.[40] Its architectural form was, however, slightly different than the shrine at Ai Khanoum. The Oxus Temple had a four-columned central hall as its main chamber, which was surrounded by long peripheral corridors, while the preceding chamber took the form of an eight-columned porch which invited the visitor to enter the inner chamber through a 'stone forest' of two rows of columns (**Fig. 3**). A single Ionic capital, found in a later structure, may suggest that more columns had been decorated by similar capitals (although not necessarily all of them).[41] The porch was flanked by two identical tower-like buildings, each with a corridor and two rooms where the remains of ashes have been unearthed.[42] Based on their narrow entrances from the columned porch, the excavators interpreted these areas to have been restricted to temple servants.[43]

A large amount of various votive offerings has been excavated, the majority of which consisted of weapon and armour votives such as arrow heads, daggers, sheaths, and lance tips, which had been dedicated throughout the temple's use-life. While the youngest dedications were largely related to war, a wider variety of offerings characterized the older collections from the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE.[44] Among these were gold plaques and ivory objects with relief images, objects with mythological creatures, clay and alabaster anthropomorphic statues sculpted in different styles, bronze Cupid appliqués, schist vessels, and a silver gilded Cybele plate – similar to the one found at Ai Khanoum's Niched Temple.[45] Numerous of these objects have been stylistically characterized as Achaemenid (gold plaques; ivory objects) and Greek (some of the clay statues), but also as culturally hybrid – labelled as Indo-Gandharan (a silver seal), Scytho-Siberian (an inlaid golden hilt-pommel with panther depictions in relief), Graeco-Bactrian or Parthianizing (some of the clay statues).[46] Perhaps best known among these objects is the

37 Drujinina 2001, 281; Lindström 2013a, 302–303; Lindström 2016, 299–300.
38 Litvinsky – Pichikyan 2002, 57–59, 87–92.
39 Following the chronology as outlined by Lindström 2016.
40 Rapin 1992; Shenkar 2011, 128.
41 Litvinsky – Pichikyan 1998.
42 The excavators (Litvinsky – Pichikyan 2002, 39, 97, 101) labelled these rooms as *atashgah*, the chambers that housed the eternal fire, and the whole building as a Zoroastrian fire temple.
43 Litvinsky – Pichikyan 2002, 38–39.
44 Lindström 2013a, 305.
45 Francfort 2012, 125.
46 Some of these objects have received exclusive focus in several publications to explore their cultural origins. See Litvinsky – Pichikyan 1983; 1994a; 1995a; 1995b; 1995c; Litvinsky 2003; 2006.

Atrosokes altar: a miniature votive altar topped by a bronze statue of the figure of the river deity Marsyas playing the double flute. The votive altar bore a Greek inscription which read that a certain Atrosokes dedicated this gift to the Oxus, which allowed scholars to identify the recipient of the temple cult (or at least one of them).[47] In later centuries, the personified god of the Oxus held a prominent place in the region's pantheon as one of the main deities of Bactria and Sogdia, and was endowed with the epithet 'King of Gods'.[48] The name Atrosokes has been identified as deriving from ancient Iranian language, signifying 'He who possesses the power of fire'.[49] Although his name is recognized in scholarship to be local or regional, the dedicator composed the inscription in perfect Greek, following conventional dedicatory formula.

As for ritual objects, a large limestone basin with a short Greek dedicatory inscription to the Oxus – dated to the Hellenistic period and similar to the one at the Niched Temple – has been excavated in the eastern front part of the courtyard, and was most probably used for water-related practices.[50] Like at Ai Khanoum, water pipes and drains have been discovered at the Oxus Temple, as well as a similar series of stone pedestals in the form of small column bases. Instead of a main sacrificial altar, there seem to have been several altars or cult places of stone and clay – amongst which two Greek-styled altars – dispersed in different areas of the sanctuary yet symmetrically arranged along the temple's main axis.[51] Considerable ash remains around the altars and the numerous ash pits dug in the central chamber indicate that fire, alongside water, played an important role in the Oxus Temple since its foundation.[52] Other cult practices included the storage and deposition of votives on shelves or caskets in the corridors in the rear part of the temple, possibly after they had been presented to the god and were on display elsewhere in the front part of the sanctuary – in the columned antechamber or on the courtyard, as reconstructed by Lindström.[53] Around the mid-2nd century BCE,

47 Rougemont 2012, 196, no. 95. The inscription reads 'Fulfilling a vow, Atrosokes dedicated [this] to Oxus' (Εὐχὴν ἀνέθηκεν Ἀτροσώκης Ὄξωι).

48 Shenkar 2014, 130.

49 Litvinsky – Pichikyan 1981, 153; Litvinsky *et al.* 1985, 103–109; Bernard 1987, 113; Litvinsky – Pichikyan 2002, 10. For an informative discussion on the name and its origin, see Schmitt 1990.

50 Rougemont 2012, no. 96. The inscription reads '…to/of Oxus… to/of Ox[us]' (*vac*. ΥΟΞΟΙ *vac*. Ὄξ[ωι *vel* -ου]. According to conventional Greek dedicatory formula, the second broken-off word may be reconstructed as the dative or genitive of Oxus. The complete first word ('Uoxoi') is not recognized as correct Greek; scholars have suggested that the repetitive dedication to Oxus may reflect an attempt to transcribe the local Baktrian pronunciation of the deity in Greek letters (Ivanchik 2011, 73–74; Veksina 2012; Ivanchik 2013, 137–139). The basin has been interpreted and termed as a *perirrhanterion* – a cultic water basin on a cylindrical stand which, in Greek sanctuaries, was used for ritual purification before entering the shrine (Drujinina 2001, 263; Drujinina – Lindström 2013, 177–179).

51 Three altars were set on the courtyard (two identical large limestone platforms on opposite corners of the *temenos*, see Litvinsky – Pichikyan 2002, 87–92; and one somewhat inconspicuous altar of unburnt clay in the middle, see Lindström 2013b, 100); one or more stone altars were unearthed in the *iwan* (Litvinsky – Pichikyan 2002, 53–55), three in the central hall (two of gypsum, one of stone, see Litvinsky – Pichikyan 2002, 22), and numerous altars in the so-called 'altar rooms' in the square buildings flanking the columned porch (Litvinsky – Pichikyan 2002, 39–51).

52 Some of the pits in the main chamber containing ash remains reached down to the foundation layer at a depth of one meter, indicating that ashes were already deposited in the sanctuary's first phase (Litvinsky – Pichikyan 2002, 24; Lindström 2013b, 110). Litvinsky and Pichikyan proposed the idea that the Oxus Temple may therefore have been a prototype of an Iranian fire temple – an interpretation which has drawn considerable criticism; see footnote 57 below.

53 Lindström 2013a, 305; Lindström 2013b, 113; Lindström 2016, 292.

several ash pits were added or deepened and votive pits were dug in the main hall as part of the sanctuary's reconstruction. Belonging to this period, two cisterns and a fountain shaft in the courtyard containing the broken fragments of large clay moulds to cast cauldrons, may indicate that a bronze casting workshop had been active here, perhaps to recycle broken or excessive votive gifts.[54] One of the moulds bore a short dedicatory inscription to the Oxus written in imperfect Greek, mentioning a person named Iromois, son of Nemiskos, who dedicated the bronze cauldron, worth seven talents.[55] Lindström argued that the abundance of votive objects in the temple and the possible presence of a metal casting workshop on the courtyard may be due to the principle of *ouk ekphora*, according to which votives, once dedicated to the deity, were not supposed to leave the sacred premises.[56]

In spite of the Greek inscriptions, Greek-styled art works, and some Greek architectural features, the Oxus Temple has been largely recognized, and given an identity as distinctly Eastern, sometimes further specified as Iranian or Bactrian. Though important, the notion of Hellenism in terms of strong Greek influence (as at Ai Khanoum) seems to have played a secondary role in the interpretation of this sanctuary. Instead, more attention has been given to the great variety of cult practices and objects which have been identified as both Iranian and Greek – a cultural mix. Significant perhaps is also the predominance of Soviet and Tajik scholars in the excavations and subsequent reports of the Oxus Temple site, compared to a majority of West-European archaeologists involved in the publication of the reports, as in the case of Ai Khanoum. Litvinsky and Pichikyan, for instance, have particularly promoted an Iranian-Bactrian interpretation of the temple, identifying the sanctuary as a Bactrian fire temple which would be the oldest of its kind – a prototype.[57] Although subjected to heavy criticism, these early interpretations by the site's first excavators set the tone for later scholarship to focus on or react against the temple's 'Eastern' identity and constituency. Accordingly, instead of representing a direct reflection of Greek ethnicity, Greek cultural elements at the Oxus Temple have tended to be understood from a 'soft view' within a more nuanced framework of cultural variety and cultural flexibility.[58] In this respect, interpretations of the Atrosokes altar are most illuminating. The miniature votive altar is often cited as the embodiment of the Iranian-Bactrian-Greek syncretistic synthesis that would culturally represent the Oxus Temple and its community: a Greek-styled votive altar topped by a statue of a Greek-styled river deity, bearing an inscription in perfect Greek language and script, commissioned by a man

54 Drujinina – Lindström 2013, 182–183; Lindström 2013a, 305; Lindström 2013b, 113; Lindström 2016, 304.

55 Rougemont 2012, 271, no. 96bis. Cf. the different translations by Ivanchik 2011, 63; Ivanchik 2013, 126–130 and Drujinina 2009, 128–132; Veksina 2012, 108–109; Veksina 2014. The flawed Greek grammar and the squared cursive lettering of the inscription have led scholars to suggest that the person who composed the text had an insufficient knowledge of the Greek language and probably was not a native Greek speaker, unlike Atrosokes (Ivanchik 2011, 59, 62). Moreover, the name and patronym of the dedicator, Iromois Nemiskou, are not known in Greek and Iranian onomastics.

56 Although such storage practice may have had a much more general meaning, *ouk ekphora* has been identified as distinctly Greek by Drujinina – Lindström 2013, 182; Lindström 2013b, 113; Lindström 2016, 292.

57 Pichikyan 1992, 20–30; Litvinsky – Pichikyan 1994b, 52; Litvinsky – Pichikyan 2002, 29–30, 96–100, 108–109; see also Wu 2014, 24–25. Considering our extremely limited knowledge of pre-Sasanian fire temples, this interpretation has been heavily criticized; see, for instance, Koch 1993, 177–183; Bernard 1994a, 86–90; Grenet 2005, 378; Shenkar 2011, 118, 120; Francfort 2012, 124; Shenkar 2012, 138; Lindström 2013a, 100–101; Lindström 2016, 288–289.

58 Litvinsky 2010, 37; Wood 2011.

with an Iranian name who dedicated the object to the regional god Oxus.[59] This combination of cultural elements – their origins neatly categorized according to distinct geographical, culture-historical labels – would indicate the ethnic backgrounds of a multicultural community which formed the sanctuary's constituency: Greeks, Iranians, Bactrians, and Scythians (as an umbrella term for Eurasian semi-nomadic groups north of Bactria).[60]

Thus, despite the fact that they share noteworthy commonalities in location, architecture, ritual, and votive objects, the Niched Temple and the Oxus Temple have been given scholarly significance in disparate ways. The focus of interpretation and the subsequent deductions about the community behind the temples appear to have been affected by the proportionate quantity of objects and practices which scholars identified as Greek, as well as the relative Greekness they recognized in the wider site context. Embedded in Ai Khanoum's enduring urban status in modern scholarship as a Greek *polis*, 'complete' with theatre, gymnasium, mausoleum, and Greek inscriptions, the Niched Temple has been largely described and perceived as a non-ethnic temple of worship which, despite its non-Greek appearance, would have provided Greeks with a place to continue honouring their own traditional Greek gods in accordance to their ethno-cultural identity. By contrast, the Oxus Temple has often been described and presented as a distinctly Bactrian (or eastern Iranian) temple, which would reflect a multicultural community of (localized) Greeks, Iranians, Bactrians, and Scythians. Instead of prioritizing one ethnic identity, the Oxus Temple is thus envisioned to have embodied various, multidirectional forms of cultural exchange between coexisting and overlapping ethnic groups with ample room for agency on the part of non-Greek Bactrians.

HELLENISM AS CHANGE – LOCALISM AS NON-CHANGE

In both cases, the notion of Hellenism has manifested itself in either temple's cultural characterization in modern scholarship. Largely channelled through the lens of Greek ethnicity, scholarly articulations of Hellenism at Ai Khanoum's Niched Temple seem to rest on the understanding that Greeks could be culturally flexible (i.e., they were capable of ethnic rationalization) regarding non-Greek religious architecture, without compromising their ethnic Greek identity.[61] The Niched Temple would so still serve ethnic Hellenism. Interpretations of Hellenism at the Oxus Temple, however, have been directed more by ideas of religious syncretism and cultural hybridity, through which inclusive diversity and cultural convergence became the focal points of Hellenism there. Although Hellenism (and its related term Hellenization) has been heavily debated, criticized, nuanced, and revisited over the past decades, the nebulous notion continues to play an important role in studies on Hellenistic Bactria.[62]

A major and obvious appeal of Hellenism is its etymological connection to (something) Greek as well as its established usage and recognition in chrono-stylistic taxonomies, which make it easy to apply the term to Greek-styled material culture from the Hellenistic period without being methodologically specific about its implications. While frequently used as an apparent truism of visual Greek culture, it often remains conveniently unclear what *precisely* Hellenism means in terms of identity, which aspect of Hellenism's broad coverage is referred to, or which historio-

59 Pichikyan 1985, 283; Bernard 1994b, 116; Litvinsky – Pichikyan 1994b, 57–58; Lindström 2009a, 262; Litvinsky 2010, 37.

60 Martinez-Sève 2003; Lindström 2009b, 131; but cf. Bernard 1987.

61 Mairs 2008; Martinez-Sève 2016.

62 Hoo 2022 for the history of Hellenism and for interpretations of Hellenism across Eurasia.

graphic strand in the debate it aligns to. Like the word Hellenistic, the term Hellenism has been used not only as a chronological referent to the time period of and after Alexander the Great, but also as a broader synonym for Greek culture, Greek religion, Greek political institutions, Greek people, Greek civilization, and everything that happens in interaction with non-Greek cultures and people under the dictum of 'Greek influence'. Even if Hellenism's manifold interpretations were to be reduced to the meaning of 'Greek influence', it still remains an ambiguous term intimately tied to a Greek-centred cultural bias about the nature, extent, and signification of this influence. This traditional, structural, and often unconscious favouritism has left a massive yet unduly imprint on the historical imagination, guiding scholars to focus on, favour, (re)produce, and eventually naturalize the importance of Greek people and Greek culture (in whatever way) as representatives of Western civilization, over those of Oriental 'Others'.[63] Although many scholars have been eager to acknowledge the faults and errors of this concept as they go along with historiographical trends, it seems rather difficult to fully abandon it.

The past decades have seen waves of attempts to redefine Hellenism or seek other, more cautious and culturally 'neutral' explanations in terms such as syncretism and hybridity.[64] These concepts describe a coming together of Greek and Eastern influences which would result in mixed practices, often treated as self-evident. Despite their aim of being more nuanced, cross-cultural, and culturally accurate, their theoretical implications are not. The study of hybridity often operates through the analytical practice of determining which element of an object, a building, or a practice is Greek-influenced, and which component is of Oriental origins.[65] Although pragmatic, such an approach comes with significant methodological problems. The first is that the notion of influence upon which such an analysis is based, entails a multiplicity of sources, recipients, forms, and directions of influence, so that the word may refer to any relationship with a wide range of intermediate relations – all of which remain unspecified. But how exactly do we measure (degrees of) syncretism, hybridity, and influence? When and where does hybridity commence; how much of each is needed for something to be hybrid, and when does it reach the normalized end state (if at all)?[66] Scholars have come to recognize that ancient individuals may not have experienced the same etic categories of 'influence' or 'hybridity' in their daily lives that modern scholars ascribe to them, much less experienced them on and in the same cultural terms ('Greek', 'Iranian', 'hybrid'). Despite attempts to avoid this pitfall by clarifying that such labels are purely analytical, we still run the risk of re-essentializing them methodologically as thick ethno-cultural aggregates.

Closely related to the ambiguity of 'influence' is the problem that notions of hybridity and syncretism rest on the pre-theoretical condition (and the subsequent methodological perpetuation) of static, authentic cultures before they mix, through which an essentialist and etically reified snapshot of identity is taken as analytical starting point.[67] Modern re-

63 This problem is, of course, not new; it has been discussed and addressed in previous scholarship, see for instance Kuhrt – Sherwin-White eds. 1987; Sherwin-White – Kuhrt 1993; Rollinger 2004; Traina 2005; Strootman 2011; Chrubasik – King eds. 2017; Versluys 2017.

64 For instance Colledge 1987; Antonaccio 2003; Tronchetti – Van Dommelen 2005; Van Dommelen 2005; Voskos – Knapp 2008, 661; Canepa 2010, 10; Litvinsky 2010, 37; Hannestad 2012, 996; Vlassopoulos 2013, 117. See Versluys 2017 for a constructive debate and novel approach to Hellenism and eclectic material culture.

65 For instance Colledge 1987; Bernard 2012; Boardman 2015, 84–101.

66 For these and related critical questions about the use of hybridity in archaeology, see Stockhammer 2012; Deagan 2013; Pappa 2013; and especially Silliman 2013; 2015.

67 Concepts such as hybridity and syncretism are ontologically dependent on those very container-like entities which they attempt to overcome. Methodologically, hybridity needs purities to exist;

search on identity has informed us that people (modern and ancient) do not have unitary nor stable identities, much less stable cultures, but that their constellations of belonging are contingent in nature, inherently emergent, and circumstantially constructed.[68] Thus, while syncretism and hybridity are intended to be more nuanced alternatives to Hellenism, they are still methodologically couched in essentialist principles. This results in talking about fluid identities and the multiplicity of experiences, while simultaneously assigning components of their mixedness to reified groups with predefined homelands, identities, cultural actions and productions, predicated upon modern cultural ideologies of collectivity.[69]

Not only do we risk invoking group identities where 'Us'-'Them' boundaries may have been fluid and situational, but we also risk framing innovative change as exclusively coming from the outside; as an external force disconnected from the local.[70] Scholarly characterizations of Bactria's 'hybrid' culture are a case in point: while the Western component of the hybrid synthesis generally implies Greek influence as a dynamic, actuating force that came and diffused with Greek settlers, its Eastern counterpart does not seem to refer to more eastern from a Bactrian perspective, nor to dynamic local innovative progress, but rather to the idea of persistent, rooted local or otherwise Oriental culture. The Niched Temple and the Oxus Temple have both been (re)presented and characterized by use of analogies to temple architecture in Mesopotamia or Iran, but have not been discussed in relation to religious shrines more east, in India or China.[71] Local culture seems to have been essentialized as part of 'Eastern' culture from a Mediterranean-centred point of view, in which everything from Syria to Central Asia is seen as Eastern, belonging to the 'continent' of Asia.[72] In determining the provenance of each recognizable style element or practice, and assessing whether it is Greek or non-Greek, Eastern or Western, those elements which are positively considered as non-local therefore become rigidly isolated from those considered as local. This both galvanizes and perpetuates a view of localism as ontologically anchored in a distinct place yet displaced from dynamic time, through which the local becomes fixed, frozen, and incapable of change from within.[73]

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therefore, 'instead of combating essentialism, [hybridity] merely hybridizes it' (Friedman 1999, 236). Ironically, hybridity both *opposes* and *presupposes* the existence of authentic cultural entities which are associated with a certain ethnic group, situated in a certain geographical area, and assumed to have a certain homogeneous cultural (re)production, before they mix and merge with other entities (Hoo 2018, 172–173). This paradox has become a classic criticism in anthropological literature; see especially Friedman 1997, 82–83; Friedman 1999, 234–236; Nederveen Pieterse 2001, 226; Young 2005, 25, and more recently Palmié 2013, 464–465.

68 The bibliography on the workings of identity is extensive, but for helpful entries into the debate, see Barth 1969; Eriksen 1993; Jones 1997; Brubaker 2002. Questions of identity are, of course, not new in Hellenistic research. However, I do believe that theoretical discussions and progressions in the debate within ancient history and archaeology have only been integrated in studies of Hellenistic Bactria relatively recently over the past two decades (see particularly Mairs 2014a).

69 Amit – Rapport 2002, 8.

70 For groupism, see Brubaker 2002. Extensive discussion on localism and change in Hoo 2022, 229–270.

71 The implication may be that the Western component is more worthwhile to trace and study, since its antithetical foreignness (the West in the East rather than the East in the East) is what makes Bactria's cultural hybridity exotic and interesting.

72 In terms of continental tectonics, Asia is technically not a continent in itself but part of the Eurasian tectonic plate which stretches from the Atlantic sea in the west to the Pacific ocean in the east (Cunliffe 2015, 4–8). The term 'Asia' was already used as geographical aggregate by ancient authors, often in ethno-cultural juxtaposition to Europe (for instance, Herodotus I, 4).

73 Fabian (2014, 11–21) refers to this as the cultural 'naturalization of time'.

Such an inward and stagnant conception of localism critically places it outside history, restricting and overlooking internal changes and larger dimensions of local cultural developments. Any form of social life is constantly in flux and in a process of (re)production on a variety of scales. Change is a constant and inherent part of the dynamics of localism, just as it is part of what we consider as Hellenism. As stated by Anthony Giddens, 'what structures the locale is not simply that which is present on the scene; the "visible form" of the locale conceals the distanciated relations which determine its nature.'[74] Local consciousness and performances of identity, however bounded and integral in (material) appearance, are never static and geographically restricted, but rather relational, networked, and discursively formed in a variety of social contexts, as they are linked to continuous processes of change – both from within and without. The local, therefore, is never exclusively local, but rather *translocal*.[75]

TRANSLOCALISM AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

The theoretical premise that localism is inherently and structurally translocal, has important implications for significations of localism, Hellenism, and East-Western syncretism in Hellenistic Bactria – and by extension the wider interconnected world of Hellenistic Afro-Eurasia in which Bactria was entangled. Translocalism – a term at home within the vocabulary of current globalization research – articulates the simultaneous global and local processes of being and becoming, of people's synchronous and diachronous identifications with multiple locations (in the broadest sense of the word), while living emplaced.[76] As stated by Zygman Bauman, 'we are all on the move, even if physically, bodily, we stay put.'[77] One way in which we can make more sense of how translocalism operates on the level of material culture, is through the notion of communities of practice. Shedding light on different and overlapping kinds of communities that can transcend physical space, this notion provides the conceptual tools to inform and guide scholarly lenses through the implications of translocalism for 'Ritual Matters' and communal identities.

The concept of communities of practice was first introduced by anthropologist Jean Lave and educational theorist Étienne Wenger in their 1991 book *Situated Learning*, followed by Wenger's 1999 more detailed monograph *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*.[78] Central to these works is the theorization of how translocal identification, the negotiation of meaning, and community coherence are realized through learned social practice. Learned social practice refers to engagement in forms of co-participation which are embedded in 'relations amongst people in activity *in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured*

74 Giddens 1990, 19. See also Appadurai 1996, 189.

75 Appadurai 1996, 178–199.

76 As phrased by Arturo Escobar (2001, 141) culture still 'sits in places'. See also Eriksen 1992; Morley – Robinson 1995, esp. 128–130; Hastrup – Olwig eds. 1997; Dirlik 1999; Escobar 2001; Friedman 2002. For translocalism, see especially Appadurai 1996, 178–199 and relevant discussion in Hoo 2022, 240–243.

77 Bauman 1998, 2, 77.

78 Lave – Wenger 1991; Wenger 1999. Although relatively unknown in classics, the impact of Lave and Wenger's works has been enormous across disciplines. As a social theory of learning, the concept has particularly gained wide popularity in the fields of education studies, organization studies, and business management. Only relatively recently has the concept caught on in historical and archaeological studies, mainly in connection to material culture studies. See, for instance, Minar – Crown 2001; Sassaman – Rudolphi 2001; Feldman 2014; and recently Poddick – Stahl eds. 2016.

world.'[79] Whereas traditional definitions usually associate communities with a geographical locality, communities of practice highlight community construction through 'a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice.'[80] As such, they are not spatially fixed groups or culture-historical entities, but should be seen as socially networked structures of knowledge which are 'formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour.'[81] Practice communities can be large, small, and significantly overlapping; they can be institutionalized (for instance around philosophical schools) as well as loosely organized or institutionally interstitial (such as writers, artists, or mothers). Membership roles in such communities are based on the extent and forms of knowledgeable participation in the practice, and therefore represent potential modes of belonging which can play active or latent parts in one's identification.[82]

In essence, a community of practice is relationally formed through 'a way of doing'. How people develop a way of doing is facilitated by a shared repertoire of tools: sources of how-to-knowledge (such as objects, styles, techniques) for practitioners to do what they do.[83] Knowledgeability – engaging with the tool box – is socially generated through peer-to-peer interaction (for instance, from more experienced sculptors to beginning sculptors), in which the peers are defined by their competence as practitioners, not by ethnic, cultural, or geographic origins. All communities of practice can be seen as constellations of practice or networks of knowledge in motion which do not necessarily require identity consciousness (community awareness) unless it is activated or called upon.[84] Thus, by focusing on translocal practices and potential identifications in and across a wide range of practice communities and membership roles (which can transcend physical and proximate space), the concept of communities of practice offers a way of thinking and speaking about translocal, lived experience beyond etically homogenized collectivities. Methodologically, such an approach profoundly undermines meta-geographical cultural blocs of Eastern, Western, and everything hybrid or syncretistic that falls in between, in favour of a more emplaced, translocal perspective.

TEMPLES AS PLACES OF INTERSECTING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

How does such a translocal perspective translate to archaeological material? Practice communities shift the attention from the search for original provenances of cultural behaviour, to the relational production, transformation, and articulation of identities within and across geographical space. Communities of practice can converge on the same location, which

79 Lave 1991, 67; Lave – Wenger 1991, 51, emphasis added. As such, the theory of communities of practice takes issue with the structure-agency nexus and is caught in the middle of theories of social structure and theories of situated experience (Wenger 1999, 12–13).

80 Lave – Wenger 1991, 97–98.

81 Wenger-Trayner – Wenger-Trayner 2015, 1. Wenger (*et al.* 2002, 27–29) explains that communities of practice are characterized by three basic components: a *domain of interest* (the domain of knowledge), *a community of people* (interacting practitioners), and a *shared practice* (the repertoire of knowledge, ideas, tools, styles, language, objects etc. that is developed, negotiated, and maintained to effectively deal with the domain). In his earlier work, Wenger (1999, 73) phrased these characteristics as a mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire.

82 Wenger 1999, 143–188.

83 Wenger 1999, 83.

84 Farnsworth *et al.* 2016, 142; Poddick – Stahl 2016, 4.

means that we should take into account that behind the material remains of a single temple site, there can be a variety of communities of practice in which members were tied together through their learning of, and engagement in a particular 'way of doing' (**Fig. 4**). Accordingly, it should be considered that both the Oxus Temple and the Niched Temple embodied singular places of diverse activities for various intersecting communities of practice involving the workmanship, craftsmanship, and physical production of the respective material cultures; for instance, commissioners and architects of the temple, skilled construction workers, as well as the artisans and craftsmen of ritual and votive objects. Many of these likely worked on commission and their level of skilled practice was probably for the most time more important than their ethnic background. Additionally, there were also communities of practice related to the users and consumers of that material, such as dedicators or gift-givers who dedicated the votive objects, priests and cultic personnel who accepted and stored the dedications on behalf of the deity, and practitioners who engaged in specific cultic rites. Individual users may have played out multiple roles across such 'consumer communities': priests and cultic personnel who accepted and stored the dedications on behalf of the god(s) may also have been concerned with the material and immaterial ways in which cultic rites were executed, for instance those related to the recycling of the votives in the bronze casting workshop in the courtyard of the Oxus Temple. *Vice versa*, craftsmen of votive objects may not have been the same as those offering it; was it truly Atrosokes who wrote his name on the votive altar, or did he ask someone literate and educated to do it for him?

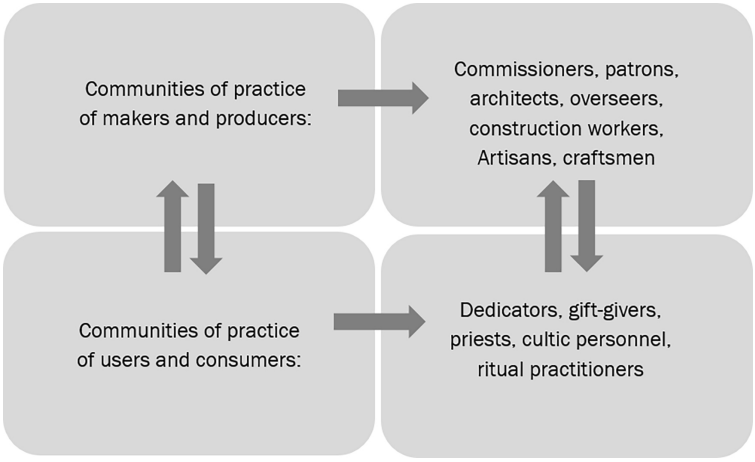

Fig. 4: Scheme of possible overlap of practitioners in converging communities of practice.

The analytical distinction between practitioners engaged in the physical production of the temples and the votives on the one hand, and practitioners engaged in the consumption of the cultic offerings on the other is important for the realization that various synchronous as well as diachronous communities of practice were at play in a single temple site. It should be emphasized that there could be significant overlap as well as mutual dependencies between such communities of practice of makers and users (**Fig. 4**). Artisans involved in the crafting of objects may also have been the ones dedicating those objects themselves (Atrosokes may well have been literate), while practitioners who devoted gifts to the temple deity (or deities) probably included construction workers, too. Moreover, how the temple was built by skilled workers most likely depended on who commissioned the building – the patron and the person (or family or institution) in power to decide on its architectural and practical design (who may

all have been one and the same, e.g. the ruling king or a member of the elite) – but also on the constituency envisioned in the commission of the building: its consuming 'customers'. The actual construction process of the temple would equally be contingent upon the systematic skills, technical knowledge, and practical ways of doing known and learned by the construction workers. These overlapping aspects, however, should not be seen as fixed one-on-one relations, immovable in their membership roles. The artisans who crafted the objects may have sold them to the actual dedicators, who then offered them as a votive gifts to the god(s), with or without mediation by a priest or other temple personnel. Thinking translocally opens up numerous possibilities in favour of a more nuanced picture of the actors involved within the sphere of activity of a single temple site.

Membership in a community of practice can be, but is neither necessarily a conscious membership nor necessarily materially salient in archaeological remains. Oftentimes, 'culture is quite ordinary', which implies that the signification of some practices in terms of identity meaning can be latent, internalized, or even absent, through which material change can mask continuity and vice versa.[85] People who engaged in cultic practices at Ai Khanoum and Takht-i Sangin could be dedicators and priests. New dedicators, such as first-time travellers, foreign ambassadors, or passers-by, were probably habitual practitioners in the wider general practice of offering votives to a temple, but most likely beginning practitioners in the cult practices specific to the Oxus Temple or the Niched Temple. As beginners on novel grounds, they may have been more aware about their way of doing in these particular sanctuaries. Other, more learned dedicators, such as those living in the vicinity, may have been more habitual practitioners and therefore less conscious about their actions. In relation to both learned practitioners who offered votives habitually, and peripheral practitioners who dedicated gifts in the manner in which they were told to do so (or how they thought would have been the correct way), priests and cultic personnel were, by definition, more learned practitioners in the distinct rites of the temple.

Members of a community of practice not only converge on one location, are physically proximate, or spatially connected to one another, but can also be geographically distributed. Ways of doing could also be shared across distances, which could materially result in visual or technical similarities. A comparison of the similarities and differences between the Oxus Temple at Takht-i Sangin and the Niched Temple at Ai Khanoum in terms of architecture, ritual objects, and votives, may illuminate the extent and complexity of potential overlapping communities of practices at both sites (**Fig. 5**). The similarities in architecture between the two temples – the use of similar mud bricks, their thick walls, and their ground plan – may indicate distributed communities of practice of architects and temple builders, who formed a constellation of practice (a distinct way of doing) with peer practitioners elsewhere, such as the temples at Dil'berdzhin in Bactria, or at Dura Europos in Syria. Contingent on the perceived identity of the deity, the Oxus Temple and the Niched Temple may also have shared a community of practice of worshippers of the same god(s), whose associations formed the cultural competence of material expressions or appropriate gifts in the form of ivory figurines, schist vessels, and female representations (which perhaps were intentionally ambiguous and multi-interpretational), as well as the cultural competence of using stone pedestals and water-related objects for cultic purposes, present at both sites. At the same time, the dissimilarities in size and architectural spaces, as well as in the suggested ritual practices – the vessels for libations in the case of the Niched Temple, and the bronze cauldrons for recycling votives in the courtyard of the Oxus

85 The famous phrase 'culture is ordinary' comes from Raymond Williams (Williams 1958) who emphasized lived, open-ended culture, as experienced in the minds and everyday life of people.

	Similarities	Differences
Architecture	Set in a larger sanctuary Mud brick Thick walls Ground plan: antechamber, central chamber, side chambers	Niched: Indented niches Oxus: Corridors for storage Oxus: Fire chambers
Ritual objects	Stone pedestals in the form of column bases Stone basin Water pipes and drains	Niched: Libation vessels Oxus: Votive pits & storage Oxus: Votive recycling Oxus: Bronze cauldrons
Votive objects	Schist vessels Ivory figurines Clay anthropomorphic sculptures Female representations (gilded Cybele plate)	Niched: Cult statue fragments Oxus: Gold and ivory objects Oxus: Objects displaying mythical creatures Oxus: Weapons and arms

Fig. 5: Comparative table of the Oxus Temple and the Niched Temple. Hoo 2022, tab. 9.1, based on Francfort 2012.

Temple – may indicate different communities of consumer practice of dedicators and priests, who engaged in distinct cult practices suitable for the respective temple and deity.

The spatial stretch of similarities in material 'ways of doing' signifies that communities of consumer practices and communities of producer practices may not have been geographically constrained, but that they possibly formed transregional dimensions of local social life in Hellenistic Bactria. This is not to say that the specific intersection of such consumer and producer practices necessarily shared the same meaning as well. Shared ways of *doing* do not equal or imply shared ways of *being*. Practices that are known to have occurred in Greece involving a stone basin or the recycling and storage of votives which scholars have identified as Greek (on the basis of the principle of *ouk ekphora*), may not have had the same meaning or required the same ethnic or cultural identity of practitioners elsewhere, for instance in Bactria. Methodologically, the idea of distributed and converging communities of practice illuminates the pitfalls of analytically determining whether this or that feature of an object or practice should be defined as Eastern, Western, or hybrid. Ultimately, these etic labels may all have been entangled and intersected by varieties of translocal constellations and communities of practice on the ground.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper was not intended to offer an exhaustive theoretical framework, but to critically reflect on the underlying tenets of common theoretical premises upon which scholars make sense of cultural mixture, as well as an attempt to open vistas for new research directions away from persistent binary traditions. I argued that the concept of communities of practice offers a productive point of entry into broader theorization of translocalism, which forms a more inclusive way to approach Bactria's cultural 'inbetweenness'. Thinking on the level of practices around which people organize various intersectional identifications, communities of practice provide a useful perspective to see past the cultural melting pot and break down larger categorizations of Eastern, Western, and the syncretic hybrid. Instead of couching interpretations in discrete *a priori* identities, this perspective directs attention to networked practices which are not always obvious, yet quite straightforward in terms of how people interact socially. This is not to say that the Greek and Bactrian identities that scholars search for

did not exist at all, but it reminds us of more numerous possibilities of practice communities which may synchronously and diachronously have intersected in a singular bodily entity of a temple (or any other building). People participate and engage in actions and interactions, organically forming communities of practice on various levels and contexts that cut across ethnicities, coexist in location and across distances, and have therefore multiple entries for conscious identification, depending on activating circumstances. Taking up a translocal approach therefore forces us to ask questions about *whose* story we narrate (and whose stories may be overwritten) when we make statements about people and communities behind religious architecture and objects.

While communities of practice yield cognitive insights into the range of potential social configurations and identities, it is not an exhaustive theory. Even with more written testimonies of how and why people acted and felt, we can only infer bits and pieces of the full range and content of communities of practice from the material at hand. Moreover, practices, practical competence, and knowledgeability can be informed, shaped, as well as hindered by various power relations both between rulers and ruled as well as lower-lovel power dynamics within families and social classes, such as priests and elites. Communities of practice should therefore be combined with theories of competence in order to incorporate questions of power and ideology as well. Nevertheless, taking translocalism and practice communities as methodological starting points can be a productive step forward to address the diverse and multiple ways that various actors may have identified themselves, without returning to binary groupist explanations.

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