THE HELLENISTIC FAR EAST:
FROM THE OIKOUMENE TO THE COMMUNITY

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Communities in the Hellenistic Far East

The Hellenistic world was an arena for the formation of new communities—real and imagined—and redefinition of old ones. Recent scholarship has offered many approaches to how one should conceptualise these communities, the circumstances of their formation, their internal dynamics and their external relations. In this paper, my general aim will be to examine the social practices and cultural landscapes of one particular region of the Hellenistic world, the ‘Hellenistic Far East’. This ‘Siberia of the Hellenistic world’\(^1\) was situated at the political and cultural margins of the oikoumene, and modern scholarly analysis has focussed most frequently on its internal cultural diversity, and the vibrant influences it incorporated, not just from the Greek world, but from the cultures and societies of the Iranian world, Near East, Central Asia and India. In what follows, I seek to identify some of the things which bound the Hellenistic Far East together, and explore how these diverse influences came together to create a whole.

My partiality to the word ‘community’ derives, of course, from Benedict Anderson’s dissection of modern nationalism as the making of ‘imagined communities’\(^2\). Although I will not always phrase it as such, my goal in this paper is, however, to see what might be gained by searching for a ‘social imaginary’ in the Hellenistic Far East. I take my working definition of the ‘social imaginary’ from Charles Taylor’s *Modern Social Imaginaries*: ‘the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations’\(^3\).

\(^1\) Rawlinson 1909, 23.
\(^2\) Anderson 1991. I should make it clear that I am not proposing any kind of ‘Graeco-Bactrian nationalism’.
\(^3\) Taylor 2004, 23.
My discussion in general will be light on theory, or at least on explicit reference to and quotation from modern theoretical and methodological works. Part of my aim in this is to avoid too much duplication or repetition of discussions elsewhere in this volume. Although I use theoretical terms and tropes rarely, I do not dismiss them, and I do not use them lightly. It is also my view that the Hellenistic world is capable of being a generator and creative adapter as well as a ‘consumer’ of theory, and that active—two-way—dialogue with the social sciences is to be fostered. To these ends, I shall briefly introduce a few wider points and concepts within which my arguments should be situated.

I would like to put some emphasis on the cognitive spaces in between identity and its articulation. Identities operate on both a macro and a micro level, from an overarching individual or communal ‘identity’, to the various social, cultural, ethnic, gender, or sexual ‘identities’ by which people may define themselves or be defined by others. Cognitively and rhetorically, such identities also function at multiple levels. They may be articulated publicly, or articulated privately. They may be consciously imagined, felt (but below the level at which one can even put it into words to oneself), or they may be something subconscious which comes forth into conscious thought and expression only under particular circumstances. Such circumstances may arise when a person or community are confronted with different ideals and ways of doing things, which provoke them to define and articulate the criteria of group membership. But these kinds of reformulations or reifications of identities are constructed around certain understandings that predate the oppositional situation or context.

One of the conceptual advantages of the ‘social imaginary’, in my view, is therefore that it does not have to work at the level of conscious speech or thought. As Taylor notes, ‘Humans operated with a social imaginary, well before they ever got into the business of theorizing about themselves’.4 The ancient Greeks, of course, loved nothing better than to theorise about themselves. But in the Hellenistic world, we must be particularly sensitive to the distinction between our theories about them, and their own.5 The archaeological evidence from the city of Aï Khanoum, which I have discussed at greater length elsewhere,6 and revisit below, provides at least one good example of an institution which scholars describe in one way, with reference

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5 Mairs 2011b, 186.
6 Mairs forthcoming.