

Cultural Contact and Cultural Change: Colonialism and Empire¹

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“The concept of culture is the single most difficult term in anthropology”. This is how Thomas Hylland Eriksen approaches the issue in his handbook *What is Anthropology?*²

I may add; it is no easier a concept in archaeology. Or rather, it seems that archaeology has a need for both an extreme operational concept of culture in order to interpret the archaeological evidence in time and space – we could call it a concept of archaeological culture – and a more holistic, inclusive, metaphysical concept of culture in order to understand and explain cultural relations. We could settle the eternal dispute in that way, by a formal agreement that the archaeological cultures are true entities, “true” meaning that they were with all probability perceived as entities there and then. A metaphysical concept of culture, then, might be considered once in a while, when we felt a need to become more philosophical.

I take this question of the concept of culture to be an important one, the most fundamental in any archaeological process, and therefore no less in a discussion on the nature of cultural contact and cultural change. A twofold concept of culture is *not* a solution, rather an illustration of the problem. Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn put it this way:

Groups of artifact (and building) types at a particular time and place are called assemblages, and groups of assemblages have been taken to define archaeological cultures... the difficulty comes when one tries to translate this terminology into human terms and to relate an archaeological culture with an actual group of people in the past.³

Style and identity

It is no passable road to ignore this problem of translation. The problem is not even to bridge the gap from things to thoughts, but to accept, understand and explain the interrelations between things and thoughts.

That there exists such a relation is suggested by the notion of style.⁴ Trained as a Classical Archaeologist – in the tradition of corpora and empiric mastery – the stylistic analysis forms the backbone of one's professionalism. It is the analytical tool that never sleeps; it is where everything begins. It is the method by which we organize the archaeological objects, create typologies, structure the evidence. Because mere experience has shown us that style is related to time and place. Style reveals where and when.

Style is how we do things, and often we do things automatically, unconsciously, guided by a sense of the appropriate reaction in a given situation. The proper response, the doing of things seems to be included in the social and cultural context of the acting person. My assertion is that it is possible to deduce from things done, that is, archaeological evidence to the context that determined what was done. It has to do with a certain diffusion between spirit and object, between thoughts and things.

Culture is not only a common code, nor a common catalogue of proper answers to common problems, a collection of particular ideas and thoughts; rather, culture is a totality of fundamental thoughts interwoven and forming a carpet that contains myriads of particular figures. But it is not only a metaphysic construction, it is in the real things, the physical contexts as well as in the mind of men.⁵ This is how Pierre Bourdieu described cultural entities, inspired by and referring to Erwin Panofsky's work on the scholastic habitus and its diffusion in Gothic architecture, and his consideration on the Humanities as a hermeneutic project and iconology as its working principle.⁶

The operational concept of archaeological culture cannot be separated from metaphysics. They constitute each other. Ian Hodder says that "material culture has a central role to play in what it means to be human", Michael Shanks that "our identities are not something inherited or acquired, as essential qualities or our character of life, but are perpetually reconstructed in relations with others and with cultural artefacts".⁷

This is not just some twaddling nonsense from two theoretical and speculative researchers, rather it is quite precisely what we ourselves encounter in our everyday life. That for instance our homes expose our identity, that the things that fill up our kitchens and closets reveal our acclaimed uniqueness. That we all know, if provided only slight insight into the local context, what kind of newspaper is most likely to be read in the home of a Danish intellectual of this and that age, what car I ought to drive, whether I prefer green products etc. All of these are in fact archaeological evidence / material culture / cultural artefacts, and they unveil me.

But my home represents not only my professional life-style, rather a conglomerate of elements that derive from my husband and his family, as well as from myself and my family, things we have bought together, like the kilims that reveal a Turkish connection, items that the kids love even perhaps for their ugliness – and it is not a constant, new things come along, by chance or after months of saving, and the style is constantly negotiated and altered. Not least as a reaction to other things in other homes.

Identity – cultural, ethnic, personal – comes from within, identity is first and foremost something that is negotiated and established inside our heads. It is a feeling, a sense of belonging. And eventually, because of what goes on inside the mind of men, it is expressed with deeds and acts, and things. Since we constantly interact with each other, it is constantly compromised and fluctuating.

Perpetually reconstructed in relations with others...

“Our identities are... perpetually reconstructed in relations with others and with cultural artefacts.” If culture is constantly negotiated, why study cultural change as a specific phenomenon?

The main reason is that the constant fluctuation of culture is slow, lazy, guided by both our conservative nature and our longing for the recognizable.⁸ Rather than major changes, the consequences of the negotiations are at most minor alterations... And even when we feel that we are drastic and dramatic in our choices, they are often confined within the frame of the expected.

By “cultural change” something more radical is anticipated. Often the change seems provoked via political or military conquest, disasters that led to mass migrations etc. In archaeology the “meeting of cultures” or acculturation studies have become a focal point concurrently with the expansion of the self perception of the classical disciplines from the study of the Greek heartlands and Rome in the early 1980s to “rural life in the hinterlands”. The study of Magna Graecia, for instance, turned from Greek colonies into *apoikia*. In recent years “Colonial Archaeology” or “Historical Archaeology” (dealing with the culture histories of the post-Columbian world) have formed another platform for archaeological research inspired by and in dialogue with anthropology and social science, focusing on acculturation.⁹

Encyclopædia Britannica Online gives this answer, when asked to define “acculturation”:

... the processes of change in artifacts, customs, and beliefs that result from the contact of societies with different cultural traditions. The term is also used to refer to the results of such changes.¹⁰

Its authors distinguish two classes of acculturation, a “free” and a “directed” one. The free form is characterised by borrowing, modification and interchange between the parties, often resulting in integration and incorporation – closely related to the “typical” cultural fluctuation.

Directed change is initiated by conquest or political control, and may result in anything from assimilation, the almost complete replacement of one culture by another, to cultural fusion, a new synthesis of cultural elements differing from both precontact cultures.

Both “free” and “directed” acculturation are perceived as processes. Culture and thus these variations of cultural meld are considered as anything but constants and they may result in assimilation or fusion, in dramatic changes or more calm diffusions.

Colonialism

Another way round “cultural contact” and “cultural change” is offered in the stimulating book by Chris Gosden, *Archaeology and Colonialism – Cultural Contact from 5000 BC to the Present* (2004). Gosden focuses on what he calls material things, and in particular on the power of material culture in colonialism, which he sees as “a relationship with material culture, which is spatially extensive and destabilising of older values”.¹¹

He sets up a tripartite typology of colonialism: *terra nullius*, the “I cleared the land and fenced it”¹²-form of colonialism that settled north America from the middle eighteenth century; middle ground which for instance covers the hybrid form of Romanisation or the early European contacts in north America; and colonialism within a shared cultural milieu which is about controlling networks, about colonialism without colonies... It is governed by cultural power, transmitted first by the elite and referring to a symbolic centre of reference. The early Greek expansion in the Mediterranean is an example. The Achaemenid empire another. The notion of Roman Empire maybe a third?

Gosden’s focus on colonialism as a correlation between material culture and human relations with the world, driven by a desire for things / wealth and seen as a source of creativity – colonial cultures were created by all who participated in them¹³ – leaves archaeology as the keeper of keys in the study of colonialism. Not because pots are people, but because “material culture has a central role to play in what it means to be human”:

Colonialism is a process by which things shape people, rather than the reverse. Colonialism exists where material culture moves people, both culturally and physically, leading them to expand geographically, to accept new material forms and to set up power structures around a desire for material culture.¹⁴

This desire creates a network between people and things, and by focusing on the material things the network becomes visible to us. Speaking of the Orientalising and the early Greek *apoikiai* he puts forward the proto-Corinthian aryballos with all its complexity of origin and stylistic mixture – symbolizing the processes of colonialism and its base in a shared cultural milieu, a colonialism of “minds and bodies through concepts of wealth, common practises and aesthetics”.¹⁵ What is of interest here is not who brought these things along, rather their distribution as such. The distribution shows us that this was a world of relations, this world was united and interconnected, and the relations had things as their starting point – bringing along thoughts, but starting with a desire for things/wealth. Was Romanisation then also a matter of business, applying the rules of supply and demand?

Desirable things

Gosden distinguishes between things and objects, things being artefacts of value through their aesthetic or symbolic qualities; they are sensitive to context, social and perhaps sacred relations. Objects are quantifiable and “un-coded”; they can be exchanged within broader contexts.

He also focuses on the dichotomy between dividuals and individuals. The dividual is composed by relations, the individual is self-governing, however, in all persons are both dividual and individual aspects: “A separate sense of self and the importance of belonging to a group are ideas in tension with each other: to create oneself as an individual is to cut off some of the links to the group; to submerge oneself in the group makes it less possible to emerge as an individual”.¹⁶ While objects and individuals belong together in a sort of de-contextualized manner, things and dividuals call upon each other – they are only fully appreciated as part of grander relations.

Such a thing is the alabaster vase from the Maussolleion (fig. 1). During Newton’s excavations of the Maussolleion in Halikarnassos it was found at the landing close to the monumental staircase that led to the tomb chamber.¹⁷ It has from time to time been put forward as a sign of *proxenia*, a symbol of the relation or alliance between the Persian hegemony, personified in Xerxes the Great, and the Halikarnassian Artemisia the Older. She participated with a minor fleet in Xerxes’ warfare against the Greeks and according to Herodotos, he was full of admiration for her bravery (Herodotos 8.68-69; 8.88).¹⁸ The vase is inscribed with the words “Xerxes Great King” in Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian and Egyptian.

Was it a personal gift from a grateful Great King to the local aristocrat? An export item, maybe one out of many vessels manufactured for such purposes, as tokens of political contracts embedded in elite networks?¹⁹

This precious item, this desirable thing, was kept in the court circles at Halikarnassos one way or the other, as a token of the aristocratic roots that

laid the foundation of the Hekatomnid dynasty almost a century later and as a symbol of its successful relations to the Persian supremacy.

Material culture, not least Gosden's things, are signs and carry with them references, contexts, relations, origins.

Invention of tradition and enacting of empire

The Persian Empire comprised different people, speaking a wide range of languages, worshipping multiple deities, living in very varied environments with different social customs etc. Within this cacophony of diversities the Achaemenids invented a quite successful method of hegemony: flexible empire.

Although it was created by conquests, their territory was preserved by "the creation of a consistently idealized vision of kingship and empire", in the words of Margaret Cool Root.²⁰ It was kept together as a successful empire not least by the creation of an ideology of power that was spread via a conscious use of a royal iconography resting on tradition. It adjusted itself to local power structures, admitted freedom of religion and ritual practices. The Great King had only a few formal demands: that he received his taxes and that conquered land was protected.²¹

But how did this system work in reality, how did life change when the Persian army conquered Sardis in the 540s BC, how was it to be the subject in a new constellation of power, how did Persianisation function?

These are questions that Elspeth Dusinberre sets out to answer in her recent work on *Aspects of Empire in Achaemenid Sardis* (2003). And her overall conclusion is that the Persian hegemony, the establishing of empire, the transformation of the Lydian kingdom into a Persian satrapy led to a new hybrid culture headed by a transformation of the local, Lydian elite.

How it was felt or experienced is not easy to tell. It seems as if the transition ran smooth, that the acculturation was a success, resulting in a meld, a new eclectic culture in a new context. However, living during these processes may not have been as easy as archaeology suggests.²² Local estate holders had to give up territory to Iranian cavalymen who formed the core of the standing army.²³ Empire came to Sardis with force, people died in the battle of Sardis, large portions of the city and its magnificent fortification walls were demolished – it started out chaotically on the worst premises! The ground was levelled for "directed" change, forceful assimilation and neglect of the hitherto prevailing order of things. Complications, however, would have served neither the Achaemenids nor the Lydians.

First and foremost, it is evident that the Persians did not arrive in a *terra nullius*, land unsettled, towns emptied or non-existent. Who ever did? They took over a kingdom with an existing power structure and infrastructure, and they made good use of it.

Dusinberre speaks of the creation of a polyethnic elite, visible through a new amalgamated style.²⁴ This elite carried a large part of the success of the



Fig. 1. Alabaster vase from the Maussoleion excavations (British Museum, ANE 132114).

satrapy on its shoulders – by involving and transforming the local elite, they worked as intermediaries between the Achaemenid rule and the local population. The local infrastructure of power was made to work for mutual benefits of the Great King and the Sardians.

One group of monuments is especially crucial to the Achaemenid empire, i.e. personal seals. Together with other minor objects, such as jewellery and gold foil ornaments they may be seen as tokens of the membership of the new polyethnic elite that was the eventual result of the Persianisation of western Anatolia.²⁵ Such an item is a cylinder seal from Sardis Tomb 813, a rock-cut chamber tomb from the so-called Great Necropolis west of the Pactolus stream, dated to the early 5th c. BC.

The tomb is quite unusual, not least the stepped façade flanked by antemion stelai. The limestone sarcophagus in the rear chamber contained skeletal remains of a large male, golden appliqué and a golden ring, and his cylinder seal (fig. 2). The seal depicts a crowned hero wearing the Persian court robe



Fig. 2. Cylinder seal from Tomb 813 at Sardis (Dusinberre 1997, fig. 3).

facing right. He grasps two rampant lion-griffins by their necks, standing on the heads of two couchant winged sphinxes that face each other, each raising a foreleg to touch paws at the centre.²⁶

While the central motif is very common at Persepolis – the crowned hero seems to encompass the ideal of a Persian man²⁷ – it is not seen in Sardis except for this one incident. And the use of pedestal animals is otherwise reserved for the royal name seals, that is, a smaller group of seals carrying the name of the Great King.²⁸

The seal from Tomb 813 is carved in the so-called Graeco-Persian style. It is a poor and problematic term – we shall return to that in a short while. Many different styles were in use concurrently in the Achaemenid administration,²⁹ – in the sealing material from Persepolis at least eight different styles have been identified. The Graeco-Persian style on the contrary was never employed in the Iranian heartlands: it was confined to Anatolia.

The man buried in the back sarcophagus of Tomb 813 belonged to a local Sardian elite. Within the Persianized aristocracy he exposed his elitarian epithets: a prominent cylinder seal that was carried in a string around his neck, golden appliqués attached to his undoubtedly luxurious garments. By his seal he lived up to the metaphoric / iconographical language exclusive to the upper echelon of the Iranian court. He was an important man in Sardis, and

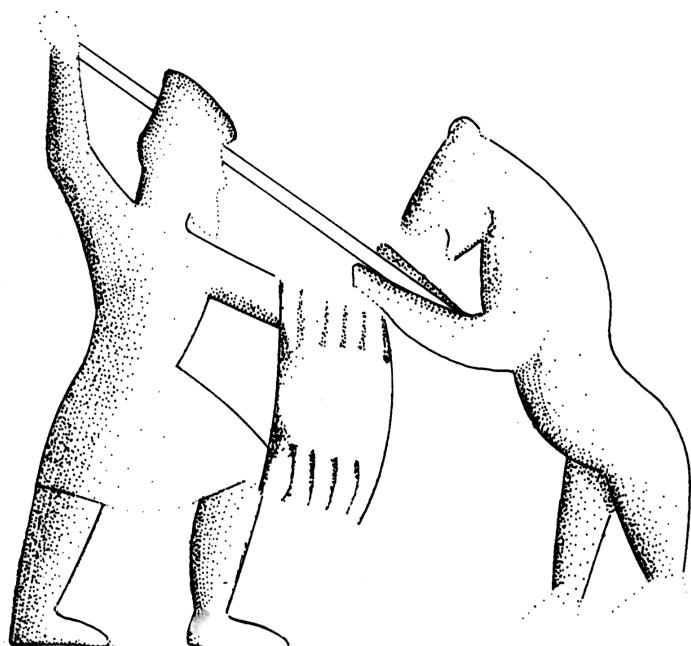


Fig. 3. Daskyleion bulla depicting a bear hunt (Kaptan 1996, Pl. 26:7).

he played a game that would hardly have been tolerated in Persepolis, but were interpreted clearly in this local context: he was one of the Great King's men.

Jewellery, seals, and golden appliqués are all extreme visible parts of a person's public appearance; – they signify the bearer. Exactly these are the things that represent the amalgamated or eclectic style of the new Persianized elite of western Anatolia. In Daskyleion, the residence of the satrapy of Greater Phrygia, the existence of a satrapal archive has been known since 1959, when Ekrem Akurgal excavated more than 400 *bullae*, clay seal impressions. Quite recently, in 2003, a full publication of the sealings has appeared.³⁰

The documents that were sealed with the little lumps of clay have not survived – all we know is that the majority, at least 89% was rolls of papyrus, while 9% sealed leather or another smooth material.³¹ What was written on these documents is also unknown, but we know that other Achaemenid archives contained documents dealing with local administration, payments, transportation of food commodities, private business etc.

The Daskyleion sealings are quite innovative and lively (fig. 3). One example is a hunter on foot advancing a bear. Further east such a hunting scene would depict a boar or a lion.³² More than anything the seals evidence an artistic creativity, also found for instance in the coinage of nearby Kyzikos,

– indeed the carvers of the coin stamps in this prosperous “Greek” harbour-town and the seals used by the local satrapal administration may very well have been the same.³³

Questioning the Graeco-Persian

Creative and experimental spirits are indeed characteristic of the artistic production of the western Achaemenid empire, of the cultural milieu. Deniz Kaptan, the man behind the Daskyleion *bullae* publication put it this way: “The Daskyleion sealings contribute more evidence toward interpreting this art as a lively ‘blend of ancient Near Eastern, Anatolian and East Greek elements.’”³⁴

Chris Gosden explains the cultural changes that occur with the process of colonialism as a kind of positive energy, more a creator than a destroyer:

Paradoxically perhaps, I see colonialism as often being a source of creativity and experiment, and while certainly not being without pain, colonial encounters cause the dissolution of values on all sides, creating new ways of doing things in a material and social sense. A stress on creativity takes us away from notions such as fatal impact, domination and resistance or core and periphery, emphasising that colonial cultures were created by all who participated in them, so that all had agency and social effect, with coloniser and colonized alike being radically changed by the experience.³⁵

The term Graeco-Persian is problematic. Not so much the words describing a certain stylistic fuse between Greek and Persian art. But it is a loaded term and as such it was introduced in the field of research concerning Achaemenid Anatolia: it was based on the assumption that Achaemenid art needed the Greek expertise in order to alter Persian sterility and artistic poverty. In that way Graeco-Persian art was “an offshoot of Greek”, Graeco-Persian was a reflection of Persian artistic weakness and cultural indebtedness to the west.³⁶

A reversed, or at least edited version of the gravity of Achaemenid art in the west – a version that matches both Gosden’s creative colonialism and the various eclectic styles that occur and blossom in western Anatolia not least during the Achaemenid period, but also before, and certainly later – is closer the case. Much of the creative force of art in the Achaemenid empire derives from the western satrapies, where the feeling of colonialism may have been the strongest, the tensions between powers intense.³⁷ And it is also here that continuity from the Achaemenids to the Hellenistic iconography of power is the clearest.

Thoughts and things

When Margaret Cool Root set out to write her thesis on Achaemenid art and empire in the late 1970s she undertook an investigation of the construction and maintenance of the Achaemenid Empire as an ideology expressed in iconography. She laid the foundation for another understanding of empire, as not only a form of governance, but as a totality of polities that rests and depends upon a conscious and calculated use of iconography, an image of power produced in order to underline the ideology that the Achaemenids wished to emphasise:

The Persian kings waged brutal wars, exacted heavy taxes from reluctant subjects, and harboured fears of palace revolutions spawned by ambitious courtiers. But, for the imperial art with which they hoped to impress the world (and with which they themselves apparently wished to identify), ...the Achaemenids commissioned the creation of a consistently idealized vision of kingship and empire – a vision which stressed images of piety, control and harmonious order.³⁸

Archaeology of Empire is a trend in archaeological research that moves on the problematic, yet often profitable thin ice of letting general premises enlighten particular cases, and vice versa. Adding the perspective that cultural histories give, the background to let differences and changes come forward.

Of the general nature is the fact that territorial expansion is costly not least when based on military conquest. Consolidating empire in such conquered territory is almost impossible without diplomacy and personal magnetism:

The charisma of great leaders in empire formation is not incidental; the creation of personal loyalties and alliances between emperors and newly conquered elites may ameliorate costs of military domination, and the awesome or sacred name and reputation of the emperor may encourage conciliation and submission without the need for military activity or a permanent military presence.³⁹

Stressing that the creation of empire, by a conscious use of an iconography of ideology, indeed also encompasses the Roman Empire is by no means breaking news. But underlining the mechanisms and their roots in imperial history and tradition may let us gain more knowledge.

Gosden focuses on colonialism as a social event. He says that:

Colonialism is a relationship of desire, which creates a network of people and things, but the exact shape of desire and the ensu-

ing network will vary. And this variability is partly due to the regimes of value in place at any one time and partly to do with the negotiations of value that take place between different cultural forms".⁴⁰

His point is that we are constructed through objects and vital social values adhere in and around objects.

It is easy to feel "lost in translation" from things to thoughts. Yet, what we learn from focusing on things is that empire building is not only a question of power politics, dominance and submission, but rather a case of creative negotiation as well as forceful and conscious use of cultural power. And that out of chaos, stress, and tension grow artistic quality and creativity.⁴¹

Notes

- 1 I wish to express my warm thanks to my colleagues, Helle Winge Horsnæs and Rune Frederiksen, for reading through drafts of this paper. Winfried Held needs a special thank for ample, vivid and ongoing discussions on identity, on the Achaemenids in Western Anatolia in general, and for providing me Daskyleian first aid.
- 2 Eriksen 2004, 36.
- 3 Renfrew & Bahn 1993, 98.
- 4 Carstens 2004.
- 5 Bourdieu 1967, 151-152.
- 6 Panofsky 1969; 1970; 1939.
- 7 Hodder 2002, 9; Shanks 2002, 293.
- 8 Carstens 2004, 14-15.
- 9 Cf. Burke 1999.
- 10 "acculturation." Encyclopædia Britannica from Encyclopædia Britannica Online. <<http://search.eb.com/eb/article?tocId=9003494>> [Accessed June 15, 2005].
- 11 Gosden 2004, 4.
- 12 Henry Lawson, *Reedy River*; Gosden 2004, 114. It is important to stress that in fact North America was indeed not *terra nullius*, land unsettled and empty, rather the *idea* of the early colonisers were that they settled and civilized land hitherto uncivilized.
- 13 Gosden 2004, 25.
- 14 Gosden 2004, 153.
- 15 Gosden 2004, 155.
- 16 Gosden 2004, 35.
- 17 Newton 1862-1863, 91-94, and Appendix II.
- 18 Carstens 1999, 112.
- 19 In Halikarnassos it was not an isolated item. In the British Museum register all 17 alabaster jars or fragments are listed deriving from Newton's excavations, yet this one is the only carrying an inscription. Jeppesen & Zahle 1975, 70; Zahle & Kjeldsen 2004, 221-227. In the treasury of Persepolis 53 similar alabaster vessels were found bearing the same inscription, "Xerxes Great King". Schmidt 1957, 81-93, pl. 47-65; Cahill 1985, 383.
- 20 Root 1979, 2.
- 21 Cf. Dusinberre 2003, 1-4.

- 22 Gosden 2004, 25.
- 23 Sekunda 1991, 8-84.
- 24 Dusinberre 2003, 29. However, being *polyethnic* or rather above and beyond ethnic differentiation may be exactly the hallmark of aristocracy, Carstens 2005. But Dusinberre's point is another; she is forcefully arguing against the alleged denial of both artistic creativity and ability to create an impact on local cultures in the empire. Dusinberre 2003, 8-9. See also Root 1979, 15 *et passim*.
- 25 Dusinberre 2003, 146; Sekunda 1991, on onomastic evidence of acculturation or intermarriage. Dusinberre 2003, 145-157.
- 26 Dusinberre 1997, 100.
- 27 Root 1979, 303-306.
- 28 Dusinberre 1997, 106.
- 29 Earlier it was believed that the styles bore with them certain messages of the ethnicity of its user, but the detailed studies of the large body of material deriving from the Persepolis archives have revealed that style was something deliberate chosen "not only to their tastes but perhaps to the purpose of the seal or the position of the commissioner in the administrative hierarchy." Dusinberre 1997, 110. See also: Garrison & Root 2001, 16 and *passim*, Introduction; Dusinberre 2003, 164.
- 30 Kaptan 2003.
- 31 Kaptan 1996.
- 32 Kaptan 1996, 91-92.
- 33 Kaptan 2000; 2001.
- 34 Kaptan 1996, 95.
- 35 Gosden 2004, 25.
- 36 Root 1991, 1 and *passim*; 1994, 18.
- 37 It is indeed puzzling that the Graeco-Persian style seems prominent in the centres of the western satrapies at Daskyleion and Sardis, where the satraps were ethnic Persians and the landscapes/cultures more Anatolian (Phrygian and Lydian) than East Greek. Or, indeed, they already represented a cultural blend. This questions, on another level, the "Classical tradition", the urge for Greek culture, in the late Archaic and Classical western Anatolia, and the Ionian Renaissance. Cf. Pedersen 2001-2002.
- 38 Root 1979, 2.
- 39 Sinopoli 1994, 163.
- 40 Gosden 2004, 153.
- 41 The lively eclecticism of Roman "provincial art" that leads Jørgen Christian Meyer in his paper to characterise Palmyra as "never fully Romanised from a cultural point of view" is rather than a Palmyrenian false perception of "becoming Roman" an illustration of the negotiations that more than anything characterises processes of cultural change and the spirits of colonialism. Indeed, this insight should lead us to question the check-list methodology hitherto too often applied the study of Romanisation.

