Oriens et Occidens

Studien zu antiken Kulturkontakten und ihrem Nachleben

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Common Dwelling Place of all the Gods

Commagene in its Local, Regional and Global Hellenistic Context

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Nemrud Dağ, view of the statues on the east terrace taken during the campaign of 1953 (Photo: Friedrich Karl Dörner, © Forschungsstelle Asia Minor, Dörner archive)

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Beyond Greece and Babylonia
Global and Local at Seleucia on the Tigris

VITO MESSINA

In this contribution different types of documents and classes of materials from Seleucia on the Tigris are presented and discussed with the purpose of identifying global and local trends in both their production and meaning. Subsequently, this paper explores how these trends coexisted, interacted and affected the city and its society. In many instances, materials that are deemed as 'local' at Seleucia have been considered part of a globalizing process; however, this paper addresses this issue by proposing that fully developed global systems, like those that came into being in the Hellenistic world, were in fact fostered by globalizing processes that had already been underway.

The aim of this essay is to show that global and local trends at Seleucia appear to go beyond their characterization as ensembles of exclusively Greek and Babylonian origin. As in Hellenistic Commagene, we seem to be dealing here with 'cultural scenarios' that acquired very different meanings over time. In particular, the use of Greek elements, which I will define as 'Hellenistic mainstream', in Seleucia on the Tigris, appears to be potentially comparable to what was happening in Commagene at the Euphrates simultaneously.

The Hellenistic World as a Global Network

Throughout different periods of human history, the culminating propensity to large-scale connectivity led to the creation of globalizing societies; that is to say, societies with different backgrounds, traditions, and even languages, participating in supra-regional networks and experimenting, among other interrelations and to various degrees, with cultural interplay.

In archaeology, this interplay can be traced, albeit usually not completely understood, by the examination of things (arranged in classes of materials) and framed in what the literature defines as a global perspective or Globalization theory.

This theoretical body, especially developed by notions derived from world systems theory during the past few decades, has brought complex phenomena as cultural interplay into sharper focus.[1] As such, it has highlighted the effects of increased connectivity to explain appropriation and interaction processes, although not always with a general consensus on the use of the concept of globalization itself.[2] Network dynamics has also been applied in this context and has provided new viewpoints on the integration of complexities.

Studies on globalizing networks and connectivity in Antiquity are generally conducted on the basis of objects or commodities as well as on the basis of the know-how that these embody and their movements.[3] These studies often point to the fact that things were not merely carriers of meaning but indeed denoted – and still continue to denote – the people that envisioned, made, and used them. In a perspective that examines connectivity and cultural interplay as expressed in materiality, things are not only markers of social complexities, but indeed agents in social dynamics and, for this reason, among others, they can be considered as subjects of appropriation.

As far as can be deduced on the basis of known documents, there was no network as extended, complex and, therefore, as global as the network that came into being and functioned from the time onwards of what we call the Hellenistic world. Everything seemed to become part of one whole[4], in this world, where concepts and ideas reverberated through time and space because of the movement of things (and of everything that these things entailed).

Cities like Seleucia on the Tigris became key nodes in this global network, points at which social, economic, political and cultural edges intersected. These were places that, in terms of their dimension, gravitational attraction, and cosmopolitan attitude suit the concept of metropolis closely, even when considered in its more contemporaneous meaning.

This contribution presents different types of documents and classes of materials from Seleucia on the Tigris, in order to detect global and local trends and examine how these trends seem to have evolved and have been adopted, and investigate what their overall effects on the city and its society may have been. Through this, it also addresses

1 See, among the most recent publications, Appadurai 2001; Hopkins 2002; LaBianca – Scham 2006; Jennings 2011 and the previous bibliography cited there. See in particular for the Hellenistic and Roman worlds Erskine – Llewellyn-Jones 2011; Pitts – Versluys 2015.

2 Criticism has been raised regarding the comparison implicitly established between the term 'globalization' as it is perceived in contemporaneity and its use for describing realities of the past (that is to say processes underway for centuries, if not millennia) that we do not understand completely: examples for such criticism are the emphasis given to the fragility of some approaches to globalization and the Roman Empire, or the fact that on the literal grounds the latter cannot be defined as 'global' according to some scholars (Naerebout 2006/2007; Greene 2008).

3 See for all Appadurai 1986; Hales – Hodos 2010; Versluys 2014.

4 Pol. 1,3.

the problem concerning our perception of what is global and what is local. It appears, namely, that things that can be deemed as 'local' at Seleucia – that is to say, Babylonian in their appearance – in fact seem to be the result of globalizing process that was already underway at least since the formation of the Achaemenid Empire, if not earlier.

As such, the case of Seleucia and its wider region, Babylonia, might offer a useful comparative study to better understand and contextualise what happened in Commagene during the same period. Although these were two very different regions, Babylonia and Commagene were part of the same network and they both added to and took from what we call the Hellenistic repertoire in terms of dynastic display, religion, and material culture.

Centrality of Seleucia in the Hellenistic Network

Seleucia on the Tigris was founded by Seleukos I, most likely in the final decade of the 4th c. BCE, at the centre of a system of land and water routes that developed over centuries and fostered connectedness between the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf and the Iranian plateau.[5] Among other characteristics, this position was crucial for the city's pre-eminent status, as has been stressed in the literature, because it would have enabled links between the centre and periphery of the Seleucid domain.[6] Evidence from excavated archaeological materials, however, shows that the city's propensity for connectivity far exceeded this domain. The same propensity likewise characterized other major nodes of the Hellenistic network, namely, cities that shared unequalled centrality with Seleucia in terms of their size, position and status, for example Alexandria, Antioch and, later, Rome. In terms of scale, so it seems, what happened in Seleucia was quite different from what happened in Commagene.

The city's position is only one indicator of its centrality, however. It is also revealed by its political importance, social complexity and ideological meaning, which are not commonly present simultaneously. Another indicator is the city's enormous size, which far exceeds 600 hectares of almost entirely built spaces (an extension that is rarely detected elsewhere in Antiquity). Seleucia, as the official residence of the Seleucid co-regent and capital of the Upper Satrapies of the Seleucid Empire, played a pivotal political role also beyond the region in which it was located.

Seleucia was governed by institutions of Greek origin, like the boule. This council played a pivotal role in the history of the city until the second half of the 2nd c. CE, as

5 This is the point where the Nahar Malkha, the royal canal known in Babylonian records, joined the river Tigris to the Euphrates. The region is known in Arabic as 'Al-Mada'in' (the cities), and after the foundation of Seleucia it became one of the larger urban contexts in antiquity: from that time onwards, it was probably the main access to the Silk Roads.

6 Invernizzi 1993a.

has often been emphasised.[7] However, the new foundation was also labelled according to a rather local ideological point of view: in cuneiform sources, Seleucia is indeed designated as 'āl-sharrūti', the city of kingship[8], and it is openly assimilated to Babylon even by Greek authors.[9] The fact that this Akkadian designation, conferring royal dignity, conforms with traditional local practices[10] has led scholars to interpret the behaviour of Seleukos I, in founding his own capital, as that of a Babylonian king, and not merely as a successor of Alexander.[11]

Indeed, the link between Seleucia and Babylon – as well as Babylonia – appears to have been very close since the onset. This link, induced as an intentional strategy, stimulated, and was stimulated by, the influence of the local background[12] to such an extent that it is hard to consider Seleukos I's foundation exclusively as a Greek city. This can also be suggested on the basis of the city's characteristics, like its urban layout and monumental setting, and of some passages in Greek sources.

The city's layout is characterised by a regular grid of the so-called Hippodamian type (fig. 1),[13] often understood as an expression of the Greekness of the city; however, the plan also reveals intentional reference to the Babylonian milieu in its building projects and monumental setting.[14] Greek sources seem to show that a conceptual link between Babylon and Seleucia was established by Seleukos I himself, who transferred the *basileion* from the former to the latter, as if Seleucia was perceived as a new Babylon.[15] Hence, it appears that the concepts of 'Greece' and 'Babylonia', which are often still understood as cultural or ethnic containers, were embodied in the city since it was conceived by its founder and planners. Moreover, in the end, because of this, Seleucia was envisioned as a cosmopolis encompassing these two elements and many more.

When we talk of the centrality of such a city in the network, we therefore refer to the fact that it was distinguished from the great majority of other inhabited centres by a series of characteristics that, simultaneously, occurred just in a few other major urban contexts (or network key-nodes). The network was supposedly counterbalanced by the existence of these centralities, even if it probably lacked constant stability. Centralities expressed their pre-eminence in each of their regional contexts, as they were involved, competitively or not, in supra-regional dynamics.[16]

7 See for all Invernizzi 1994, 9–14.
8 Smith 1924, 155 (e. g. BM 92688).
9 Plin. HN 6,122; Str. 16,744.
10 Sherwin-White 1983, 270. But for other records on the city foundation see also Hadley 1978.
11 Invernizzi, 1993a, 235.
12 Invernizzi 1994, 5–7.
13 Gullini 1967.
14 Messina 2011.
15 In particular, Str. 16,738. On this aspect, see also Sherwin-White 1983.
16 Think for instance to the interdependence of powers, demand and markets' development that was central to some scholars' vision of Hellenistic economy (see Archibald 2001, 379–386 and Manning 2005, 171–181, who discuss and elaborate concepts already outlined by Rostovtzeff 1936).

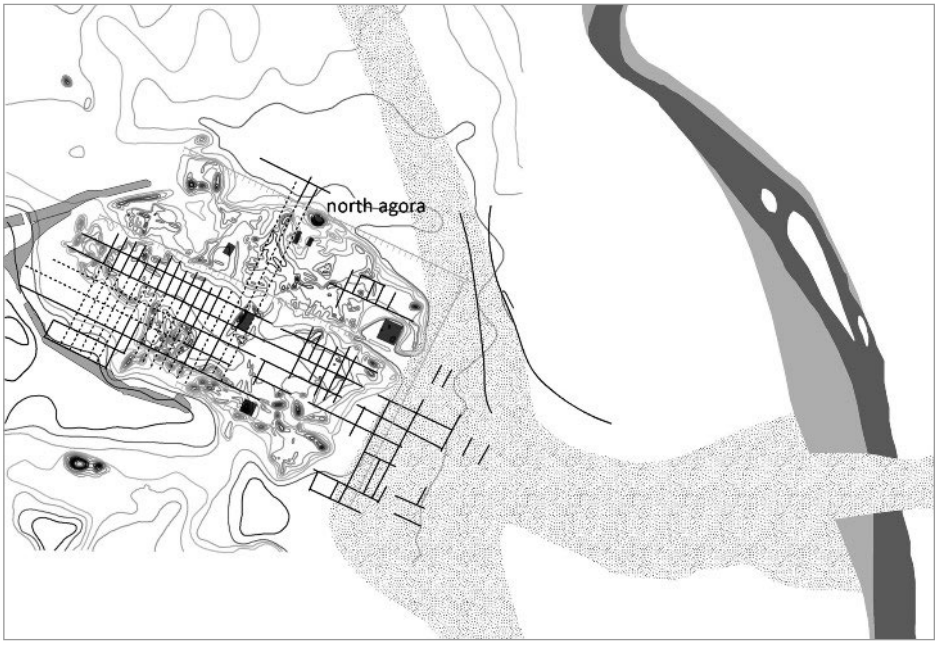

Fig. 1 Seleucia on the Tigris. Restored city plan, © E. Foietta and V. Messina (on the basis of the topography conducted by the Italian team and satellite imagery)

Quality and Quantity of the Documents from Seleucia

The ruins of Seleucia are still clearly visible on the west bank of the Tigris, about 30 km south of present-day Baghdad (fig. 2). The impressive remains of the city, which has not been covered by modern settlements, were noticed by travellers since the 16th century at least[17], but were investigated systematically only in more recent times, following a ground survey in the region led by the *Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft* (DOG).[18]

Excavations were conducted at the site by two expeditions: the American joint expedition of the University of Michigan and the Museums of Toledo and Cleveland, which worked continuously from 1927 to 1936[19], and the Italian expedition of the *Cen-*

17 Many accounts are known that describe the area and ruins, among which the one made by Claudius James Rich, the first British Resident in Baghdad, who visited Seleucia and Ctesiphon in 1810.

18 Maps were produced by Walter Bachmann and later published by Meyer 1929, fig. 2 and Reuther 1930, fig. 1.

19 Waterman 1931; Waterman 1933; Hopkins 1972.

tro Ricerche Archeologiche e Scavi di Torino per il Medio Oriente e l'Asia (CRAST), which worked from 1963 to 1976 and resumed field activity from 1985 to 1989.[20]

Both expeditions recovered materials of various types in large quantities and revealed different buildings. Public buildings, like the theatre, the stoa, and the city archive were unearthed in the so-called north agora by the Italian team; a dwelling block (so-called block G6) was completely excavated by the American team; workshops were identified by both teams, in addition to the remains of what can be recognised as a *bouleuterion* and of a small Mesopotamian temple.[21]

Architectural remains span from the Seleucid to the Parthian periods and the materials found in various contexts provide information about city life, society and artistic production. Copious amounts of pottery, small objects and terracotta figurines were found in the dwelling block and other domestic contexts, but also in tombs (as funerary objects) or in workshops, as was particularly the case with terracotta figurines.

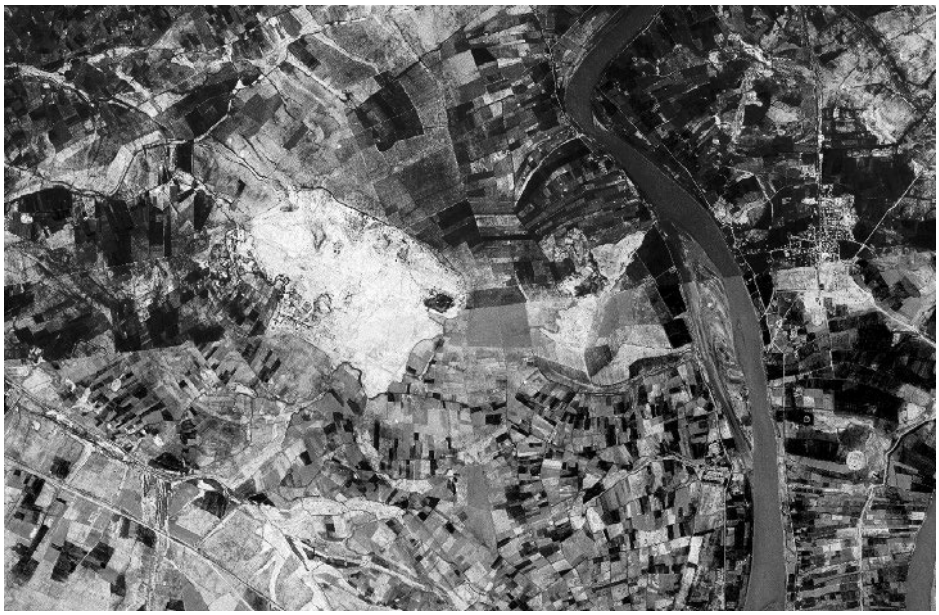

Fig. 2 Area of Al-Mada'in. Ruins of Seleucia on the Tigris. Corona scene 1104–2138-F30/31 (August 16, 1968). Detail, © Corona Atlas

20 Preliminary reports on the Italian excavations at Seleucia on the Tigris were published from 1966 to 1990 in the Journal *Mesopotamia*. Final reports on some operations were published by Messina 2006 and Messina 2010.

21 For the theatre and Mesopotamian temple see Messina 2010, 55–160; for the stoa Valtz 1986; Valtz 1988; Valtz 1990; for the city archive Messina 2006, 27–70; for the 'block G6' Hopkins 1972, 28–118; for a workshop in the north agora Menegazzi 2009, for the *bouleuterion* Hopkins 1972, 26–27 (there wrongly identified as a theatre).

Coins have been found throughout the site, albeit in smaller quantities and not always in clear contexts. Additionally, thousands of clay sealings (the remnants of perished sealed documents) were discovered in public and private archival contexts.

These classes of materials, together with architecture, architectural decoration and other types of findings that occur less frequently, reveal different backgrounds and trends, which not only coexisted but rather converged and interacted. This coexistence has been investigated from a 'continuity and change' perspective and considerable advances have been made in understanding mutual contributions and influences against different backgrounds. However, it is also possible to identify such dynamic processes when framed within a specific context, instead of considering the interaction between global and local trends on a larger scale only. Our understanding of these dynamics seems to have great potential, given the comparability of global trends in different cultural contexts or regions, as similar dynamics would have been concerned, in general terms, with different realities within the same Hellenistic network.[22]

In any case, the quality of information embodied in the different classes of materials from Seleucia is characterised by a high degree of complexity, because the features, occurrences and contexts of the findings allow for the observation of dynamic processes taking place across its society, in spite of the fact that major artworks are almost entirely lacking.[23]

Global and Local at Seleucia

When investigating the Hellenistic global network by means of examining things, it is important to start with the observation that things from different and distant places look somehow Greek to us, as this has affected assessments of the degree of system connectivity in most recent literature.[24] In general, this is not seen as the result of acculturation processes but instead as the adoption (whether conscious or not) of concepts that had often little to do with Greece or Greek culture directly. Rather, these testify to the use of a form of expression (especially in visual arts) that was derived from what

22 Dynamics related to the adoption of global trends and their interaction with different 'localities' are examined by Messina – Versluys forthcoming, with particular regard to the objectscapes of Seleucia on the Tigris and Susa.

23 The only known major sculpture from Seleucia is a famous bronze statue of Herakles derived from a Lysippean prototype, accidentally found at the site, whose origin is still debated (see for all Invernizzi 1989; Canepa 2015b, 86–87). It is interesting to note that, in terms of the archaeological record, the situation in Seleucia is thus almost opposite to that in Commagene, where monumental art is well documented.

24 For networks of different types (economic, social, artistic) in the Hellenistic world, see Archibald 2011; Oliver 2011; Larson 2013.

we recognize as the Greek artistic tradition, but that in fact evolved because of external inputs, as well.

This form, Greek in its appearance but already the result of previous elaboration, is seen as global because it is attested in different and distant regions across the world that did not maintain direct relations with Greek culture: from the Mediterranean to the Indian Subcontinent and from the steppe of Central Asia to Africa. The diffusion of this form, to which the venture of Alexander greatly contributed but did not constitute the first input, has been initially understood as the spread of Greek customs beyond the Mediterranean and thus as a form of acculturation.[25] However, it has since been reconsidered as an outcome of active processes of appropriation and interactions embedded in local contexts that were fostered by the propensity of the network for connectedness.

From a global perspective, the overall Greek appearance of things can be used to investigate complex connectivity. However, this appearance can be misleading or meaningless when it is not contextualised: it could lead to generalizations or incorrect inferences, not to mention the risk of the tendency to see something as more global when it appears more Greek (as this is clearly not the case). The question is complicated further by the fact that what we currently perceive as Greek was probably not at all perceived as such in Antiquity. Therefore, to simplify, what we deem here as global shows features that appear mainly Greek (while being aware that they could not have been Greek, or at least not exclusively Greek). Secondly, what we deem here as local shows features that, at Seleucia, appear mainly Babylonian (we will examine below whether they were, and whether they were so exclusively).

At Seleucia, global and local dynamics, such as can be traced in the city's materiality, affected society at all levels as the result of appropriation, coexistence, combination and interaction processes. In some cases, it is evident that these processes – especially combination and interaction – were fostered by the input of apparatuses, while in other cases they appear induced by more spontaneous phenomena. This can be inferred from the characteristics of certain classes of materials and their supposed contexts of use and diffusion.

Products of the visual arts, in particular, reveal in what way and by what means trends that we see as global spread in the city, and how they coexisted and interacted with local productions. The most diffused classes of figurative materials found at Seleucia, namely, clay sealings and terracotta figurines, reveal that subjects that had originated from what can be defined as a Greek visual lexicon could be reproduced by media of various types and sizes. Moreover, they demonstrate that small media repli-

25 See for all Schlumberger 1970, who defined for the first time 'oriental Hellenism' as an original form that did give origin to Parthian and Greco-Buddhist arts.

cating major works were widely circulated and that certain iconographies lasted for long periods.

Global concepts influenced subjects that appeared to have originated from a much more local lexicon, thereby showing how a variety of solutions were found in order to satisfy the demands of different groups. The choice of themes, which in some cases can be peculiar,[26] appears to have been the result of commissions by people from different communities, backgrounds and from across all social groups. This is arguably revealed through the analysis of some classes of materials, of which this paper provides an overview, in particular seals and terracotta figurines. The variety of productions, and subsequently of commissions, is testified by the plethora of subjects displayed (observed in both seals and terracotta figurines), the way in which different visual lexica are used to create interaction (observed in particular in seals), the wide range of quality standards, sometimes with a high occurrence of certain types that most likely were mass-produced (observed in both seals and terracotta figurines, but particularly in the latter).

The city's population was mixed, with inhabitants of various origins, and as a result its productions appear to be the result of choices that cannot be ascribed to merely one component. In centres like Seleucia, appropriation is something that concerned all communities that lived there, while induced combinations and interactions seem to be detectable only in certain contexts.

The Seleucid apparatus appears to have been an agent of global and local interaction, as we are led to assume by two main indicators, namely, media displaying royal iconography and monumental architecture.

Our knowledge of Seleucid royal iconography is largely based on portraiture from coin dies and seals. Royal portraiture shows standardised types on coins[27], which display the beardless diademed head of the king in right profile almost exclusively (fig. 3), thus conforming to the global trend of Hellenistic coinage. Portraiture on seals (that is, seal impressions) reveals a much freer variety, onto which the divine likeness of the king or other attributes – unattested on coins – occur more frequently (fig. 4). This might be explained by the fact that coins and seals could have circulated in different circles. However, a more interesting angle from our perspective is the fact that global and local concepts seem to have been deliberately combined to interact in the construction of some royal images. An example of this is a portrait of Seleukos I that shows the king's diademed head (conforming to global trends) combined with the (locally used) divine attribute of horns.[28]

26 See for instance Messina – Pappalardo 2019, 91–94.

27 For coins found at the site see Le Rider 1998, for issues attributed to the mint of Seleucia see for all Houghton – Lorber 2002, *passim*.

28 In Mesopotamia horns are the distinctive attribute of gods or supernatural beings, as is well known.

Fig. 3 Mint of Nisibis. Obverse of a silver tetradrachm showing a portrait of Antiochus III (Messina (ed.) 2007, no. 13), © Trustees of the British Museum London

Fig. 4 Seleucia on the Tigris. City archive. Seal impression showing a portrait of Antiochus III as Dionysus. Baghdad, Iraq Museum, © Archive of the CRAST

Seleukos I's horned head occurs on coins and official seals in the context of a posthumous celebrative programme developed by his son Antiochos I.[29] On seals, however, horned portraits of Seleukos I are also represented in full figurative form, following the canon of a Lysippean prototype created for a heroic – but hornless – statue of Alexander. This has led to the proposition that such full-figure portraits were replicas of one or more statues of Seleukos that had likely been erected in Seleucia or other important cities.[30] As such, they are pieces of information on how global and local trends converged and interacted in the celebrative sculptural programme of the Seleucid dynasty; a programme that aimed to present the city founder as a superhuman being by the use of a local divine attribute, but also by the appropriation of a concept that had already been developed in the Acheamenid milieu: namely, the concept of the royal hero.[31] This appears to have led to the invention of a tradition that justified the superhuman and heroic celebration of Seleukos for redefining dynastic identity: this tradition was based on the figure of the hero defeating wild animals or monsters – which symbolized chaos in Babylonia and Iran – and this figure survived in later sources.[32]

29 Messina 2004.

30 Messina 2011, fig. 7; Messina 2017, 24–25. It is there stressed that on media of small or miniature size major artworks now lost could have been replicated.

31 Cool Root 1979, 300–308.

32 For instance, a passage in App. Syr. 57 refers to Seleukos I's horned statues directly and justifies the presence of horns because Seleukos is said to have held alone, with nothing but his hands, a wild bull. This topos must have become quite famous in antiquity: for about a century later it appears again in a passage of the so-called Romance of Alexander attributed to the Pseudo-Callisthenes (Life of Alexander the Macedonian 2,28), and returns also in Lib. Or. 11,92. We are dealing with etiology, for these records postdate by centuries the – invented – facts they are describing; however,

The convergence of global and local elements can also be found at Seleucia in monumental architecture. Excavations in the north agora revealed the presence of buildings according to reproduced models that have been attested almost everywhere in the Hellenistic world (and thus also globally), like the stoa and theatre. But the excavations also revealed the presence of local types (fig. 5). The theatre was constructed in the same complex that also incorporated a small Mesopotamian temple[33], the stoa was built in order to limit the east side of the agora and face the city archive, which is a building with a modular layout based on the precincts of Babylonian sanctuaries.[34]

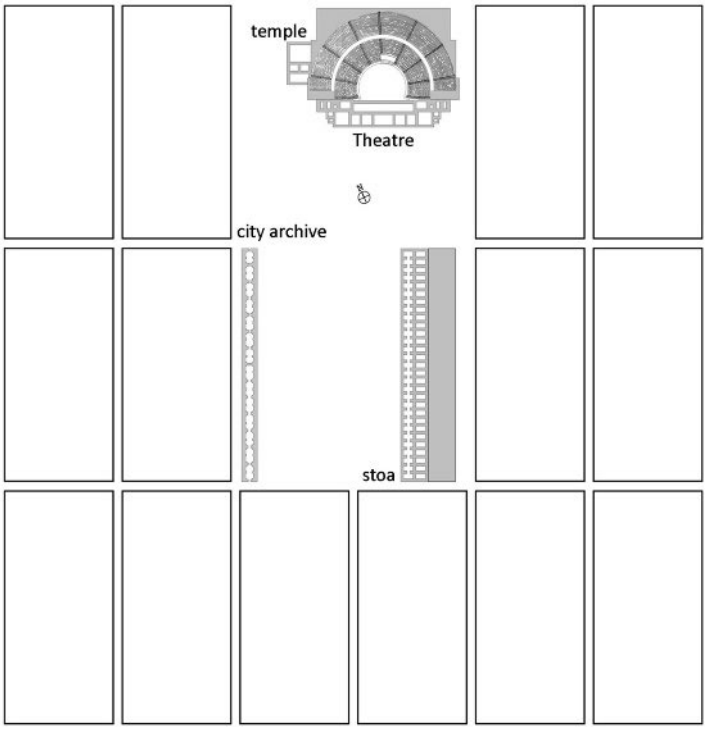

Fig. 5 Seleucia on the Tigris. Restored plan of the north agora, © V. Messina

they inform us that a tradition regarding Seleukos' horned statues did exist and survived long after the Seleucid era. The visual manipulation of global and local elements is thus very interesting in these statues: in Greek eyes, Seleukos wears a kind of bull's *exuvia* (horns) after having defeated a bull as Herakles wears the lion's skin after having strangled the Nemean lion; in local (Babylonian and Iranian) eyes, horns qualify Seleukos as a supernatural being directly, having been for millennia the distinctive attribute of gods of different rank or superhuman beings. Furthermore, the figure of the hero defeating animals or monsters by his hands is attested in Babylonian and Iranian glyptic of all times copiously.

33 Messina 2010, 55–160.

34 Messina 2006, 27–70.

All these buildings were made according to the local mud brick technique, using both Greek and Babylonian measurements.[35]

The coexistence of these buildings in the north agora, the most important public space of the city, must be the consequence of a deliberate choice made by the city planners, namely, a choice for global and local convergence. The foundation of Seleucia can be seen as an ideological action by Seleukos I. The city's monumentalization is probably to a large extent the consequence of a royal dynastic project conceived and carried out – again (!) – by Antiochos I[36], which was also continued by his successors[37]: Antiochos chose Seleucia as his residence during the co-regency (and probably as one of the symbols of Seleucid kingship) and he inspired the city designation as royal abode.

It would therefore not be misleading to regard Seleukos and Antiochos as the main instigators of this convergence.

The trends that can be identified by what we know of royal iconography and the remains of the city's monumental architecture allow for the reconstruction of a set of symbols (derived from the intentional combination and convergence of global and local inputs) that were purposely used to convey messages (and thus for propaganda). In the capital of the Upper Satrapies, Greece and Babylonia were combined for the purpose of the Seleucid dynastic display. It appears that this set of symbols indeed became a convention and that the Seleucids created basic and enduring strategies of royalty which lasted throughout the subsequent periods. According to some scholars, this was possible thanks to the selective integration of a variety of (global and local) traditions to forge artistic, architectural and even religious lexica.[38]

If it may seem hazardous to regard these sets of symbols as evidence of the construction of a multiple identity[39], it seems at least probable that they could have been part of a strategy aiming to accommodate the multifarious identities of the city and, in so doing, gaining the consensus of these identities. Whether or not this accommodation

35 The standard measure of bricks used in the theatre followed the Greek *pentadoron*, that of bricks used in the stoa rather fits the Babylonian cubit (*ammatu*), that of bricks used in other buildings, like the city archive, followed the Attic-Ionic foot.

36 Messina 2011, 164–165.

37 For instance, the city archive was surely in use during the reign of Antiochos III (Messina 2006, 66–69).

38 Canepa 2015a.

39 In this context, the concept of multiple identity would imply that individuals could have engaged in practices (encouraged by apparatuses) that did lead them to navigate from one identity to another, or in processes of inclusion of groups considered alien from one's own group; it would also imply our awareness of social phenomena, like people's propensity to choose a variety of socially constructed but deeply embodied identities in a variety of circumstances and contexts that, on the contrary, we are not able to reconstruct. On constructing identities in the Hellenistic world (and a critique of the equation of style in material culture with ethnic or cultural identity) see Versluys 2017.

can indeed be recognised in the data from Seleucia and other Hellenistic centres is beyond our scope.

Was the city's society receptive to these sets of combined global and local symbols (whether or not one considers them as the direct emanation of an apparatus)?

Can the convergence traced in architectural and sculptural programmes also be detected in the production of other things?

These issues may be addressed by looking at three main classes of materials that allow the identification of societal tendencies effectively; namely, the behaviour of some groups within the city and their propensity for making choices concerned with the use of certain visual lexica.

The first class to be examined is that of clay sealings. These are uneven lumps of clay that were applied to the strings that tightened folded documents (parchments and, in very small number, papyri). Stamps or seals were impressed on their surface in order to avoid access to the documents that had tightened in this manner. Thousands of sealings were found at Seleucia: a few hundred in two small private archives unearthed by the American team, and more than 25,000 in the city archive discovered by the Italian team. These bear on their surface more than 30,000 impressions.[40]

The majority of impressions on sealings belong to stamps of a Seleucid salt-tax department[41]; very few are related to official seals. Others were left by figurative seals that show a plethora of different subjects (derived from Greek, Babylonian and Iranian visual lexica).

More than 4,000 seals have been identified that supposedly were used by contracting parties, private individuals or professional witnesses. The users of these seals are therefore representative only of a part of the city's society: notables, officers or specialised circles (such as salt traders and witnesses). Figurative seals provide insight into the choices of restricted groups, and allow us to assess global and local dynamics within the city's elite, or at least a part of it.

On the seals used by these groups, subjects derived from the Greek visual lexicon are widely attested: Greek gods, heroes or mythological scenes seem to testify to the full adoption of global themes by officers and traders. Types that appear rather local seem instead to reveal the preferences of other professionals: monsters, priests and worshippers frequently occurred on seals used by witnesses.[42] Among local types we

40 Bollati et al. 2004.

41 These bear Greek inscriptions that inform us on the payment of, or exemption from, a tax on the salt trade, and express the year of taxation following the Seleucid era. Almost all dated sealings (ca. 97 %) fall in the period from Antiochos III's to Demetrios II's reigns, with a concentration in the reigns of Antiochos III (222–187 BCE) and Seleukos IV (187–175 BCE).

42 This can be inferred on the basis of the occurrence of the same motives on seals impressed on the clay tablets found in other centres of Babylonia and South Mesopotamia, like Uruk: on the Seleucid cuneiform tablets from the city sanctuaries, seal impressions are labelled and it is thus possible to recognise the categories of seals' users.

find also subjects derived from the Iranian visual lexicon, like winged griffins and hunting scenes (fig. 6).[43]

Fig. 6 Seleucia on the Tigris. City archive. Seal impression showing a hunt in Greco-Persian style. Baghdad, Iraq Museum, © Archive of the CRAST

The appropriation and combination of global and local motives is attested in different ways: global subjects executed in local style (like many figures of Eros or Apollo, for instance) are quite diffused. Local types executed in global style (like the replica of a statue representing the *mušḫuššu* of Marduk) are very rare, but extremely interesting. Especially figures that combine global and local elements appear to demonstrate the development of very complex concepts, which also embodied religious 'syncretism'. Such is the case with seals that reproduced Greco-Babylonian gods, like Athena-Nanaia and Apollo-Nabu, in which divine attributes of Greek and Babylonian origins converged (such as the helmet of Athena and the crescent of Nanaia, or the headdress of Apollo and the stylus of Nabu).[44] There is no other evidence for postulating the existence of cults devoted to these (or other) 'syncretistic' gods, despite the evidence of these adaptations.[45] However, the process that led to the creation of these images implies a thorough religious elaboration based on the convergence – and

43 Hunts are very similar to those diffused in the so-called Greco-Persian glyptic, a definition that did rise a ferocious debate among scholars with regard to the ethnicity that seems implied in it (see for all Gates 2002).

44 Bollati et al. 2004 2, Na 2, Nb 1.

45 Adaptation is the process by which Greek gods were identified with gods of Mesopotamian or Iranian origin (thus adapting a non-local iconography to a local deity). This is demonstrated by two epigraphs, in Greek and Parthian, written on the legs of the bronze statue of Herakles already mentioned above, cf. n. 23. The epigraphs are two versions of the same text: in the Greek version the figure is labelled as Herakles, in the Parthian version as Verethragna.

intentional manipulation (?) – of global and local beliefs. That said, it is hazardous to consider this elaboration as a phenomenon that largely affected the city's society, especially if one considers the very low occurrence of known samples in comparison to other (global or local) subjects.

The combination of global and local elements in sculptural and architectural programmes appears to be the consequence of a choice deliberately made by the Seleucid apparatus in order to convey messages in a frame of propagandistic legitimation, similar to what appears to have happened in other regions of the Hellenistic world, like Commagene.[46] But it is more difficult to ascertain whether or not this combination was characterised by a similar intentionality on figurative seals. A positive answer could imply the successful ideological indoctrination of plutocracies and elites by the Seleucid apparatus; a negative answer would instead suggest that the convergence of global and local trends was a more spontaneous phenomenon, maybe unconsciously fostered by the need or propensity for complex forms to accommodate and negotiate. Whether spontaneous or not, these processes appear related to a minority of the city's society.

Spontaneous but less complex phenomena of appropriation, coexistence and convergence of global and local trends also appear to have originated from a larger part of the city's society. As such, they are recognisable in the production of two other classes of materials, which will be briefly discussed here: pottery and terracotta figurines.

Pottery and terracotta figurines are usually seen as things through which societies or social identities can be accessed to a larger degree than through other classes of material, because of their wide diffusion. As far as one can see, based on published examples[47], the ceramic fabric of Seleucia seems to be characterised by types that show either an appropriation or an original interpretation of shapes derived from a Mediterranean repertoire, like fishplates, *lagynoi*, amphorae and one-handled jars (fig. 7), as well as other sources of inspiration, especially including a locally rooted tradition reflected in bowls, miniature vessels and lamps. This led to the creation of an extremely varied production[48], but it is interesting to see that types belonging to different repertoires were almost only made following local techniques, based on the production of common and glazed ware (black painted ware is almost absent and usually seen as import). In pottery production, appropriation and adaptation are frequent, whereas combination is difficult to recognise. This points to the fact that the choice of vessels and other types of containers seems to have been made by the population for reasons related to taste rather than their need or propensity for negotiation.

46 Cf. Versluys 2017; Riedel 2018.

47 The pottery from Seleucia is far for being exhaustively published. A selection of the pottery found during the American excavation is published by Debevoise 1934, the pottery found during the Italian excavation is published very partially and only preliminarily by Valtz 1983; Valtz 1991; Valtz 1993. A final reassessment of the matter is more than desired by scholars.

48 The same variety characterised the pottery production of many sites, from the Persian Gulf to the Iranian plateau, from the 2nd c. BCE to the 3rd c. CE.

Fig. 7 Seleucia on the Tigris. North agora (area of the stoa). Glazed fishplate and one-handled jar. Baghdad, Iraq Museum, © Archive of the CRAST

However, it must be also said that combination is much easier to recognise in the process of the production of figurative objects than of pottery. If we turn to terracotta figurines, the adoption of global trends appears, to a certain extent, to be followed by their combination with local productions. It has often been put forward that the mass production of pottery and terracotta figurines, fostered by the fact that they were cheap and easy-to-make, could reach a wider audience than other forms could, and that, especially at sites like Seleucia, the plethora of different types attested by the production of terracottas indicate the acceptance of complex interplay by a multifarious society.[49] This interplay is primarily based on the supposed mutual acceptability of the many cultural features that these objects could be made to bear by those who made and used them.

The impact of global trends in the city's production of terracotta figurines is attested by the increase of the repertoire compared to the subjects represented in pre-Hellenistic Babylonia: Greek gods, women in Greek dress, grotesque figures and theatre masks (fig. 8), which are well-attested in the Mediterranean, were introduced as new types and became very popular.[50] As was the case with seals, major prototypes like the

49 On terracotta figurines from Babylonia, South Mesopotamia and Susiana, see, in chronological order, Van Ingen 1939; Ziegler 1962; Invernizzi 1968/1969; Karvonen Kannas 1995; Martinez-Sève 2002; Klengel-Brandt – Cholidis 2006; Menegazzi 2014 and, with a special focus on terracottas as indicators of societal tendencies vs. ethnicity, Langin-Hooper 2014.

50 According to recent studies (Menegazzi 2014, 24–25; Menegazzi 2019, 395–396), which move forward previous observations (Invernizzi 1993b), these types reveal close similarities with the production of the East Mediterranean and, particularly, Asia Minor.

'Weary Herakles', 'Herakles Epitrapezios' or 'Crouching Aphrodite' were replicated by figurines of different sizes and of varying quality.[51] Moreover, technological aspects of this production refer to global tendencies if we look at the predominant use of double moulds instead of the more traditional single moulding and hand modelling.[52] Subjects that pre-existed the introduction of these global novelties continued to be produced, especially nude standing women, sometimes supporting their breasts (a Babylonian traditional image) and riders (which had been diffused in Achaemenid Iran before their introduction also in Babylonia). These subjects, which can be defined as traditional – and therefore local – were renewed by their combination with global tendencies: for instance, nude standing women wear Mediterranean headdress or accessories (like the stephane) and reveal a new sensibility for the anatomy of the human body, being double moulded (fig. 9).[53] Combination is likewise revealed by figurines of women wearing the global chiton and the local crescent-shaped pendant that probably refers to the circle of acolytes of the goddess Nanaia.

Fig. 8 Seleucia on the Tigris. North agora (area of the city archive). Terracotta mask of Silenus. Baghdad, Iraq Museum, from Menegazzi 2014, 17.G90

51 Menegazzi 2014, SelT1G81. SelT1S16. SelT1W4. SelT1P2.

52 Almost 90 % of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figures are made in double moulds at Seleucia, whereas, interestingly, this proportion appears quite reversed in sites like Babylon, Uruk and Nippur, where local techniques seem to have been more tenacious (Menegazzi 2014, 8).

53 According to some scholars, the fact that these traditional types were produced in double moulds does not only imply knowledge of a newly introduced technique, but also the invention of modelled backsides (anatomically rendered) instead of flat-backed figurines (Langin-Hooper 2014, 459–460). This process appears far more complex than the simple adoption of a new technique, for it originated in the elaboration of new forms and this is particularly interesting when considering

The corpus of terracotta figurines from Seleucia includes a variety of types. These were probably created to suit specific needs and their variety seems to point to the existence of social negotiation processes or forms aiming to accommodate and/or redefine identity norms. According to recent studies, the types reproduced by figurines can be seen, at least in part, as miniature versions of the society; in this representation of the society, several identities may be recognised: riders, women in elaborated dress of Greek inspiration, men reclining on klinai, etcetera. This variety of miniature types seems to reflect, especially in regions like Babylonia where some types were mass-produced, a complex social environment, and figurines contributed to the understanding of how things operated within social life.[54] It is in this context that global and local trends were combined (after appropriation) and mediated for making objects that could be accessible to members of different groups or communities. Like other materials, these objects thus functioned as agents, and not only as reflections, of social tendencies.

As evident from the classes of material we considered here (and in particular from figurative objects), what appears as local in Seleucia is not exclusively Babylonian, for it already embodied inputs from previous, different backgrounds, too, in particular from the Iranian milieu.

Subsequent to this observation, models, concepts and ideas that we perceive as local in a given historical period or cultural context may be regarded as global – or globalizing – in others. What emerges as the Babylonian milieu's contribution to the creation of artistic and architectural lexica at Seleucia, and what appears to us as local in the context of Hellenistic Babylonia, was to some extent already global, or better said, already part of a globalizing phenomenon, namely, as the result of a process that had been underway since the formation of the Achaemenid Empire at least, if not earlier.

The artistic and architectural language created by the Achaemenid apparatus brought together influences from Egypt, Iran, Mesopotamia and even the Mediterranean, thus originating a milieu that included different backgrounds (and which was, for this reason, globalizing). This appears to be the case even though the predominant influence of Assyrian and Babylonian traditions clearly emerges in the visual codes that were used; for instance, in the rock carving at Bisutun or sculpted jambs and slabs at Pasargadae and Persepolis, and also in the palace architecture at Susa and monuments recently found in Fars.[55]

that traditional single moulded nude standing women did continue to be produced, even if they are less frequent. In this regard, it is also interesting to note that more than 90 % of the terracotta figurines from Seleucia were found in layers dated to the Parthian period, i. e. from the 1st c. BCE to the 2nd c. CE (Menegazzi 2014, 29–30).

54 See for instance Langin-Hooper 2015.

55 In the plain of Marvdasht, not far from the place where Persepolis was erected, a joint Iranian-Italian expedition discovered in recent years even a replica of the Ishtar Gate (Askari Chaverdi et al. 2017).

The mutual influence that affected these backgrounds has generally been explained as the appropriation of foreign models, especially through the transfer of iconographies and styles from one milieu to another, with interferences that have often been deemed the result of ephemeral phenomena, like the so-called 'perseries' in Greece, or the sporadic occurrence of Greek sculptures at Persepolis. These were re-defined, in a broader perspective, in terms of reciprocated cultural receptivity, pointing to the conscious use and combination of well-known – and shared (?) – lexica.[56]

This experimental combination of traditions – but not yet a complete interaction (?) – which is often defined as eclecticism, in turn affected, to a certain extent, the artistic production of the 'localities' that contributed to its evolution. The productions of Babylonia in the Achaemenid and post-Achaemenid periods likewise result from this return, and therefore from a globalizing process.

Fig. 9 Seleucia on the Tigris. North agora (area of a workshop). Double mould terracotta figurine of a nude standing woman wearing a stephane. Baghdad, Iraq Museum, from Menegazzi 2014, 2.S103

56 See in particular Miller 1997. For an overview on connectivity and objects' agency in the Near East preceding the Achaemenid Empire, see Feldman 2006.

This is the reason why we see the figures of the royal hero, the rider and the Persian hunting scene, among others, already embodied in the local visual lexicon of Babylonia and reflected in the production of Seleucia.

Hellenism as a Mainstream

What we deem as global in a given period or cultural context is therefore the mainstream of that period or cultural context; a mainstream that can become convention (when a set of symbols is purposely used to convey messages) and embody asymmetrical trends that evolve from various backgrounds during different temporalities and, incidentally or deliberately, interact after coexisting.

The mainstream that arose in the Hellenistic world was global to a degree that had never before occurred, not only because of its unprecedented and unparalleled area of diffusion and rapidly increasing connectivity, but also because of the plethora of different cultural traditions – let us also say localities – that, in various ways and only initially in a local habitus, interacted and cooperated with its diffusion by means of the appropriation, creative elaboration and re-transmission of models, concepts and ideas in an increasingly growing loop.

We perceive these phenomena through the documents we examine, but we are not able to explain them completely. The reason is clear: mainstreams can be understood only if their historical, cultural, social and economic contexts are clearly known; that is, if it is possible to determine how and why they originated, how long they lasted, how and why they evolved or were contracted, and how and why they were replaced or became incorporated by other mainstreams. When contingencies are known only to a limited extent – and this is unfortunately almost always the case – we can explain what is, what was and what had previously been (and eventually again became) global, or a mainstream, only to a limited extent.

The Hellenising visual language of Seleucid Asia,[57] which arrived primarily via centres of production like Seleucia, incorporated – and was indeed also fostered by – the experience already gained in Achaemenid Asia, and took its place as a mainstream (and thus as a globalizing phenomenon, which was more global than any before had been). This visual language was in turn replaced by – or evolved into – new tendencies. East of the Euphrates, the new mainstream became what we call Parthian Art, a form of expression that gave voice to a renewed propensity for codified visuality (marked by frontality).[58] West of the Euphrates, the new mainstream became what we call, and

57 This language was part of the more complex phenomenon that Daniel Schlumberger (Schlumberger 1970, 5) defined as the expression of the heirs of Greek art in non-Mediterranean Asia.

58 Schlumberger 1970, 67–73. 187–209.

what is often debated as, Greco-Roman Art.[59] Both were still part, together with other forms of expression, of the global network that came into being across what we call the Hellenistic world. The processes we see in Commagene are, in all aspects, part of this same development.

Beyond Greece and Babylonia

Based on this overview, which is far from exhaustive, it can be supposed that, while in Seleucia appropriation of global ideas and coexistence with local elements were phenomena widely attested across the city's society, interactions due to global and local convergences or combinations were instead the result of deliberate choices or forms of accommodation and negotiation – in other words, of deliberate or more spontaneous forms of agency – that can be recognised only in certain circles, groups or communities. The fact that these forms of agency can be recognised only in relation to particular circles does not imply a priori that they held no a relation with a larger part of the society. However, there must have been reasons why, then, they did not emerge in the materiality; but we are not always able to discern these.

Be that as it may, it appears that in Seleucia complex dynamic processes, traceable in materiality, indeed developed beyond a rigid scheme based on the concepts of Greece and Babylonia, for two reasons. Firstly, because what we deem as global is not only Greek, and what we see as local is not only Babylonian. And secondly, because the multifaceted experience of appropriation and interaction between global and local trends was re-transmitted as part of the above-mentioned loop and in this way returned to the mainstream.

What were the reasons for the success of this mainstream? There appear to be many answers to this question, grounded in different contexts, when we refer to the multiple realities that joined and fostered the mainstream over time. However, if we examine visual lexica, in particular, one answer may be acceptable concerning the network in its entirety.

The visual form transmitted by the Hellenistic mainstream, Greek in its appearance but already the result of elaboration, had a ground-breaking narrative potential. This was expressed not only in the way human bodies were anatomically rendered (thanks to virtuosity reaching its apogee), but also, and more importantly, in the pioneering idea of rendering spatial relations as perceptible, which had never been done before, namely, through the way in which figures moved and acted in space, in order to evoke the third dimension as an experience for the observer rather than as simply a necessary measure. This is not the place for assessing the impact that this idea would have had on

59 Versluys 2014.

the visual (and still two-dimensional) codes that ruled the artistic production of many parts of the network before the introduction of this new form, but if we look at the Near East, at least, we can assume that this impact must have been indeed substantial.

As far as Babylonia is concerned, answers for the mainstream's success can be found in the presence of globalizing phenomena that had already been underway and ingenerated a kind of catalytic process. What is local is the result, to a certain extent, of a phenomenon that already was global and that subsequently became incorporated into a phenomenon that was even more global and that would thus foster it. The mainstream in Babylonia was successful because it was fostered by a pre-existing albeit less powerful stream. This catalytic process became possible in cities like Seleucia, which appear to have been especially envisioned to gain centrality in the network and entail global and local concepts in their urban projects. Simply put, these cities seem to have been made for the mainstream. In other Babylonian centres, like Babylon, Nippur and Uruk, the situation seems to have been different: in these cities the convergence, combination and interaction attested in Seleucia appears much less evident, and the compresence of diverse trends instead appears unbalanced in favour of local elements.

In Babylonia and many other regions of the former Achaemenid Empire, the Hellenistic mainstream gave voice to multifarious identities and answered a specific need. This necessity existed long before the debut of the new forms of expression in Asia, namely, as the need faced by the Persian kings when they established their sovereignty over people of different cultures, religions and languages and became programmatic of their artistic production and propaganda: the need for universality. This amounts to the capacity of a form of expression – in particular a visual language – to be understood by spectators of different backgrounds, in order for its message to be received by all, or at least by the largest possible audience. This originated in what many scholars call 'eclecticism' in Achaemenid Art, but must have been perceived as connatural to the global language that was spread, on such a substantial scale, by the Hellenistic mainstream. This language appears to have answered the need for universality as never before.

What is more universal than a flexible, adaptable, combinable form of expression? What is more resilient than a form that allows the convergence of local and global? What is more effective than such a mainstream in entangling identities that transcend the divide between cultural groups, as the outcome of a complex and multicultural society?

This form of expression entered milieus, left them, and returned to them, re-transmitting in its own loop. As such it reverberated over time and space and created entanglements that we can only understand up to a limited extent, despite the complex information embodied in materiality. But in the end, it told and still tells us a story of identities through connectivity.

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