

Preface

This book contains a sustained but eclectic comparison of ancient Greco-Roman and Indian literary high culture. It thereby represents a seldom used approach to these two civilizations within premodern Eurasian history. Through a focus on sign-reading in many forms, hierarchy, ambiguity, and cosmopolitanism, I try to show that the two civilizations are not only comparable, but that representations of power and identity indeed point to deep structural parallels between them. The terms ‘intertextuality of power’ and ‘typology of the ambiguous ruler’, introduced here, exemplify how I analyse these parallels.

Because of this book’s literary and comparative nature, which bridges different scholarly traditions, I will briefly account for some of my choices regarding the rendition of texts. I have aimed at some kind of consistency: all Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit quotes are in English translation. Certain original/transliterated key terms, however, I include in the main text. For reference, I have also chosen to render some longer original passages in the notes. Regarding the spelling of Greek names, I have followed the usual conventions of academic English (e.g. Herodotus instead of *-os*). However, when quoting Greek and Latin sources, I have kept the spelling of the translations used. As for Sanskrit, due to reasons of precision, I have used the IAST standard for transliteration from Devanāgarī. Exceptions from this are words commonly used in English (e.g. Ganges instead of *Gaṅgā*). Because of my general reliance on IAST, I have altered the spelling of the quotes from the *Kāmasūtra*. For the pronunciation of Sanskrit words, see the Appendix.

In order to enhance textual transparency and ease access to the material for non-expert readers, I have chosen to split the bibliography in primary and secondary sources. In the former ones, I have also included editions that present a practical overview over both original text and translation.

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Of course, any remaining mistakes are my own.

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Introduction

... when Favorinus died he made Herodes heir both of all the books that he owned and of his house in Rome and of Autolecythus. He was an Indian and entirely black, and was the plaything of Herodes and Favorinus. For he used to entertain them when they were drinking together, by mixing up Attic words with Indian, and speaking barbarously with a stammering tongue.¹

Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* (VS) 1.8.490

1.1 Subject, aims, overall approach – and a few conclusions

This book is about elites who crossed cultural boundaries in the early Roman Empire (c. first to third centuries AD). I analyse how these elites, in different types of literature, made sense of their transregional interconnectedness, and how it relates to imperial contexts. Since the scope here is world-historical, I also compare Roman and Indian sources, to more broadly shed new light on premodern literary high culture and its relations to power and status. Throughout that comparison, *cosmopolitanism* will be a central term. The notion of the cosmopolitan, originating in Greek philosophy, is often addressed by classicists. Yet a recent – Indological – application of the concept has inspiringly enriched it. Now it is also a key term for denoting the transregional, cultural integration of elites in India and Southeast Asia on the basis of the ancient language Sanskrit. The ambition of this book, therefore, is to bring the Greco-Roman experience into dialogue with the Indian material and its model of Sanskrit cosmopolitanism, in order to add to our understanding of elite integration in the Roman Empire.

The opening quote invokes vivid images of what is meant by such a cosmopolitan, or translocal, ancient world. The orator Favorinus (c. AD 85–155) was born in Gaul, gave speeches in Greek, lived in Rome with an Indian slave, and enjoyed a great repu-

1 For all quotes from *Lives of the Sophists*, I have used the translation by Miles.

tation as a rhetor throughout the eastern half of the Roman Empire as well as in its largest city. Yet despite all this unboundedness, the learned linguistic fun also displays a marked disinterest in – and some condescension towards – the personality and language of the Indian slave. Given his status, that is of course totally unsurprising. Even so, there is something more than one-sided submissiveness and racial prejudice at play here. The two upper-class intellectuals openly enjoy the attempt of the Indian slave to express himself in stammering Greek while laughing at his errors. The reach of Hellenic culture is extended to people from faraway cultures, while full access is nevertheless denied. In light of this example, how should we conceive of the seemingly paradoxical cultural expression of inclusivity and rejection that will be seen to run parallel in the ancient east and west?

The scope of this book is thus world-historical and comparative, with Eurasia as the central geographical unit. Covering such a large area within a time frame that spans millennia, and with sources in Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit, some degree of superficiality and loss of detail is unavoidable.² That being said, locating Rome among other universal premodern empires and exploring parallels yields many benefits. The first, perhaps, is the chance to supplement a more traditional approach that focusses on Rome's legacy – i. e., western civilization: nation states, Romance languages, legal systems, the Christian church, etc.³

To be sure, scholars increasingly explore Eurasian perspectives on Rome these years.⁴ Where the present contribution differs is mainly in its sustained comparison with early India. By extracting a model of prestige languages from the Indologist Sheldon Pollock's work on Sanskrit and afterwards testing it on Rome, my primary aims are twofold.⁵ First, to provide a new frame for analysing elite culture in Rome and, second, to qualify basic parallels, so that they may help nuance our perception of the premodern world. Special attention is given to how hierarchy, ambiguity, and cosmopolitanism were played out in texts. I argue that the ability to read signs in many different contexts, both in Rome and India, was central. From the ancient, educated person's perspective, this was so because of the need to show and defend social position. From our perspective, because the focus on sign-reading offers an extra analytical framework to evaluate premodern societies – closer to their own terms. In terms of language, the scene with Favorinus, Herodes, and Autolecythus highlights the basic importance of fixed rules, since their social interaction is set in a universe of formal linguistic conven-

2 I analyse sources from around the third century BC to the fifteenth century AD. The approximate time frame is mainly due to the difficulty in dating the Indian material. See pp. 26 ff.

3 For a detailed account of Rome as the template for later European empires, see Kumar 2017.

4 For instance, Alcock et al. (eds.) 2001; Spawforth (ed.) 2007; Scheidel 2009; Burbank & Cooper 2010; Bang & Bayly (eds.) 2011; Duindam, Artan & Kunt (eds.) 2011; Bang & Kołodziejczyk (eds.) 2012; Woolf 2012; Lavan, Payne & Weisweiler (eds.) 2016; Bang, Bayly & Scheidel (eds.) 2021; Bang 2025.

5 Pollock 2006.

tions. It is precisely the fact that the slave does not know/comply with correct grammar, wording, and diction that makes up the premise of the learned fun (together with the intake of wine, of course). Thus, for Favorinus and Herodes, the attempts of the Indian slave can both confirm the universality of their culture and re-enact the social hierarchy because of his mistakes. The fixity, the universal norm, is shaped by writing, and it represents an idealized, or stylized, form of language. And because of written fixity, idealized language is readily moveable across time and place, enabling cosmopolitan communities to share their text-based life-worlds.⁶ No wonder, then, that Favorinus passed on his beloved books to his friend.

While my primary aims thus revolve around adding further nuances to our perception of the premodern world, my secondary aim – by means of the sources and approaches chosen – is to contribute to bridging the gap between traditional scholarly environments, both philological and historical. Therefore, detailed comparative analyses of the allusive material go hand in hand with contextualizations of sign-reading capabilities. As a consequence, intertextuality in many guises is a keyword throughout.

This chapter and the next lay out the basic theoretical, methodological, and contextual framework. Then follow four case studies that respectively deal with reading signs on the body, in fictitious literature, religious discourse, and topography.

Representativity

I haven't chosen my literary examples in order to represent their respective civilisations, some well-defined genres, certain periods of time, or even the oeuvre of a certain author. Of course sometimes they do, but rather, my focus has been to point to the existence of three shared Eurasian contexts and ways of dealing with them for elite persons: 1) the basic and urgent condition of everyone living in premodern societies to be able to read people in order to stay alive, 2) the ambiguous arena of imperial courts, and 3) the concept of knowledge itself – in which mythology and other repetitive, sign-based elements arguably played a strong part. To be sure, when 'building representativity' this way, other relevant sources could have been chosen.⁷ But that replace-

6 Goody 1986 on the socio-political implications of writing and fixity.

7 From Rome, e.g. Galen (c. AD 129–216) and the sign-reading qualities of medicine proper could have been drawn in. From India, other relevant and representative comparanda include: in terms of courtly refinement and eulogies to rulers and their deeds, the *Harṣacarita*, "The Life of Harṣa" (a seventh-century AD, post-Gupta period king who also himself wrote Sanskrit literature); regarding Indian comedic drama, King Mahendravarman I's *Mattavilāsa Prahāsana* ("The Farce of Drunken Sport", also seventh century). I owe these two references to Daud Ali. Regarding topography (see ch. 6), many other praises of places from the *purāṇic* corpus could have been discussed. Often, the texts I have chosen to analyse, and their representativity, relate to my engagement with Pollock's work. More on this in ch. 2 below.

ability exactly points to the broad existence of Eurasian parallels and the relevance of analysing them.

Along with other ‘Greek’ intellectuals, Favorinus and Herodes are portrayed in Philostratus’ *Lives of the Sophists* (third century AD). Despite anecdotal and exaggerated elements, the portraits are basically reliable, which is why I shall return to them repeatedly.⁸ Yet the degree of historical correctness in representing the personalities of these intellectuals is not my primary interest; rather, it is the way that hierarchy and ambiguity play into their cosmopolitan outlook. Here, the seemingly straightforward submission of the Indian slave, who entertains the orators with his bad language use, also has more open-ended dimensions. Is he perhaps impersonating a rhetorician doing his job ridiculously badly? Could the slave’s outlandishness echo Favorinus’ own non-Greek descent? And connected to this, maybe the Indian’s strange sounds are reminiscent of the Gaul’s “high-pitched and delicate and strained” voice?⁹ After all, he was born a eunuch.¹⁰ If so, within the frame of elite superiority, it would both show the self-satirizing ability of the rhetors and the creative agency of the slave.

But neither can we answer these questions with historical certainty – nor is it that important, since educated men (*pepaideumenoí*) were self-aware and versatile figures in courtly and civic settings, whose authority partly depended upon how they were subjectively seen.¹¹ My point is that the ambiguity sketched above would have restricted Philostratus as little in his portraying Favorinus as it would have restricted the latter in doing his job. We may be inclined to sort out these ambiguities and see them as weaknesses, but for ancient intellectuals they posed no problems. In fact, they were empowering. I will return to this basic point several times throughout this book.

Shapeable as it was, the information about Favorinus and his social environment also represents more general presuppositions regarding, for example, Greek linguistic sophistication, Indian otherness (the slave’s colour and speech), and Roman power looming large behind it all (the relation with the emperor, and Rome as the basic facilitator without which there would be no grand scene to perform on). In different forms, monolithic applications of these themes survive to this day, also in academia.

The intention of this book, then, is to go behind these *topoi* and instead of taking them for granted or inquiring into whether they are true or false, to focus on the grey-tones in how they were played out in antiquity. As we shall see – barely concealed in a text by Polemon – not all of Favorinus’ peers accepted him like Herodes did. That fight for status also runs through the Indian sources. Therefore, since my discussions

8 Barton 1994: 96–7; Swain 2007: 127–8. Cf. Bowie & Elsner (eds.) 2009.

9 Philostratus, *VS* 1.8.489 where he also encapsulates Favorinus through a threefold paradox: “he was a Gaul who Hellenized, a eunuch who was tried for adultery, and he had quarreled with an emperor and lived”.

10 Gleason 1995: 3.

11 Cf. Paterson 2007: 131–2, and Smith 2007: 161–3 on the early and late Roman courts, respectively; Whitmarsh 2001: 33–4; Swain 2007: 126–56.

of literary high culture's social dimensions represent more broadly shared premodern contexts, I will view comparison with India not just as a possibility, but a necessity.

The intertextuality of power

One of the motors of that comparison is intertextuality. Denoting the relationship between texts, the term implies that an analysis of allusive cultural material also requires an understanding of the (not necessarily obvious) references involved. That comparative analysis yields valuable insights into the materials themselves, their creators, contexts, intentions, etc. To be sure, that type of intertextuality is indispensable for my purposes, for instance when analysing the multilayered literary references of the *Satyricon* by Petronius (chapter 4). However, as a supplement, I introduce the term 'intertextuality of power', positing that power itself, defined as the "[a]bility to act or affect something strongly" (*OED*), is also often intertextual. That is, the ways in which power in its many hard, soft, and intermediate forms is put into discourse and acted out, can themselves be part of intricate referential systems.¹² The analysis of these may help to bring the communicative qualities of power to the fore. In this book, I use the intertextuality of power analytically in two interconnected ways.

First, it plays into the key terms in this book's title.¹³ This is because *hierarchy* is intimately linked with power and any allusive narrative of it. Premodern imperial societies were based upon inequality, not in opposition to it, and the fight for hegemony on many different levels was of existential importance. Representing one of these levels, the *cosmopolitanism* of boundary crossing rulers and intellectuals was particularly important for both claiming and legitimizing universal command and closeness to the gods. Yet the narratives of hierarchy and hegemony, however blatant and arrogant, often retained an element of *ambiguity*, expressing, as we saw with the slave Autolecythus, a notion of inclusion and interpretational openness alongside stereotypical condescension. These points will continually be exemplified, for instance in chapter 5, where I focus on referential *res gestae*, or 'things achieved' of both Eurasian rulers and intellectuals. Thus, only by *reading the signs* in texts and the world around him, was the status-seeking ancient intellectual able to speak the historicized language of power.

Second, exactly because that language was eclectic in terms of the historical references used, the intertextuality of power also highlights historical ruptures and continuities. These ruptures and continuities may provide arguments for discerning shared structures within premodernity and/or its various subperiods, as well as what may be understood as basic human preconditions across the millennia. In other words, they

12 'Hard power' implies the use of coercion and (the threat of) violence, whereas 'soft power' is based, for example, upon the attractiveness of culture. The latter term was coined by Nye 1990.

13 The points of this paragraph will be elaborated on later in this chapter.

provide arguments for what may relevantly be compared – and how. The functions of ancient courts and courtly culture, the importance of mythological traditions, and the relationship between universal rulers and more local middlemen – these are examples of central premodern structures that are highlighted by the intertextuality of power.

Additionally, though beyond the scope of this book, the two analytical points above seem highly relevant in our present times, where the allusive language of power is again spoken bluntly at the level of government – in the west.

If the premise of this book thus is comparative, it is still grounded in empirical material from Rome and its provinces, the cultural interactions of which in themselves are the subject of huge and contested scholarly discussions. Therefore, in the next section I discuss these debates in relation to my approach.

1.2 Beyond Romanization?

Encompassing the Mediterranean and spanning at its height from present-day Scotland to Iraq, and from the Black Sea to Northwest Africa, the Roman Empire was heterogeneous by nature. At the same time, there were easily recognizable features in the multicoloured, local patchwork, for instance Roman administration and military, Greco-Roman literature, cultural practices, material culture, and the Latin and Greek languages. This begs the question: how should we conceive of cultural integration and difference in the polyglot Roman Empire? For most of the 20th century, ‘Romanization’ was used to denote especially the former. The term was borne out of a specifically colonial, positivist, and teleological context: in light of western, Christian hegemony, and the perceived Roman influence on it, the degree to which a particular ancient site had become Roman and thus civilized, could for instance be read out of the composition of potsherds found in excavation.¹⁴ With worldwide decolonization and scholarly deconstruction of earlier truths, Romanization broke down as a normative parameter for assessing cultural integration. What followed, driven by archaeologists and historians alike, were countless revisions, denoting less and less, with more and more reservations. This rendered the term hollow and therefore of limited value as an analytical tool.¹⁵

As a descriptive term, however, Romanization still has merit, in order to capture the physical changes that undeniably took place in the Roman world.¹⁶ Even so, the prolonged scholarly discussions of these issues highlight the need for more adequate

14 Romanization was first coined by Haverfield 1905.

15 The historiography is immense but see e.g. Woolf 1998: 1–23; Mattingly 2011: 3–42; Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 9–28. For a full bibliography, see the contributions in Pitts & Versluys (eds.) 2015.

16 Here I follow Woolf 1998: 7.

models for analysing imperial and cultural integration. In this book, I posit the “Sanskrit cosmopolis” (to which I shall soon return) as such a model.

Since the 1990’s, a focus on identity has gradually replaced the old paradigm.¹⁷ The standard work on the interaction between Greek and Roman culture and identities is now Andrew Wallace-Hadrill’s *Rome’s Cultural Revolution*.¹⁸ Focussing on the late Republican and Augustan transformations of Roman society, he clarifies that while identities were mostly multi-layered and context-based, they were never – contrary to some cultural practices – hybrid or mixed. No matter how many Greek elements Roman culture absorbed, it stayed distinctly Roman by appropriating them according to its own needs. Greeks under Rome, similarly, made a point out of holding on to their Hellenic identity.¹⁹ Other points of Wallace-Hadrill’s include the need to see Hellenization and Romanization as connected and repetitive, rather than separate and linear processes; and, especially important for my purposes, the central role that language plays in defining multi-layered identities.

For three decades now, classical language studies have benefited greatly from incorporating a sociolinguistic focus on bilingualism that has flourished in contemporary studies since the 1980’s.²⁰ Far from neglecting the fact that ancient people often used two or more languages, classical philology has until recently focussed on the grammatical and phonological development of these languages, their social, geographical and chronological distribution, and on linguistic hierarchies.²¹ The new approach highlights the social and situational embedding of concrete language use, opening up a broad spectrum of identities and choices. Central terms here are ‘code-switching’ and ‘diglossia’, the latter of which I will repeatedly return to.²²

A recent development in understanding the cultural meetings of the Roman Empire is the application of globalization theory.²³ Martin Pitts and Miguel John Versluys

17 At least in Anglo-Saxon scholarship, which is what I relate to here. For German and other continental traditions, see Schörner (ed.) 2005.

18 Wallace-Hadrill 2008.

19 Woolf 1994; Whitmarsh 2001.

20 See for instance Adams, Janse & Swain (eds.) 2002; Adams 2003; Swain 1996: 17–100 (on Atticism). More on this in ch. 2.

21 Adams & Swain 2002: 2, 11–12.

22 Code-switching denotes “the practice of using two or more languages in the same utterance”. Diglossia is used in two contexts, monolingual and bilingual. In the former, it refers to the use of different registers within the same language, for instance formal and colloquial. In the latter, it describes and interprets how and why different languages are chosen. Traditionally, the diglossic relationship between languages has been viewed in hierarchical terms (as High versus Low idiom), but recent scholarship has pointed to scenarios of multiple ‘High’ languages, and to the importance of the application of different languages to different domains. For definitions, see Adams & Swain 2002: 2–3, 9–11 (quote p. 2); Feeney 2016: ch. 3.

23 Pitts & Versluys (eds.) 2015. This *has* been done before, for instance in Hopkins (ed.) 2002. Yet where the latter volume mostly focusses on early modernity, coining the term ‘archaic globalisation’ regarding earlier periods, the former operates within both globalization theory and the Ro-

contend that it is time to abandon Romanization altogether, and to replace it with an analytical frame that moves connectivity, networks, and circulation of cultural ideas to the forefront. Doing this is in line with the thinking of Wallace-Hadrill and others, yet the scale is different. Pitts and Versluys namely argue that in order to understand the cultural workings of the Roman Empire – the first real global “punctuation of connectivity” – a truly global outlook has to be applied; an outlook that goes beyond focusing on the interaction between Greece and Rome.²⁴

This application of contemporary globalization theory – aware of the pitfalls of anachronism – avoids projecting modern globalization onto antiquity. It also avoids a singular focus on economic issues by allowing for cultural dimensions. The result is stimulating in that it highlights both the interplay between global and local, and the agency of people in ancient societies in terms of movement and appropriation of cultural phenomena. Yet the suggested pervasiveness of connectivity leaves, I think, too little room, on the one hand, for the stratified cultural differences within the premodern world, and, on the other, for the shared logistical obstacles facing it.²⁵ In terms of world history, therefore, this book focusses on comparison rather than connectivity.

Further, if the Roman world, through its rich connections, became globalized, how should we then conceive of the relationship between Rome and India? Given the scarcity of directly connecting evidence, how can we write anything else but trade history to illuminate the relationship between the two civilizations? Here, comparison provides a much-needed supplementary approach. An approach that partly builds upon the connectivity and circulation of people, things, and ideas; partly allows for shared basic preconditions to develop into comparable features. This is where cosmopolitanism comes in, with a triple relevance for my purposes. First, it is easier to handle than globalization, since as a translocal phenomenon it makes itself felt on a potentially smaller scale. Second, the ability of the cosmopolitan person to transcend cultural boundaries is intimately linked with a likewise unbounded linguistic and textual dimension. Third, such a comparative-cosmopolitan approach is, in a sense, born global, since it can be applied to most premodern civilizations, for instance Rome and early India.²⁶

man Empire proper. To see whether they are compatible is the leading – and generally confirmed – question of the volume.

24 Versluys 2015: 158–63 (quote p. 160).

25 Cf. Versluys 2015: 163: “Of course there still were a lot of cultures in the Mediterranean from 200 BC onwards – that is not the point when calling it a globalised world – and these cultures still implied difference. These differences, however, were no longer taxonomic, but largely had become interactive and refractive”. No matter how these differences are interpreted in the Mediterranean world, when the Eurasian arena is drawn in, not only are differences more pronounced, structural similarities are also – as seen, for instance, in the independent presence of imperial courts throughout the premodern and early modern periods. On this, e. g. Spawforth (ed.) 2007.

26 On globalization, see e. g. Spooner 2015 – inspired by the thinking of Elias 1976. Cf. Bayly 2002.

1.3 Cosmopolitanism, then and now

Using the *OED*'s seemingly uncontroversial definition of the adjective 'cosmopolitan' as being "composed of people from many different countries", the community of Greek and Latin speaking intellectuals of the early empire, coming from different places and connected by a bond of learning, surely fit the description. Yet cosmopolitanism, together with its related terms, is quite elusive and contested. The reason, for one thing, is that it has been evolving, picking up different meanings, ever since the Greek Cynic philosopher Diogenes coined the term, allegedly sitting in a barrel, defining his cosmopolitan status negatively: it denoted what he wasn't, since he neither attached himself to, nor followed the rules of any particular city state.²⁷ For another, it has increasingly during the last 25 years or so become a scholarly – not always positive – buzzword for making sense of and acting in a world 'shrunk' by globalization. Both the ancient and the contemporary perspectives on the problem are important for my purposes. The former, to better understand the life-worlds of people living in the premodern world, which is important in itself, but also for comparison. The latter, for applying a theoretical framework and, hopefully, for lending some contemporary relevance to this book. Two seemingly timeless questions that this book addresses in a specifically premodern context, are: how did literary high culture connect to and produce cosmopolitanism, and which features of the former made it sufficiently attractive to account for people changing cultural practices?

In order to answer these questions, however, I need a more comprehensive definition of 'cosmopolitan' than the descriptive one given above, which is often used interchangeably in daily parlance with 'international'. For such a definition also has to address the term's ambiguity and normativity that have accompanied it since antiquity. The description of the cosmopolitan as someone "whose allegiance is to the worldwide community of human beings" gives an indication of these layers, since 'allegiance' can be interpreted both in terms of category (moral, political or economic) and universality (does it strictly apply to all of mankind?).²⁸ The following definition of cosmopolitanism captures this well: "a complex of practices and ideals that enabled certain individuals not only to cross cultural boundaries, but to establish an enduring normative framework across them".²⁹ It also fits my purposes, for – as we will see – the both ambiguous and normative system provided the ancient intellectual with an open-ended canvas onto which he could project his own translocal feelings of belonging.

27 Diogenes lived in the fourth century BC. According to Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 6.63, he answered that he was a *kosmopolitēs*, "a citizen of the world", when asked where he came from. Cf. Dyson 2008: 187–8.

28 Nussbaum 1996: 4 (quote); 1997. The scholarly work produced on cosmopolitanism's different meanings is enormous and not necessarily relevant for my purposes, since I focus on cultural cosmopolitanism. For a good general introduction, see Kleingeld & Brown 2019.

29 Lavan, Payne & Weisweiler 2016: 1.