



## **Ai Khanoum: A Case Study into Material Culture as a Marker for Ethnocultural Identity and Syncretism on the Hellenistic Frontier**

*David Thomas Richey-Lowe*

### **Abstract**

The following paper focuses upon the Hellenistic site of Ai Khanoum in Afghanistan from an architectonic perspective and attempts to evaluate the degree to which the ethno-cultural identity of Graeco-Bactrian culture was subject to acculturation. An analysis of two case studies, namely the Temple with the Indented Niches (TIN) and the ›Herōon‹ of Kineas, reveals that, whilst the urban configuration and architectural designs can offer clues towards the diffusional relationship between local and Greek elements, one should be careful of relying too heavily on the supposition that a specific style of material culture equates to a set ethnic unit.



One of the most complicated questions facing studies concerning the Hellenistic dominance of Bactria (modern-day Afghanistan and Tajikistan) is the determination of the region's ethno-cultural identity. Answering this problem involves establishing the extent to which Graeco-Bactrian society underwent the acculturation process of Hellenisation, namely whether the identity indicates the ethno-cultural superiority of Hellenistic culture over local elements; the maintenance of native culture against Hellenism; or a synthesis between both cultures<sup>1</sup>. Data used in this debate is predominately drawn from the archaeological material uncovered from the Graeco-Bactrian site of Ai Khanoum. As such, the city has been cited frequently as an example in support of all three interpretations regarding the acculturation pattern of Graeco-Bactrian culture. In addition to examining the level of Hellenistic influence detected at Ai Khanoum from a generalised architectonic focus, this paper also seeks to evaluate the reliability of the supposition that cultural identity is expressed merely through material culture (a postulate upon which most of the archaeological interpretations of Ai Khanoum

1 This view of acculturation is adapted from the bidimensional ›four-modelled‹ attitude of Berry (BERRY 1997, 9–12) to intercultural contact.



Fig. 1 : Map of the Archaeological Site of Ai Khanoum.

have been grounded) by using two case studies: the Temple with the Indented Niches (TIN), and the ›Herōon‹ of Kineas.

Excavated by the French in CE 1968–1978 and 2002, Ai Khanoum remains one of the only Hellenistic urban complex to be excavated in Central Asia. Ai Khanoum constituted one of the most important settlements in Bactria. Located in north-eastern Afghanistan, the site itself formed a triangular space covering approximately 1.44 km<sup>2</sup> and was protected by two confluent rivers, the Darya-I Pandj (Oxus) River and Kokcha River, and a 60 m high acropolis (fig. 1)<sup>2</sup>. The archaeological site of Ai Khanoum lies close to the surface and corresponds with

2 LERICHE 1974, 231.

the city's final occupation layer<sup>3</sup>. In light of the fact that no subsequent occupation levels were built above the Hellenistic strata, Ai Khanoum is distinguished from other sites within Central Asia, which continued to be occupied over the centuries following the Hellenistic period. Nevertheless, since only the Eucratidean level of the city (ca. 170–145 BCE) has been excavated sufficiently, the available archaeological data from Ai Khanoum remains limited. Consequently, little can be said regarding either the initial identity of Ai Khanoum upon its foundation (with the exception of the ›Herōon‹ of Kineas which, according to numismatic evidence, suggests that the site was constructed earlier in the reign of Antiochos I [281–261 BCE]), or how this identity underwent development through acculturation<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, it should be noted that the conclusion reached by this essay will predominately concern the identity of Ai Khanoum during the Eucratidean period.

Prior to the commencement of excavations at Ai Khanoum, one's understanding of Hellenistic Bactria was restricted to obscure details recorded in Greek and Latin literary sources, numismatic data, and unprovenanced material from antiquities markets<sup>5</sup>. In addition to being limited in size and disarticulated from its context, such evidence only provides a scope largely focussed upon the Graeco-Bactrian elite. Subsequently, the processes of cultural engagement amongst the other echelons of society were entirely absent from analyses.

Following the discovery of Ai Khanoum, the original assessments of the Greek presence in the region were soon expanded as the true extent of Hellenistic influence became increasingly obvious. In addition to an abundance of Hellenistic artefacts, such as Megarian-style inspired vessels and Hellenistic sculptures, excavations revealed that Ai Khanoum followed a Hellenised model for urban organisation<sup>6</sup>. Some of the characteristic public features of Greek poleis, as set out by *Pausanias*, were also identified, such as a gymnasium, theatre, and fountain<sup>7</sup>. Regarding architectural decoration, some of the constructions displayed attributes typical of Hellenic architecture. For instance, several buildings (e.g., the propylaia, palace, sanctuary, and gymnasium) exhibited Doric and Corinthian-ordered columns (**fig. 2**). The roofs of these buildings were also tiled and adorned with antefixes, which in combination with the above stands as a strong indication of a borrowing from Hellenised culture<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, despite this superficial evidence of Hellenistic influence, there is an apparent absence of any space resembling an agora. Considering that community life in the Hellenistic period was still heavily centred upon agorai, Ai Khanoum's status as a model Hellenistic polis is arguably dubious.

Furthermore, the local elements of Ai Khanoum are equally evident. One discrepancy highlighted amongst the structures at Ai Khanoum by scholars is that, in contrast to the conventional slanted / tiled style of Hellenistic architecture, most of the buildings were flat-roofed and devoid of tiles, for the construction of walls was mudbrick, as opposed to marble<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, whilst these indeed are features common to Central Asian architecture, such design choices may merely reflect practicality rather than being any statement of cultural identity. Since there was an inadequate supply of roofing material and marble in the region, the expenses of importing the material required to both support a heavy tiled roof and build

3 Sadly, Ai Khanoum's exposure has caused it to be a prime target for looting activities (STEIN 2015, 190).

4 MAIRS 2015, 117.

5 MAIRS 2013, 86; MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2015, 17.

6 RAPIN 1994, 197; SHIPLEY 2000, 83. 96. On Megarian ware, LYONNET 2012, 155; on sculptures, BOPEARACHCHI 1998, 24.

7 Paus. 10, 4, 1. BERNARD 1976; LERICHE – THORAVAL 1979, 174–176.

8 MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2014, 280.

9 Ibid.





Fig. 2 :  
Corinthian capital from  
Ai Khanoum.

extensive stone masonry would have been high, and thus impractical for domestic or low-profile public buildings<sup>10</sup>.

Perhaps more telling is the nature of the architectural orders used. Many of the column plinths were eastern in appearance, utilising a floral torus design – a trait seen widely amongst Achaemenid architecture<sup>11</sup>. Equally uncharacteristic of Hellenistic conventions were the proportional dimensions used. As noted by Downey, this is especially highlighted by the religious spaces<sup>12</sup>. For instance, the TIN, with its triple naos design and indented recesses along the exterior walls, has no Hellenistic parallels, which typically used a single naos and smooth walls<sup>13</sup>. It has been noted that such an arrangement is instead reminiscent of both Mesopotamian and Achaemenid architectural attributes seen at sites such as Temple A at Assur, and the Royal Palace at Persepolis<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, another centre of worship, namely the open-aired sanctuary atop the acropolis of Ai Khanoum, was clearly associated with Zoroastrianism, since it parallels the layout of other known local religious sites in the Bactrian region, such as the site of Takht-I Sangin<sup>15</sup>.

How then does one reconcile this apparent disparity between Greek and Eastern elements? Rather than viewing the situation as a case of cultural competition between Hellenism and localised culture for Bactria, the above suggests the existence of a more complicated relationship between the two cultures. Unfortunately, however, there is no means by which one can verify the level to which Ai Khanoum is representative either as a Hellenistic or Bactrian city, since none of the other Graeco-Bactrian sites have been excavated to the same scale<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore,

10 BERNARD 1982, 154.

11 BERNARD 1968, 124.

12 DOWNEY 1988, 63–76.

13 See BERNARD 1970, fig. 16.

14 RAPIN 1990, 336; SHAENKAR 2011, 128; MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2014, 280–281.

15 MAIRS 2013, 93. On the open-aired sanctuary, see BERNARD 1976, 306–307.

16 MAIRS 2014, 53.



despite determining the type of process of acculturation that may have occurred, problems still linger discerning the ethno-cultural identity of the inhabitants from Ai Khanoum.

The first issue is that the classification of a society's culture has customarily been based upon the distribution patterns of material culture, with the geographical spread of certain diagnostic attributes marking the regional influence of a particular ethnic group<sup>17</sup>. Yet, how reliable is this methodological approach of basing one's determination of identity upon an associated material culture? As Mairs duly noted, one must be cautious not to simply presume that the fusion of Graeco-Bactrian expression in architecture and art acts as a litmus test for showing the degree of hybridisation amongst the inhabitants of Ai Khanoum themselves<sup>18</sup>. This is because individuals are active agents who choose markers relevant to their cultural self-perception rather than being mere passive subjects to a fixed cultural identity<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, there is no direct linear correlation between material and identity.

Another issue related to cultural identification is that the archaeological focus in modern scholarship continues to emphasise the significance of ethnicity as the dominant component of identity. Yet, as noted by Wood, the level of stress placed upon the role of ethnicity for one's identity is more related to modern perceptions of ethnicity's importance rather than upon the ancient idea of ethno-cultural identity<sup>20</sup>. Therefore, as a substitute for this modern criterion of ethnicity, the remainder of this essay will briefly examine the Heroon of Kineas and the TIN in accordance with two of *Herodotos*' criteria for the Hellenic ethos, namely religious observance and language<sup>21</sup>.

The Heroon stood on a three-tiered podium and comprised of a pronaos with two columns in antis and a narrow naos. Beneath the naos' floor was a limestone sarcophagus, with a duct leading down from the naos for the pouring of libations<sup>22</sup>. This provision of offerings, combined with the fact that burials within the city were strictly forbidden except under the circumstances that the deceased individual held some exceptional antemortem status, strongly suggests that this individual was the founder (οἰκιστής) of Ai Khanoum<sup>23</sup>. Such religious behaviour has long been prevalent in Greek history, with several well-attested examples of heroa being set up for individuals, including: the founder of Gela, Antiphemos; Hagnon and Brasidas at Amphipolis, and Alexander at Alexandria<sup>24</sup>.

The later continuation of religious reverence shown by the inhabitants of Ai Khanoum can also be implied through the unusual alignment of the street – whose axis changes direction at one point to avoid coming into contact with the Heroon<sup>25</sup>. Further, the Heroon was completely rebuilt under the building program of Euthydemus<sup>26</sup>. It is argued that since the Graeco-Bactrian Kingdom separated from the Seleucid Empire, there was a need on the part of the Graeco-Bactrian monarchy to emphasise their persona as Hellenistic dynasts. A major aspect of such royal imagery in the Hellenistic period was being perceived as defenders of Hellenic religion<sup>27</sup>. This renovation, in my opinion, is therefore a bid to stress the Hellenistic origins of Ai Khanoum, and therefore their own Hellenic roots. This notion is further supported by

17 LUCY 2005, 87–88; WEBSTER 2009, 12–13.

18 MAIRS 2013, 91.

19 BARTH 1969, 10. 15; JONES 1997.

20 WOOD 2011, 142.

21 Hdt. 7, 9, 2; 8, 144, 2

22 MAIRS 2015, 112.

23 MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2015, 31.

24 On Antiphernos, MALKIN 1987, 190; Hagnon and Brasidas, Thuc. 5, 11, 1; and Alexander, Curt. 10, 10, 20.

25 MAIRS 2015, 114.

26 MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2015, 37.

27 SHIPLEY 2000, 83.



the fact that the Heroon was renovated to imitate a Hellenistic temple, despite it being built at the same time as the construction of more ›Eastern-styled‹ buildings. This could imply that whilst there was a range of architectural designs available to the builders, maintaining a conventional Hellenistic rendition of the Heroon was still deemed important by inhabitants of Ai Khanoum<sup>28</sup>.

Nonetheless, when the TIN is also taken in consideration of the city's religious characterisation, a more complicated image emerges. As already discussed earlier, the localised appearance of the TIN closely resembles sites of worship of a known Mesopotamian / Achaemenid nature. As such, it is reasonable to assume that the religious context of this building, at least to some extent, also originated from a similar Eastern background<sup>29</sup>. Furthermore, whilst the cult sculpture belonging to this building has the outward appearance of a Greek deity, and was initially identified as Zeus, one must be careful in assuming that a Hellenistic depiction of a deity automatically translates into the represented god in question, as well as the associated temple site, was indeed Greek by origin. We must not forget that the Persians were unaccustomed to assigning andromorphic iconography to represent their pantheon<sup>30</sup>. Therefore, when the need arose to portray Persian-Bactrian deities, it is likely that foreign motifs were applied, including those belonging to the religious tradition of the Greeks<sup>31</sup>. As such, this so-called figure of Zeus may instead be more appropriately equated to a deity of Eastern origins, such as Mithra or Bel<sup>32</sup>.

In light of the central location of the TIN amongst the wider urban landscape, this temple was likely a major place of worship within Ai Khanoum, alongside the Heroon<sup>33</sup>. Therefore, the religious importance of this building for the urban populace cannot be relegated to a minor status simply on the grounds of its different cultural orientation compared to the other Greek institutions<sup>34</sup>. It is improbable that public engagement with the TIN was only reserved for the non-Greek members of the community, especially considering that the responsibility for both the socio-religious organisation of the city and the construction of public buildings fell upon the shoulders of the elite class, who would have been composed largely of those claiming Greek descent. Consequently, if the presence of non-Greek institutions or expressions was perceived by the elite as a threat to their own cultural identity, then one would not expect to see the existence of the TIN in such a position of prominence amongst other Greek buildings. Such a coupled arrangement between Greek and local establishments implies that an individual's preference for a certain religious cult was not governed according to their ethnic background, thereby suggesting the possibility that one could move amongst different ethno-cultural spheres without compromising their own sense of cultural identity. If this proves to be the case, the TIN demonstrates that one should be wary of supposing that a direct link can be drawn between one's religious affiliation and ethno-cultural identity. Furthermore, the TIN exemplifies that, rather than viewing the ethno-cultural ›mediums‹ of Ai Khanoum solely on the grounds of their immediate physical features, such material must also be examined in accordance with their associated spatial context.

In relation to the second Herodotean benchmark of language, both case studies also show evidence of Greek inscriptions. Amongst the finds of the TIN, for instance, is a glass cultic 'shovel' bearing a Greek engraving<sup>35</sup>. Of greater importance, however, is a dedicatory stele

28 CANEPA 2013, 340.

29 FRANCFORT 2012, 109.

30 MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2016, 98–99.

31 MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2014, 247, n. 38.

32 BOYCE – GRENET 1991, 149–151; SHENKAR 2011, 129.

33 DOWNEY 1988, 72.

34 MAIRS 2013, 106.

35 RAPIN 1992, 97, pl. 68, 7. For parallels of this type of object, see FRANCFORT 2012, 119 nos. 52–56.



Fig. 3 : Inscription from the Heroon of Kineas.

inscribed with Delphic maxims that was erected within the temenos of the Heroon by a certain Klearchos (fig. 3)<sup>36</sup>. The significance of this epigraphical data in the identity debate is two-fold. From a symbolic perspective, given that the inscription was erected several generations after the foundation of Ai Khanoum, there appears to be a desire amongst the city's population to reinforce their bond with the ›old‹ Hellenic world through a symbolic association to Delphi, thus reinstate their ethno-cultural heritage<sup>37</sup>. Additionally, since the stele is a monolingual text, it indicates that it was only intended for a Greek-speaking audience. Papyrological evidence from Ptolemaic Egypt alludes to the use of Greek as a method of differentiating between the Hellenic settlers and the native Egyptians<sup>38</sup>. Perhaps here too, we are dealing with similar utilitarian phenomena, where the encryption of a set of behaviours, which only members of the Hellenised class could understand, facilitated a distinction between those who could and could not read Greek, and thus were unable to adopt such behaviours<sup>39</sup>.

In conclusion, whilst our understanding of the ethno-cultural dynamics is largely based upon the small sample of Ai Khanoum, there are at least several elements which demonstrate that some level of syncretism took place between the Hellenistic and localised material culture. Yet the extent to which the process of syncretism influenced the ethnocultural identity of those living in Bactria is by no means conclusive. Instead, as has been shown with the case of the TIN and the Heroon, there is an urgent need to recalibrate our modern understanding of identities from its fixation upon criterion of ethnicity towards a model of syncretism that is more aligned with the ancient perception of ethnocultural expression, namely one that focuses upon signs of acculturation as opposed to assimilation.

36 ROBERT 1968, 422–457; ROSSI 2004, 182–184.

37 MAIRS 2015, 121–122; MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2016, 104.

38 GOUDRIAAN 1988; ANSON 2011, 7 no. 6.

39 MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2016, 104–105. Nevertheless, it is worth keeping in mind that papyrological data typically tends to be centred upon provincial matters, and thus one must be cautious about how details extrapolated from such material are projected as evidence for the views of the wider Hellenistic world.

## Bibliography

- ANSON 2009 E. M. Anson, Greek Ethnicity and the Greek Language, *Glotta* 85, 2009, 5–30
- BERNARD 1968 P. Bernard, Chapiteaux corinthiens hellénistiques d'Asie centrale découverts à Ai Khanoum, *Syria* 45, 1968, 111–151
- BERNARD 1970 P. Bernard, Campagne de fouilles 1969 à Ai Khanoum en Afghanistan, *CRAI* 114.2, 1970, 301–349
- BERNARD 1976 P. Bernard, Campagne de fouilles 1975 à Ai Khanoum (Afghanistan), *CRAI* 120.2, 1976, 287–322
- BERNARD 1982 P. Bernard, An Ancient Greek City in Central Asia, *Scientific American* 246.1, 1982, 148–159
- BERRY 1997 J. W. Berry, Immigration, Acculturation and Adaptation, *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 46, 1997, 5–68
- BOPEARACHCHI 1998 O. Bopéarachchi, A Faience Head of a Graeco-Bactrian King from Ai Khanoum, *Bulletin of the Asia Institute N.S.* 12, 1998, 23–30
- BOYCE – GRENET 1991 M. Boyce – F. Grenet, *A History of Zoroastrianism 3. Zoroastrianism under Macedonian and Roman Rule* (Leiden 1991)
- CANEPA 2013 M. P. Canepa, The Transformation of Sacred Space: Topography, and Royal Ritual in Persia and the Ancient Iranian World, in: D. Ragavan (ed.), *Heaven on Earth. Temples, Ritual, and Cosmic Symbolism in the Ancient World* (Chicago 2013) 319–372
- DOWNEY 1988 S. B. Downey, *Mesopotamian Religious Architecture: Alexander Through the Parthians* (Princeton, NJ 1988)
- FRANCFORT 2009 H. P. Francfort, Ai Khanoum ›Temple with Indented Niches‹ and Takht-I Sangin ›Oxus Temple‹ in Historical Cultural Perspective: Outline of a Hypothesis About the Cults, in: A. Invernizzi (ed.), *Parthica. Incontri di culture nel mondo Antico* (Torino 2009) 109–136
- GOUDRIAAN 1988 K. Goudriaan, *Ethnicity in Ptolemaic Egypt* (Amsterdam 1988)
- JONES 1997 S. Jones, *The Archaeology of Ethnicity. Constructing Identities in the Past and Present* (London 1997)
- LERICHE 1974 P. Leriche, Ai Khanoum un rempart hellénistique en Asie centrale, *RevArch N.S.* 2, 1974, 231–270
- LERICHE – THORAVAL 1979 P. Leriche – J. Thoraval, Fontaine du rempart de l'Oxus à Ai Khanoum, *Syria* 56, 1979, 171–205
- LUCY 2005 S. Lucy, Ethnic and Cultural Identities, in: M. Diaz-Andreu – S. Lucy – S. Babić – D. N. Edwards (eds.), *The Archaeology of Identity. Approaches to Gender, Age, Status, Ethnicity and Religion* (Oxford 2005) 86–109
- MAIRS 2013 R. Mairs, The ›Temple with Indented Niches‹ at Ai Khanoum. Ethnic and Civic Identity in Hellenistic Bactria, in: R. Alston – O. van Nijf – C. G. Williamson (eds.), *Cults, Creeds and Identities in the Greek City After the Classical Age* (Leuven 2013) 85–118
- MAIRS 2014 R. Mairs, *The Hellenistic Far East: Archaeology, Language, and Identity in Greek Central Asia* (Philadelphia 2014)
- MAIRS 2015 R. Mairs, The Founder's Shrine and the Foundation of Ai Khanoum, in: N. MacSweeney (ed.), *Foundation Myths in Ancient Societies. Dialogues and Discourses* (Philadelphia 2015) 103–128
- MALKIN 1987 I. Malkin, *Religion and Colonization in Ancient Greece* (Leiden 1987)
- MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2014 L. Martinez-Sève, The Spatial Organization of Ai Khanoum, a Greek City in Afghanistan, *AJA* 118, 2014, 267–283



- MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2015 L. Martinez-Sève, Ai Khanoum and Greek Domination in Central Asia, *Electrum* 22, 2015, 17–46
- MARTINEZ-SÈVE 2016 L. Martinez-Sève, Ai Khanoum. Échanges et résistances, in: M. Espagne – S. Goršenina – F. Grenet – S. Mustafayev – C. Rapin (eds.), *Asie centrale. Transferts culturels le long de la route de la soie*, Textes issus d'un colloque international, Samarkand, 12–14 septembre 2013 (Paris 2016) 97–114
- RAPIN 1990 C. Rapin, Greeks in Afghanistan. Ai Khanoum, in: J.-P. Descœudres (ed.), *Greek Colonists and Native Populations*, Proceedings of the First Australian Congress of Classical Archaeology, Sydney 9–14 July 1985 (Oxford 1990) 329–342
- RAPIN 1992 C. Rapin, Fouilles d'Aï Khanoum 8. La trésorerie du palais hellénistique d'Aï Khanoum. L'apogée et la chute du royaume grec de bactriane, *Mémoires de la Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan* 33 (Paris 1992)
- ROBERT 1968 L. Robert, De Delphes à l'Oxus, inscriptions grecques nouvelles de la Bactriane, *CRAI* 122–123, 1968, 416–457
- DE ROSSI 2004 F. C. de Rossi, Iscrizioni dello estremo oriente Greco. Un repertorio, *Inscriptionen griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien* 65 (Bonn)
- SHENKAR 2011 M. Shenkar, Temple Architecture in the Iranian World in the Hellenistic Period, in: A. Kouremenos – S. Chandrasekaran – R. Rossi – J. Boardman (eds.), *From Pella to Gandhara. Hybridisation and Identity in the Art and Architecture of the Hellenistic East*, BARIntSer 2221 (Oxford 2011) 117–139
- SHIPLEY 2000 G. Shipley, *The Greek World After Alexander, 323–30 BC* (New York 2000)
- STEIN 2015 G. J. Stein, The War-Ravaged Cultural Heritage of Afghanistan. An Overview of Projects of Assessment, Mitigation, and Preservation, *Near Eastern Archaeology* 78, 2015, 187–195
- WEBSTER 2009 G. S. Webster, Culture History. A Culture-Historical Approach, in: A. Bentley – H. D. G. Maschner – C. Chippindale (eds.), *Handbook of Archaeological Theories* (Plymouth 2009) 11–27
- WOOD 2011 R. Wood, Cultural Convergence in Bactria. The Votive from the Temple of the Oxus at Takht I Sangin, in: A. Kouremenos – S. Chandrasekaran – R. Rossi – J. Boardman (eds.), *From Pella to Gandhara. Hybridisation and Identity in the Art and Architecture of the Hellenistic East*, BARIntSer 2221 (Oxford 2011) 141–151