

GREEK INSCRIPTIONS IN MESOPOTAMIA (AND BABYLONIA)

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This article provides a short overview on the few Greek inscriptions from Mesopotamia which date to the period between the third century BCE and the first century CE. It argues that since the concept of “identity” has certain shortcomings for a historical analysis of an ancient society it might be useful to apply the concepts “commonality,” “connectedness,” and “groupness” for a somehow further and deeper insight. Due to the lack of a larger group of Greek documents in the timeframe mentioned, these concepts are used for some short remarks on the graffiti of the Nebuchelos-Archive from Dura-Europos which dates to the third century CE. The article attempts to show how, in a situation of cultural contact which produced hybrid and ambiguous forms of cultural practices, individuals used different cultural markers and practices of the different societies to demonstrate and publicly display their “commonality” and “connectedness.”

Although the number of Greek inscriptions from Mesopotamia is rather limited, the organizers of the workshop on late Mesopotamian archives, to which this article is a contribution, aimed at comprehensiveness and also wanted to include Greek inscriptions as a potential source regarding the identity of the inhabitants of Mesopotamia. The number of inscriptions is rather small—less than 20—and they are scattered through space and time, as will be shown below. The aim of this paper is to give an overview of this corpus and to discuss an example of how inscriptions can be used to reconstruct identities.

The campaign of Alexander III and the consequent creation of the Seleucid Empire caused a broader use of the Greek language for inscribed documents in Mesopotamia and beyond.¹ Moreover, the rise of the Parthian Empire and the following Roman presence in Mesopotamia brought with it the use of Greek inscriptions as a medium for self-staging.² Nevertheless, there is only a comparatively small number of Greek inscriptions to be found beyond the Euphrates.

1 On the transformation of the Achaemenid Empire after Alexander III and the study of the “Hellenistic” Seleucid kingdom, see Strootman 2020: 7–13, 20–26. See also Mairs 2014: 6–7 on the use of Greek inscriptions and 10–11 on the use of the Greek language in Hellenistic Bactria; Coloru 2009: 287–292 with a collection of Greek inscriptions from Hellenistic Bactria. The Greek inscriptions of Iran and Central Asia are collected in CII II.1, which is labeled as I. Iran/Asie centrale in the *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*: see SEG LXII 1568.

2 See Schmitt 1998: 168 on the use of Greek inscriptions within the Parthian realm. See further Schmitt 1998: 195. See further Thommen 2010: 444–491 with a collection of Greek inscriptions (as well as parchments and papyri) from the Arsacid Empire.

The Greek inscriptions from the region stretching from the left bank of the Euphrates to India and from Armenia to Yemen are summarized under the header “Inscriptions from the Greek Extreme Orient.”³ Up to the present point of time these inscriptions have been compiled in two volumes. In 2004 Filippo Canali de Rossi published a collection which is part of the series *Inschriften Griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien*.⁴ In this publication are included 1) inscriptions originating outside Mesopotamia proper (i.e., the Upper Euphrates Valley and its tributaries on the left bank as well as the Upper Tigris Valley, IK 65/24–74), 2) inscriptions originating from Babylonia (i.e., from the Persian Gulf to a line north of Baghdad, IK 65/75–145), and 3) inscriptions originating from the Mesene/Charakene area (i.e., the region between the Tigris and the Shatt al Hai, IK 65/146–165). Most of the latter are from Palmyra but give information about Palmyrene traders doing their business there. The second volume is an anthology by Reinhold Merkelbach and Josef Stauber in which the inscriptions from Mesopotamia are published and commented (Merkelbach/Stauber Nos. 501–516). Thanks to the PHI-Project, some of the Greek inscriptions are also accessible in a digital form.⁵

The chronological distribution of these inscriptions is rather broad. The Greek epigraphical tradition begins in the third century BCE and ends towards the last decennium of the sixth century CE. Since for the present purpose only the texts from the third century BCE to the first century CE are of interest, the overall number of inscriptions is quite small, since there are less than 20 Greek inscriptions from Mesopotamia, if minor texts such as amphora stamps or stamped *bullae* or inscribed weights are excluded.⁶ These inscriptions are listed at the end of this article and they mainly shed light on the civic life of Greek communities within Mesopotamia. Thus, there are dedications (Nos. 2–4, 10, 11) and lists of different civic groups like priests and magistrates (No. 5; this list was part of a document of unknown character) or *epheboi* and winners of an *agon* (No. 13). Moreover, we find an honorary inscription (No. 16) as well as a building inscription (No. 14).

Although the number of texts is quite low, they nevertheless illustrate the usual public behavior and life of individuals and groups within Greek communities. A more private matter is the commemoration of deceased individuals which on the other has a public aspect as well (Nos. 1, 6, 8–9, 15). In terms of “identity” the public display of Greek language and the adherence to Greek institutions illustrate the existence of Greek communities which—despite the Mesopotamian contexts—at least partly lived a Greek public life and cared about showing this part of their life in the public. This might be interpreted as a reflex of the Seleucid policy that allegedly fostered cities and urban life in Mesopotamia (Monerie 2018: 236). That such an “identity” was not exclusive is demonstrated by the existence of a bilingual funerary inscription (No. 1) which shows the adherence of the deceased and/or the person who set the inscription to the Syriac and the Greek cultural sphere. Thus, despite the low number of surviving texts the display of Greek languages and Greek institutions demonstrates the existence of a Greek “identity,” among others.

Nevertheless, it might be possible to learn something regarding a Greek “identity” in Mesopotamia during the Seleucid and Parthian era by using the epigraphic evidence. However, it must be emphasized that “identity” and its use in modern historiography is not as unproblem-

3 Bérard et al. 2010: 85.

4 See the review of Schmitt 2006 with important remarks on various inscriptions.

5 <<https://epigraphy.packhum.org/regions/1535>>, accessed 23 Dec. 2020.

6 To the weights collected in IK 65 SEG LXII 1569 is to be added.

atic as it seems at first sight.⁷ The historiographic category “identity,” the theory of which is also discussed in the field of social and political sciences, can therefore be replaced by the other categories. The first of these is “groupness,” which describes the affiliation of an individual to an exclusive group whose members define themselves by their otherness. In other words, by means of being different from other groups and or individuals. The second set of terms is “commonality” (i.e., “the sharing of some common attribute”) or “connectedness” (i.e., “the relational ties that link people”), which describes the more generic belonging of individuals to larger groups without underlining their otherness (Gheller 2019: 37–38; Brubaker & Cooper 2000: 14–21, quotations p. 20).

Connectedness, commonality, and the feeling of belonging together (which to a certain degree is produced by commonality and connectedness, but also depends on other factors) might produce groupness, but it is not a necessary consequence (Brubaker & Cooper 2000: 20). Either category (commonality/connectedness vs. groupness) as well as the transitional forms between them comprise different notions of “identity” (Brubaker & Cooper 2000: 21). Groupness, then, can be characterized as “the emotionally laden sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group, involving both a felt solidarity or oneness with fellow group members and a felt difference from or even antipathy to specified outsiders” (Brubaker & Cooper 2000: 19). The use of these categories might lead to further insights regarding the topic of a Greek identity in the regions which from a Western point of view might be labelled as the extreme “Orient” or the “Far” East.

Indeed, some years ago Rachel Mairs (2014: 102–103) already emphasized in her wonderful book on the Hellenistic Far East the problem of answering questions as to whether an individual is Greek or to what degree persons were Greek and came to the following conclusion: “No one really *is* anything objectively.” Mairs (2014: 103), then, relied on the concept of ethnicity, a category which she used based on the definition of Barth, “a constructed identity in which the defense of a boundary a notional set of common cultural traits is often more important than objective differentiation in language or material culture.” After analyzing four inscriptions she emphasized the difficulty “to tell which descriptors, references, language choices, and literary styles should be read as ethnic cues and which should not.”⁸ Moreover, she came to the conclusion that there was a display of an ethnic ambiguity which—not at least—depends on the view of the modern reader (Mairs 2014: 144–145).

“Identity” as well as “ethnicity” are contemporary and thus etic concepts which were seemingly first and foremost used to describe and analyze the modern as well as the contemporary nation state or groups and their behavior within such nation states. Consequently, the application of such categories to ancient states or ancient individuals who lack every experience of the concept of “nation” might therefore necessarily have ambiguities. Categorizing the public display of “descriptors, references, language choices, and literary styles” (Mairs 2014: 144) under the headers of “commonality,” “connectedness” and “groupness” may produce further insights, since these categories do not presuppose the existence of a nation state and avoid the

7 Gheller 2019 offers a very useful discussion of the concept against the background of Late Antiquity and its history.

8 Mairs 2014: 144. The inscriptions are: The Stele of Sophytos (Merkelbach/Stauber No. 105 = SEG LIV 1568); a biographical text of a rich merchant from Kandahar; the building inscription in Prākit of Heliodoros, a Greek ambassador, from India (Salomon 1998: 265–266; cf. Mairs 2014: 117–119); the Greek metric inscriptions of Paccius Maximus from Lower Nubia (I.Egypte métriques 168–169 = CIG 5119).

use of identity, since—as the above-mentioned definition ethnicity demonstrates—the category ethnicity also relies on the use of a concept of identity. Yet, of course “commonality,” “connectedness” and “groupness” are also contemporary and thus etic concepts, but they might be useful for a better understanding of the above-mentioned ambiguities because their application may lead to the insight that individuals have different and various degrees of sharing common attributes as well as using relational ties to link themselves to other people.⁹

Unfortunately, the early Greek inscriptions (3rd–1st cent. BCE) provide no coherent set of inscriptions that could be easily analyzed. However, the potential of such texts (and new excavations could still increase the number of known inscriptions significantly) is demonstrated by choosing a slightly later set of inscriptions. Hellenistic and Roman Dura-Europos—due its richness of textual and archaeological remains—was aptly characterized as a laboratory for the study of the diversity especially of the Roman World.¹⁰ Therefore, it might be useful to briefly discuss an example from this fascinating town on the right bank of the Euphrates, particularly because its abundance of sources has led to a lot of research on the culture and the identity of its inhabitants (Millar 2006; Kaizer 2015; 2016; 2017; Gregoratti 2016; Sommer 2016; 2018: 273–360; Baird 2018: 153).

One prominent citizen of the city was a certain Aurelios Nebuchelos whose activities in Dura-Europos and in the Middle Euphrates Valley are illustrated through a group graffiti. These texts which were found on the walls of the “House of Archives” or “House of Nebuchelus” situated at the crossroads of *cardo maximus* and *decumanus maximus* nicely illustrate the remarkable business activities of the said Nebuchelos (Rostovtzeff & Welles 193; Ruffing 2000; 2016: 196–197). The graffiti were written between 235 and 240 CE which makes them an important document for the economy of the Middle Euphrates region in the third century CE. In terms of commonality and connectedness the name of the owner is already quite interesting. The texts make it clear that his full name was Aurelios Antoninos Nebuchelos who gained Roman citizenship through the *constitutio Antoniniana* of 212 CE (Prel. Rep. IV: 112).

In recording his business transactions Nebuchelos did not use his full name and called himself only with his *cognomen* (SEG VII 382). Maurice Sartre (2007) is correct in red-flagging the use of onomastic and single cases for drawing conclusions about the cultural identity, and Dieter Hagedorn (1993) has shown that in Roman Egypt the same person might use a Greek or an Egyptian name according to specific occasions. It is therefore difficult or even highly problematic to prove a cultural identity by means of onomastics. Nevertheless, in terms of commonality Nebuchelos displays that he shared common attributes with people of a Roman, Greek and Mesopotamian background, as he used the Greek language, a Roman *praenomen* and a Roman *nomen gentile*, and his Semitic *cognomen* and the name Nebuchelos (“Nabu is mighty,” cf. Prel. Rep. IV, p. 83, note 6. SEG VII 381 adn).

Interestingly, Nabu was an important god in the Parthian Empire and became identified with Apollo in the Seleucid period. (Hauser 2012: 1015–1016). His son also shared these attributes since he was called Abdochelus (Prel. Rep. IV, p. 83, no. 191. Cf. Prel. Rep. IV, p. 112), whereas a certain Alexander Makedonios, son of Apolloni(k)os, may have been Nebuchelos’ son-in-law (Prel. Rep. IV, p. 137–138). Thus, he might have had connections to the local elite which bore

9 As underlined by Kaizer 2015: 101 and Sommer 2016: 65–66 though using the paradigms acceptance, adaptation and reaction.

10 Sommer 2016: 67. See also Kaizer 2015: 94 and Kaizer 2017: 74–75 emphasizing that Dura-Europos is the best source for daily life and cultural contact.

Macedonian and Greek names (Kaizer 2017: 72–73). Interestingly, in Dura-Europos there is a tendency for a broader use of Semitic names under Roman rule than under Parthian rule (Kaizer 2015: 101). Hence, it is not impossible to interpret this tendency as a change to the patterns of commonality and thus as an accentuation of the Mesopotamian element.

As already mentioned, Nebuchelos was a businessman who traded goods along the Euphrates Valley up to the point where the Khabour enters the Euphrates and beyond. Evidently his Mesopotamian background was advantageous for him in establishing connections in order to conduct his business. At least, as far as the texts offer some insight, his most important agent and business partner was a certain Marabelos who thus used a Semitic name as well. Other possible agents were a certain Phraates, a man called Aninis, one called Okbasies and a certain Malchos and others, of which some also bore Greek names (Prel. Rep. IV, p. 138–139). It is thus not impossible to draw the conclusion that the commonality of the use of names produced a certain connectedness, which might also have produced a certain feeling of belonging together.

Both connectedness and the certain feeling of belonging together were likely to be of greater importance for establishing business connections, since business and especially agency are based on trust to quite a high degree. This is why business connections between principals and agents were often, if not regularly, established between persons of the same cultural background or differed between the different cultural backgrounds (cf. Ruffing 2013). The example of Nebuchelos, which has been very briefly sketched here, demonstrates that it might be a worthwhile undertaking to use the categories of commonality, connectedness and maybe even groupness, instead of the concept of identity, to analyze how—in a situation of cultural contact which produced hybrid and ambiguous forms of cultural practices—individuals used these different practices in the diverse societies of the ancient world. This, however, is a task of future research.

LIST OF INSCRIPTIONS¹¹

1. IK 65/25 = CIG III 4670 (I/II cent. CE/Edessa): Bilingual (Syriac/Greek) funerary inscription of Amassamses, wife of Saredos, son of Mannos.
2. IK 65/64 = Merkelbach/Stauber 501 = SEG VII 37 = SEG XLVIII 1838 (I cent. CE/Nineveh): Dedication of Apollophanes in honor of the strategos Apollonios.
3. IK 65/65 = Merkelbach/Stauber 502 (Parthian era/Nineveh): Dedication of the *archon* Apollonios to the *polis*.
4. IK 65/66 = Merkelbach/Stauber 503 = SEG XLVIII 1838 (I/II cent. CE (?)/Nineveh): Statue of Heracles dedicated by Sarapiodoros, son of Artemidos which was made by certain Diogenes.
5. IK 65/76 = Merkelbach/Stauber 505 (after 209 BCE/Seleucia on the Tigris): List of priests and magistrates which was part of a document of unknown character.
6. IK 65/84 (Parthian era/Seleucia on the Tigris): Fragmentary funerary epigram.
7. IK 65/97 = Merkelbach/Stauber 511 = SEG XXXII 1400 (III cent. BCE or 63 BCE/Babylon): Ostrakon mentioning payments of 249 drachmai to Ballaros and Artemon and their men, soldiers of the garrison of Babylon.

11 This tentative list only comprises texts which were found in Mesopotamia and are dated to the chronological range from the 3rd cent. BCE to the 1st cent. CE. Excluded are inscriptions found elsewhere the texts of which have a content which is related to Mesopotamia. Amphora stamps and other minor texts were not incorporated either. Only the major editions are mentioned.

8. IK 65/98 (242 or 222 BCE/Babylon): Fragmentary funerary epigram.
9. IK 65/100 = Merkelbach/Stauber 515 = SEG XXXIII 1218 (III/II cent. BCE (?)/Babylon or Uruk): Funerary inscription of Aristeas, alias Ardibelteios.
10. IK 65/102 = Merkelbach/Stauber 510 = OGIS 254 (Seleucid era (?)/Babylon): Dedication of the *polis* in honor of the *strategos* Democrates.
11. IK 65/103 = Merkelbach/Stauber 509 = SEG XXXVI 1724 (166 BCE/Babylon?): Dedication of Philippos during the reign of Antiochus IV who bears among others the title savior of Asia (σωτήρ τῆς Ἀσίας).
12. IK 65/106 = Merkelbach/Stauber 514 = SEG VII 40 (121 BCE/Babylon): Fragment mentioning the Parthian king Arsaces IX Mithridates II.
13. IK 65/107 = Merkelbach/Stauber 513 = SEG VII 39 (110 BCE/Babylon): List of *epheboi* and winners of an agon.
14. IK 65/112 = Merkelbach/Stauber 512 (I/II cent. CE/Babylon): Building inscription of Dioscurides regarding the theatre and the stage building.
15. IK 65/139 (Seleucid or Parthian era/Uruk): Fragmentary funerary epigram(?).
16. IK 65/140 = Merkelbach/Stauber 516 = SEG XVIII 596 (110 CE/Uruk): Honorary inscription of the community of the Dollameni for Artemidoros, son of Diogenes, alias Minnanaios, son of Tuphaios who dedicated a village named Daiameina to the god Gar.

ABBREVIATIONS

CIG III	BOEKH, August & Johannes FRANZ (ed.) 1853. <i>Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum volumen tertium</i> . Berlin: ex officina academica.
CII II.1	ROUGEMONT, Georges (ed.) 2012. <i>Inscriptions grecques d'Iran et d'Asie centrale</i> . (Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum II(1)) London: School of Oriental and African Studies.
I.Egypte métriques	BERNAND, Étienne (ed.) 1969. <i>Inscriptions métriques de l'Égypte gréco-romaine: Recherches sur la poésie épigrammatique des Grecs en Égypte</i> . Paris: Le Belles Lettres.
IK 65	CANALI DE ROSSI, Filippo (ed.) 2004. <i>Iscrizioni dello estremo oriente greco: Un repertorio</i> . (Inchriften Griechischer Städte aus Kleinasien 65) Bonn: Rudolf Habelt.
Merkelbach/Stauber	MERKELBACH, Reinholt & Josef STAUBER 2005. <i>Jenseits des Euphrat: Griechische Inschriften: Ein epigraphisches Lesebuch</i> . München: K.G Saur.
OGIS	DITTENBERGER, Wilhelmus (ed.) 1903. <i>Oriens Graecae Inscriptiones Selectae: Supplementum Sylloges Inscriptionum Graecarum</i> . Leipzig: Lipsiae S. Hirzel.
Prel. Rep. IV	Paul V.C. BAUR, Michael I. ROSTOVITZEFF & Alfred R. BELLINGER (eds) 1933. <i>The Excavations at Dura-Europos Conducted by Yale University and the French Academy of Inscriptions and Letters: Preliminary Report of Fourth Season of Work October 1930 – March 1931</i> . New Haven: YUP.
SEG	<i>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum</i> , Leiden 1923ff.

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