

Karsten Johanning

Language and Power in the Roman Empire and Early India

Hierarchy, Ambiguity, and the Art of Reading
the Signs in Cosmopolitan Cultures

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ELISABETH BEGEMANN (Erfurt), DANIELA BONANNO (Palermo),
FILIPPO CARLÀ-UHINK (Potsdam), ANNA-KATHARINA RIEGER (Graz)
und KATHARINA WESSELMANN (Potsdam)

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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.

I have a lot of people to thank: Peter Fibiger Bang for many years of inspiration, discussions, support, and friendship, and for inviting me in on his research project “Rome in the World History of Universal Empire”, funded by the Danish Humanities Research Council and hosted by the Saxo Institute, University of Copenhagen, all of which led to the PhD thesis from 2018 that this book is a revised version of; the other members of

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Of course, any remaining mistakes are my own.

Copenhagen, May 2024 and again spring 2026.

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 Prahasana* (“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 (*pepaideumenoi*) 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 Autolycus, 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.

Thus, cosmopolitanism is closely connected to the concept of identity – another slippery term. Here, Tim Whitmarsh’s definition, “a set of categories of selfhood presumed, legitimised or questioned” is very useful, because, while pertaining to the individual level, it also embraces hierarchy and ambiguity through social interaction.³⁰ Therefore, my interest in identity centres on how certain ancient intellectuals construct a role for themselves in their translocal ideals; not what they really felt. A prominent example is Dio Chrysostom, a Greek-speaking rhetorician and intellectual from the first century AD, who moves within a wider Hellenic network. In his speeches, he constantly discusses the ideal behaviour of all Greeks under Rome, while never forgetting his role as a local politician in the town of Prusa in Asia Minor. Somewhere in all these roles, Dio’s identity becomes blurred, and it more comes through as a context-dependent persona.³¹ In chapter 5, I analyse two speeches by Dio, focussing on how ancient intellectuals used religious discourse to further their own agendas. In turn, I compare Dio’s intellectual persona with Vātsyāyana’s, the author of the *Kāmasūtra*, the famous Indian treatise on the art of love. For my purposes that comparison highlights central features: the embeddedness of both intellectuals in their respective courtly systems (as shown by the behavioural norms and godly links asserted) – and the translocal, cosmopolitan scene on which they perform so brilliantly.

1.4 Cosmopolitanism as an analytical tool

Apart from the descriptive and idealized meanings listed above, cosmopolitanism can also be used analytically. Here, I use two approaches. The first is inspired by the Ghanaian moral philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, who in his thinking about cosmopolitanism stresses the importance of its ‘rootedness’. That is to say, cosmopolitan sentiments will always have to be balanced with more close and local attachments: family, friends, formative place, language and so on. This may seem banal, but to Appiah it is the crucial modifier to secure the proper priorities, should translocal love for humanity make itself felt and herald difficult dilemmas. Here, family is always more important, and besides: local and universal perspectives need not be monolithic oppositions, since a continuous ‘cosmopolitan conversation’ between them results in locally rooted appropriations of translocal things and concepts.³²

My analytical use of Appiah’s thinking takes his relative cosmopolitan spectrum between global and local, and probes translocal features from antiquity for their lo-

30 Whitmarsh 2011: 3.

31 More generally on the relativity of (Greek) identity, see Whitmarsh 2001.

32 “Rooted cosmopolitanism” was coined by Cohen 1992: 483 and developed by Appiah 2005: ch. 6. On cosmopolitanism’s practical enactment and dilemmas, and cosmopolitan conversation, see Appiah 2006.

cal aspects, and vice versa. This opens up new perspectives and discloses underlying agendas and priorities.

The second approach originates from the book *Cosmopolitanism and Empire* that centres on how premodern empires used cosmopolitanism to facilitate the governmental integration of culturally very diverse local elites.³³ Its editors, Myles Lavan, Richard E. Payne, and John Weisweiler state the “aim to reclaim the term [cosmopolitan] as a category for historical analysis”, and they introduce two categories for denoting “distinct practices that transcended – rather than erased – difference and drew strength from diversity”.³⁴ These are ‘assimilation’ and ‘subordination’. In the first, local elites, by means of appropriating the universalizing and normative culture of the rulers (themselves largely indifferent to local culture), get access to the highest circles of power. The resulting elite culture, gradually relinquishing many of its local signifiers (for instance language), shows considerable empire-wide homogeneity. The second type of imperial integration works through preserving local cultural difference, and instead reformulating and ordering it hierarchically, according to the needs of the rulers.

To be sure, no empire relied on just one model, but the example of Rome is nevertheless significant. In the western, Latin-speaking part of the empire, assimilation processes for instance made Trajan the first of many emperors born outside Italy.³⁵ And in terms of subordination, Greek, the dominating elite language in the eastern part, never played a significant role in governing the imperial centre – despite its conscious cultivation by Greeks and Romans alike. Thus, cultural integration through cosmopolitanism – formulated by the rulers and necessary for imperial survival – always involved strict hierarchies: aspiring local elites had to comply with varying cosmopolitan practices. Therefore, the modern institutionally backed equality of all human beings (e.g. universal human rights), is simply ahistorical when analysing ancient empires.³⁶ The analytical approach of Lavan, Payne and Weisweiler focusses on cosmopolitanism’s historical application as an integrative instrument, not its more idealistic meanings. Still, the approach inspiringly highlights both imperial Rome’s capacity for differentiated responses and the complex hierarchies involved in the relationship with Greece – while setting these features on a comparative, Eurasian scene.

A scene, however, that does not include premodern Indian empires. Doing this, as already mentioned, is one of the premises of the present book, which of course requires thorough contextualizations. At the same time, my focus being specifically literary, cosmopolitanism’s more abstract and identity-based dimensions also play a role.

33 Lavan, Payne & Weisweiler (eds.) 2016.

34 Lavan, Payne & Weisweiler 2016: ch. 1 (quotes p. 2, my brackets).

35 Lavan, Payne & Weisweiler 2016: 6–7. Trajan (reigned (r.) AD 98–117) was born in Spain.

36 Cf. Lavan, Payne & Weisweiler 2016: 7–12. Cosmopolitanism today mostly carries positive connotations. But indeed, its potential as the handmaiden of different contemporary economic, political, and cultural forms of (western) domination has also attracted intellectual criticism; *ibid.*: 8–9. Cf. Harvey 2009; Robbins 2012.

This is because they served as a rich authorial tool for putting learning, normativity and social hierarchy into discourse. In fact, my two analytical approaches to cosmopolitanism may be combined here: identifying transregional forms of imperial integration in Rome and India will be supplemented by a look at the cosmopolitan potential of the local, and the local realities of the universal.

Seen together, the two approaches are meant to simultaneously bypass traditional Romanization debates as well as overly specific understandings of globalization and identity. In the following chapters, therefore, three guiding questions will help to maintain that double focus in my analyses of Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit texts:

1. How did premodern empires make use of boundary-crossing elites?
2. How did elites conceive of and use their cosmopolitanism in literature?
3. How can the cosmopolitan spectrum between universal and local help us to understand ancient elite life?

1.5 Why India? – Stereotypical images and Sheldon Pollock’s framework

While world-historical studies increasingly explore ancient Eurasian parallels and connections, India, as indicated above, is seldom included. In this section, I establish the basic feasibility of comparing the Roman Empire and early India. First, by commenting on the stereotypical images that have stood in the way of such a comparison. Second, by introducing the work of Sheldon Pollock and relating basic characteristics of the Indian material. The rest of this chapter – on universal empire, premodern conditions, and comparison – seeks to add to that feasibility.

Stereotypical images

Rome never conquered India, nor ever made any attempt at it.³⁷ Still, during the early empire there existed a rich tradition of representing Indian splendour and ‘otherness’, stemming from Alexander’s North Indian conquests in the fourth century BC, and subsequent relations through diplomacy, trade, and the travels of intellectuals.³⁸ From the end of the Middle Ages, the broad interest in the east blossomed again through

37 Although the historian Dio Cassius, writing around AD 200, has the elderly Emperor Trajan say (standing by the Persian Gulf after conquering parts of present-day Iraq): “I should certainly have crossed over to the Indi, too, if I were still young”. And Dio continues: “For he began to think about the Indi and was curious about their affairs, and he counted Alexander a lucky man”; *Roman History* 68.29.1 (trans. Cary). See also p. 33 n. 94 below.

38 Parker 2008: 5–6 divides this representation into three categories: 1) “A source of commodities”, 2) “A source of special knowledge”, and 3) “The end of empire”. Trajan’s (imagined) thoughts above are therefore wholly in keeping with the tradition. Cf. Richter 2011: 199–206.

the travels of for instance Marco Polo. The stories and the knowledge brought back to Europe by him and early modern adventurers had a deeper impact than to simply add another layer of representation of the east: eventually they would contribute to destabilizing the authority of the Catholic church.³⁹

Zooming in on India itself, it was only during the gradual colonization and subsequent formal British rule from 1858 to 1947 that more factual knowledge of the subcontinent reached the west. But like in antiquity, this knowledge was still used as a source of ambiguous representation. Sanskrit provides an excellent example. Out of the British bureaucratic need to understand Indian laws written in the old sacred language, the awareness of and reverence for Sanskrit arose as not only being closely related – but superior to – European languages, including Greek and Latin. Sir William Jones' words are telling:

The *Sanscrit* language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the *Greek*, more copious than the *Latin*, and more exquisitely refined than either.⁴⁰

Was this a reversal of western colonialism's usual narrative of spreading civilization? There is much truth in Jones' summary. Compared to Greek, Sanskrit retains some grammatical forms that Classic Greek had largely shed (e.g. full conjugation and declension in three numbers, including *dual*); its morphological system is bigger than Latin's; and it *does* have extraordinary qualities for aesthetic expression (as shown in the large amount of synonyms and homonyms, for instance).⁴¹ All of these features rendered Sanskrit a powerful language both for solemn and playful purposes, and command of it gave the possessor a perfect tool for creating social distinction.

Yet Jones' appreciation of Indian civilization was based in a distant past and not in his own times. As Edward Said has pointed out, this is a typical feature of the Orientalist approach to the east, namely to contrast its refined old cultures – carefully reconstructed through a western lens – with an inept and stereotypical contemporary reality.⁴² Hence his logical claim to avoid Eurocentrism and let former colonies represent themselves, so that mental decolonization can accompany the political one.

As important as Said's project of revealing the workings of Orientalism has been, during recent years a new generation of postcolonial thinkers has added important cos-

39 Anderson 2006: 16–17. Thereby also helping to pave the way for nationalism.

40 Quoted in Said 1978: 79. Sir William Jones (1746–94) served as a supreme court judge in Calcutta. Yet the quote indicates what he is better known for, namely providing the groundwork for systematic, comparative linguistics, a prominent feat of which has been the reconstruction of Proto-Indo-European as the common ancestor of e.g. Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek. Cf. Campbell 2008: 85–93, but he tones down Jones' influence in the process.

41 Overview in Ostler 2005: ch. 5, esp. 180–5. Pollock 2006: 136–41 for further details. See also ch. 2 in this book.

42 Said 1978: 121–48 (on Sacy and Renan) and *passim*.

mopolitan qualifications. Whereas Said on the finishing pages of *Orientalism* laments the worldwide “standardization” of western culture and economic thinking, Kwame Appiah more optimistically talks about the very different local appropriations of globalized culture. For Said, (American) popular culture is “consumed unthinkingly” and therefore leads to new stereotypes because “the modern Orient, in short, participates in its own Orientalizing”.⁴³ For Appiah, on the other hand,

cultural significance isn’t just something that corporate headquarters gets to decree. People wear Levis on every continent. In some places they are informal wear; in others they’re dressy. You can get Coca-Cola on every continent, too. In Kumasi you will get it at funerals. Not, in my experience, in the West of England, where hot milky Indian tea is favored. The point is that people in each place make their own uses even of the most famous global commodities.⁴⁴

The uncomplicated *lived*, cosmopolitan experience of Appiah’s multicultural background is a ubiquitous inspiration for him; practice takes priority over theory, and ‘cosmopolitan conversation’ over theoretical agreement.

As for contemporary India, Dipesh Chakrabarty has shown that Indian intellectual identity is not found in opposition to and under a former thin veneer of colonialism, but in a constant dialogue with and reinterpretation of its multifarious effects. One of them being the dissemination of “European thought ... which is now everybody’s heritage and which affect us all”.⁴⁵ Thus, instead of enlarging Indian specificity and autonomy to highlight an eastern civilizational alternative, he reduces the universality of Europe by ‘provincializing’ it. European thought, influential as it is, still needs revision to grasp the full picture of non-western identity.⁴⁶

How does this then apply to my world-historical comparison with ancient India? For one thing, it is a reminder that prejudices towards India have a long history, and that they equally run on both sides of the fence. This also applies to contemporary academia. For another, the quote from Appiah illustrates the primacy of practice over theory in cultural studies in general, and in this book in particular. Put differently, for my comparative purposes, application will always be more important than origins.⁴⁷

43 Said 1978: 324–5.

44 Appiah 2006: 113.

45 Chakrabarty 2000: 16, cf. *ibid.*: “Relating to a body of [European] thought to which one largely owes one’s intellectual existence cannot be a matter of exacting ... ‘postcolonial revenge’”. Inden 1990 for a nuanced critique of Eurocentric attitudes towards early India – also including positive reconstructions.

46 Chakrabarty 2000: 237–55, showing the insufficiency of western rationality to fully understand the life-worlds of non-western cultures. The term refers to the title of his book: *Provincializing Europe*.

47 “Looking at how something works is always more important and interesting than looking at where it came from – and if a treatment of a myth calls attention to the issue of origin, then that is itself

This is illustrated by the way ancient intellectuals in Rome and India used grammatically fixed languages. On the one hand, their very fixity made them moveable and inclusive, invoking a seeming timeless and original essence. On the other hand that essence entirely depended on the agenda and the skills of the intellectual: how it was alluded to, and how it was put into discourse. Or, to return to Appiah's example: I am not interested in the connections that enable the enjoyment of Coca-Cola in Asia, and Indian tea in Britain; I am interested in different local appropriations of translocal phenomena, and in the underlying social mechanisms that help determine them.

Sheldon Pollock and the Sanskrit cosmopolis

In many respects, the Indologist Sheldon Pollock has delivered the framework for my inquiry in his monumental book *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*.⁴⁸ In its first part, coining and operationalizing the term "Sanskrit cosmopolis", he deals with how and why Sanskrit developed in the first millennium AD. Originally an orally transmitted North Indian language mainly used for religious purposes, it became a textual, cosmopolitan power idiom of the court, spanning India and Southeast Asia, as well as many different literary genres.⁴⁹ Central to his study are investigations into which properties make certain languages cosmopolitan, and how they relate to power.⁵⁰

Pollock's reinterpretation of 'cosmopolis' brings him into contact with the Greco-Roman world and scholarship on it. But more importantly, his study is explicitly comparative, as he includes a chapter comparing his Indian findings with the relation between Latin and the Roman Empire. This makes it very useful to build on for my purposes, since in both civilizations there were comparable linguistic structures. These will be addressed in depth in the next chapter, but as preliminary examples Latin and Sanskrit, supported by extensive empires with universal outlooks, grew to become stable and wide-ranging *lingua francas*, at the same time related to and distinctly separate from local, ever-changing languages.⁵¹

Pollock has, by providing a model for understanding the link between premodern empire and literary culture, and then testing it on Rome, in a sense left a double challenge to Roman history. On the one hand, to see how his model can illuminate current debates about high culture and identity in the Roman Empire; on the other, to nuance

a function of the work the myth is doing". Denis Feeney's wise words (1998: 74) pertain to the relationship between Greek and Roman myths, but I completely agree with their more general implications.

48 Pollock 2006.

49 On the term and its use, see e.g. Pollock 2006: 11–12, 122–3. His analysis of the reverse development, 'vernacularization', is not central for my purposes.

50 These aspects will be discussed thoroughly in ch. 2.

51 Local languages: in India, the Prakrits; in Europe, the Romance languages.