Cultural Creolization in the Hellenistic Frontier

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The phenomenon of cultural change between the Greeks and native populations in the Hellenistic period has been the subject of much historical focus. The period after Alexander's death, now commonly known as the Hellenistic period, brought about significant changes in the nature of interactions between groups that use Greek cultural practices and the indigenous cultures of the former Persian empire and beyond. In the Hellenistic period, inscriptions are invaluable at presenting us with ideas as to how culture spread and changed. Using these inscriptions, we can begin to view these cultural changes using models that explain how the processes of cultural change occur. Many models of cultural change have been employed when analysing the phenomenon, in this essay I will use that of creolization. In this model, two or more culture groups combine forms of identity to create a new identity, or identities. To explain my choice, I must first define previous models of cultural change used by historians. Previously, scholarship focusing on cultural change in the period largely argued for the concept of Hellenization. Hellenization is a process where Greek culture is transferred and adopted by other culture groups. The adoption of the Greek language or art are both seen as evidence of Hellenization or Hellenism.[1] This viewpoint is problematic as it has connotations to cultural imperialism and domination (particularly in the Hellenistic period where the Greek minority ruled over an indigenous majority).[2]

Although historians have attempted to redefine the concept, its one-way nature has led to scholars using different theories to highlight cultural change. In modern post-colonial scholarship, creolization was initially used to refer to the evolution of 'creole' languages, in which natives or slaves in colonial or frontier localities form new languages by combining their own with that of their colonizers. The process views the colonized individuals as active participants in cultural exchange, rather than passively accepting cultural change. The implications of this model have seen its use broadened by ancient historians, who have applied it to the creation of unique material culture on the edge of the Roman Empire in Britain.[3] We can further progress the use of creolization by assessing the word creole's origin. The terms originally referred to a 'Spaniard born in the new world', this means that

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[1] Simon Hornblower, 'Hellenize, Hellenization', in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* [online] ed. by Simon Hornblower, Antony Spawforth and Esther Eidinow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
[2] Hornblower, 2015.
[3] Jane Webster, 'Creolization', in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* [online] ed. by Simon Hornblower, Antony Spawforth and Esther Eidinow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

whilst still retaining their Spanish cultural identity, they also take on a new cultural identity that exists solely in this frontier environment.[4] Thus the concept of creolization I will be employing in this essay will focus on the blending of cultures by both an active Greek and native population in the frontier context created by the movement of Greeks following Alexander's conquest. It is also important to state that I will assess culture as a polychrome concept, meaning that multiple identities can be held at once but contribute to a larger blending of cultural identity, the 'Spaniard in the new world' concept fits into this model.

A similar model to creolization is that of hybridization. The model of hybridity argues that in locations of cultural change, two separate identities merge together to form a new blended identity. I have chosen not to use this model due to the process's nature as a change between two separate identities.[5] Whilst appropriate in some circumstances, the environment of the locations in this essay do not facilitate the notion of separate identities. This is due to the nature of habitation in these examples. In locations where there are more than two identities combining cultural practices, a single hybrid identity is not formed. Instead, multiple different combinations form as a result of these groups combining on a one-to-one level, and then a broader level. This can certainly be seen all over the Hellenistic world, where the previous Persian empire, which has already been considered multicultural, mixed with the incoming Greek populations following the conquests of the Macedonian king, Alexander. This does not mean that the theory of hybridity cannot be used in the entire Hellenistic period. However, the ways that cultures combine to form new identities in these circumstances mean that hybridity cannot be used to explain these changes.

The perspective of this essay will focus on two inscriptions and the wider context surrounding them. In this essay I will be using two bilingual inscriptions: the first, found at the temple of Bel in Palmyra (*IGLS* XVII.1.24) and the second is the Kandahar Bilingual Rock Inscription of Asoka. The dedication at Palmyra was left by both natives and Greeks at the temple of Bel, whereas the Kandahar bilingual rock edict was a command issues by the Mauryan King to the mixed population living in the region. Both of these inscriptions focus on religious aspects of society, with Bel being a local Palmyrene deity and Asoka promoting the following of Buddhist principles. Furthermore, these inscriptions are from two different societies but ultimately show us similar phenomena occurring. As Richlin noted in her assessment of women in the Ancient World, the Ancient Mediterranean is rarely broadened

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Carla Antonaccio, 'Hybridity and the Cultures within Greek culture', in *The Cultures Within Ancient Greek Culture: contact, conflict, collaboration,* ed. by Carol Dougherty and Leslie Kurke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 60.

to consider the Middle East, but within this region, there were unique cultural developments involving the cultures commonly at the forefront of scholarship such as Greek or Roman.[6] Identities such as Palmyrene or Kamboja, both of which will feature in this essay, are often overlooked by historians when assessing the spread of culture. The assessment of culture groups is important. As Bohak writes, often smaller eastern peoples are grouped up as "minor oriental groups".[7] Unique local culture prospered in many parts of both the Hellenistic kingdoms and the Roman Empire and as I will assess, often produce unique creole cultures as well as sub-cultural identities.

Upon assessing the texts on face value, we can pick up numerous cultural influences distinct to the localities. Both are inscribed in Greek and Aramaic, although the Aramaic varies due to the regional dialect used, which in this case is the Palmyrene dialect. The Palmyrene inscription is a thanks to a particular individual who aided the temple of Bel in some form, made by a private group of individuals, whereas the Kandahar inscription is a public text issued by the Mauryan ruler Asoka to promote a new edict and societal message. The private nature of the Palmyrene inscription allows us to see that Aramaic and Greek are not only used at a state level but also that the people of Palmyra themselves want to be seen using the dialect of Aramaic, as well as the Greek language. Bodel notes that the display of Aramaic in both public and private inscriptions at Palmyra is unlike any other region in the near east.[8] Furthermore, Stoneman notes that Palmyrenes were bilingual, and this is furthered by Bryce, explaining that Greek held its uses in Commercial and Diplomatic activities. [9] The traders behind this inscription were most likely bilingual, this makes the use of Aramaic even more important. Palmyra conserved its traditional Aramaic language as well as accepted the introduction of Greek. This conservation is important for the idea of a creole identity. The adoption of the Greek language alongside the preservation of their own does not make Palmyra 'Greek', but it does create a new form of identity displayed by the bilingual nature of Palmyra. Moving away from a Hellenocentric viewpoint we can further suggest that those who originally used the Greek language also adopted Aramaic when settling in Palmyra. The numerous examples of Greco-Palmyrene bilingualism show that this practice became somewhat of a societal normality, whereas in other localities inscriptions were solely

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[6] Amy Richlin, 'Writing Women into History', in *A Companion to Ancient History*, ed. by Andrew Erskine (Hoboken: Blackwell, 2009), p. 152.
[7] Gideon Bohak, 'The Jews', in *A Companion to Ancient History*, ed. by Andrew Erskine (Hoboken: Blackwell, 2000), p. 201.
[8] John Bodel, *Epigraphic Evidence: Ancient History from Inscriptions* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2001), p. 14.
[9] Richard Stoneman, *Palmyra and its empire: Zenobia's revolt against Rome* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan press, 1992), p. 11; Trevor Bryce, *Ancient Syria: A Three Thousand Year History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014), p. 280.

in Greek. This can be used as evidence for creolization as it shows us that the Greeks adopted local culture as much as the natives did. In this specific location, Greeks living in Palmyra chose to adapt and combine their cultural values, resulting in a practice that cannot solely be seen as Greek. Taking the position that Aramaic was adopted by the Greeks, we can see that the Greeks did not keep their own separate identity but also took on that of the native Palmyrenes. The identity created from this was not Greek and Palmyrene, it was Greco-Palmyrene, a unique sub-identity that fits within the broader idea of a Palmyrene identity.

The public nature of the Kandahar inscription also aids us in assessing cultural change. It is important to note that the inscription of Kandahar was commissioned by the Indian Mauryan King Asoka, in two languages not native to his empire (Greek and Aramaic). Kosambi notes that the use of Greek and Aramaic in these edicts – translated from the original Maghadi dictation – is unique to Asoka's inscriptions despite the existence of multiple varying languages in other conquered regions.[10] This is important as it highlights the unique frontier environment within Kandahar, having previously been a Persian, then Seleucid controlled territory. The native Kamboja and the incoming Greek population share similarities with Palmyra in this case. The lingering of Aramaic through Greek and Indian control highlights the use and value of the language long after the fall of the Persian empire.[11] Aramaic's use highlights the importance of the language and its use alongside Greek shows no sign of authoritative actions to change the language of the Kamboja natives. However, there are some noticeable differences between the Aramaic and Greek. As Sircar highlights, "the Aramaic refers to Asoka as 'our lord', whereas the Greek simply refers to Asoka as king."[12] The Aramaic describes Asoka more affectionately as the "Institutor of Truth", as well as reinforcing Asoka's practices when describing *dhamma*, the Buddhist practice ascribed by Asoka, as having been profitable before [the inscription]. [13] Initial reactions to the differences between the Aramaic and Greek were that of an approach supporting the idea of Hellenization. These historians focused on these differences to argue that Kandahar was, at this point, an independent Greek state. These views were also supported by previous assessments of Greek inscriptions also made by Asoka.

However, critical analysis of this viewpoint has changed the nature of how we assess cultural change in this region. Firstly, Sircar highlights that original interpretations of the

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[10] Damodar Kosambi, 'Notes on the Kandahar Edict of Asoka', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient,* 2 (1959), 204-206 (p. 205).
[11] Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 286.
[12] Dineshchandra Sircar, *Asokan studies* (Calcutta: Indian Museum, 1979), p. 45.
[13] Sircar, p. 45.

inscriptions found in the area misinterpreted information about where the Greeks resided, and thus drew incorrect conclusions favouring the idea of a dominant, independent Greek culture.[14] More recently, Maniscalco reassessed the inscription, arguing that the context implies that the people of Kandahar are indeed subjects of Asoka.[15] Maniscalco's analysis also gives a reason for the differing phrases in the Greek and Aramaic, arguing that these differences are the result of literary traditions developing distinctly from one another.[16] Whilst this may be a contributing factor, there is another way of viewing these differences. It is important to remember that the Aramaic-speaking Kamboja are native to Kandahar which has seemingly been the borderland between Indian cultures and Achaemenid influence, as this Aramaic inscription is found west of the natural border of the Indus river.[17] The Kamboja's continued existence in this location would have no doubt exposed them to cultural elements from the Indian subcontinent, this can be seen by the reference that dharma "has been profitable". This line highlights that the Kamboja have at least an understanding of this practice, hence the difference between the two inscriptions comes naturally, as the Greek inscription must explain and inform the Greeks of the new edict. The Kamboja understanding and previous adoption of this practice is a sign that they are already a creolized group, due to their continued existence on the edge of Achaemenid and Indian cultural influences. The use of Aramaic alongside Indian social practices shows a blending of the multiple cultural influences to create a unique Kamboja identity. However, the Greeks are a new identity group to the locality and so are yet to adopt any new cultural practices. As the Greeks are beginning the process of cultural change, they are treated differently by their Mauryan rulers, who would be well aware that Greek cultural practices differ greatly from that of native groups. This inscription allows us to compare a culture that has been continuously engaging in cultural change with one that is just beginning the process.

With the initial analysis in mind, it is also important to examine the motif behind both inscriptions, as they both feature religious elements that indicate cultural changes taking place. Contextually, this inscription is advocating for the observance of Buddhist principles, following the conversion of the ruler Asoka. The command to kill animals only for food shows the difference in principles between the Greek population. This could be in reference to animal sacrifice to the Greek gods and hunting which is mentioned in the inscription. The Kandahar inscription also focuses on the concept of *dhamma*, which can be interpreted from both a Buddhist and a societal perspective. *Dhamma* has no direct translation into English

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[14] Sircar, p. 45.
[15] Francesco Maniscalco, 'A New Interpretation of the Edicts of Asoka from Kandahar', *Annali Di Ca' Foscari. Serie Orientale* 54 (2018): p. 257.
[16] Maniscalco, p. 247.
[17] Dupree, p. 286.

but is a reference to the philosophical concepts of Indian religions, the word is used in both a spiritual and philosophical context, not just whilst describing Buddhism. In the inscription the phrase is translated into the Greek *eusebeia*, a similar phrase to that of *dhamma*, *eusebia* is a philosophical term that translates to inner piety. This word was used intentionally to ensure understanding of the new principles being promoted. Kosambi's analysis explains that *dhamma* in this context is not exclusive to Buddhism but is instead understood to mean an "innate natural law" that is observable to all regardless of religion and importantly, not conflicting with other's beliefs.[18] Even with the religious context as a secondary message, the influence of Buddhism on the Greek population provides us with an example of creolization, beginning with this interaction. Dupree writes that this is the first evidence of the spread of Buddhism so far to the West, and importantly this interaction occurs towards a Greek population at the westernmost point of the diaspora.[19]

As previously mentioned, this interaction is the beginning of a cultural evolution that we would see from the Greek population in the Indian subcontinent, and this can be seen by the evolution of terms used to refer to Buddhism. The concept of *dhammaka*, a term used to describe the King in reference to his Buddhist faith which is linked to the phrase *dhamma*, would be later translated by the Greek Buddhist king Menander as *dikaios*.[20] This is an important example of evolution from the Greek language in understanding these Buddhist concepts and adopting both the terms and the religion. This is an important example to use in highlighting the process of creolization as the inscription allows us to trace the initial contact of the Greeks with these Buddhist concepts. Creolization in this context comes from the adoption of the Indian religion of Buddhism and a focus on the principles the faith proposes. The move away from Greek traditions, instead adapting to their position in this new location, shows the ability of a Greek population to adopt a native ideal without necessarily transferring Greek cultural ideals. However, elements of Greek identity are retained, for example the Greek language, thus not completely separating this group from Greek culture. The evolution of these concepts from this initial contact creates this unique creole sub-identity, unique to the Greek population in this region. The Greco-Indian identity that forms from its inhabitation of areas such as Kandahar links back to the historic definition of creole, as the Greeks inhabit and transform their own identity in the new world they are interacting with.

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18 Kosambi, p. 204.
19 Dupree, p. 286-7.
20 Kosambi, p. 204.

The religious context of the Palmyrene inscription also allows us to examine cultural change in the region. The purpose of the inscription gives us information that the Greeks in Palmyra have adopted local practices to some extent, as they are included alongside the Palmyrenes in thanking the individual involved with the temple of Bel. This shows that some of the Greek population interacting with the Palmyrenes were involved with the Palmyrene deities. Greek interest in the temple of Bel is evidence that this site was of some importance to the wider community, as the Greeks involved in this inscription are merchants from Seleucia and presumably are not residents of Palmyra. Religious change in the ancient world was not necessarily exclusive to conversion from belief in the Greek gods to the Palmyrene, instead, deities were supported on a more local level allowing for adoption and adaptation of gods. Non-Palmyrene Greek involvement with the local deities implies an important cultural change taking place, even along trade routes. The wider context in Palmyra further shows the nature of this religious change. When discussing Palmyra, some historians often point out the combination of native Palmyrene and Greek imagery, implying that Greek cultural influence led to the combination of Greco-Palmyrene gods.[21] However, Finlayson explains that Palmyrene deities were representative of multiple differing identities. Some representations of a deity include Persian, Roman and Greek elements within the same image; this reflects the multicultural nature of the Palmyrene society.[22] Bryce further highlights that Palmyrene traditional cultural images remained present despite the state's nature as a "cosmopolitan society", with traditional Arab values and imagery continuously portrayed by Palmyrene deities.[23] The combination of multiple cultures in one deity allows the wider community to unite in worship of this deity despite other cultural differences. The creation of unique Greco-Palmyrene deities is more representative of unique creole sub-identities, rather than reflective of the whole community forming this identity. There was not only a unique Greco-Palmyrene identity represented by this cultural change but also a unique Persian-Palmyrene and Roman-Palmyrene identity. These identities were not exclusive but instead are reflected by the chosen language and imagery used to portray cultural identity. This creolization is the result of a unique form of interaction between imperial powers in a frontier location and it further highlights the diversity and complexity of cultural change.

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[21] Fergus Millar, *The Roman near east 31 BC - AD 337*, 4th Ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1993), p. 319.
[22] Cynthia Finlayson, 'Textile Exchange and Cultural and Gendered Cross-Dressing at Palmyra, Syria (100 BC—AD 272)', *in Textile Society of America 9th Biennial* Symposium (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska - Lincoln, 2004), p. 69.
[23] Bryce, p. 283.

These inscriptions are evidence of a process that we can begin to view on a wider scale whilst analysing Palmyra and Kandahar. In Palmyra, the cultural change seen in the inscription from the temple of Bel was the result of a larger process taking place beforehand. Friendly relations between the Palmyrenes and the Greeks can be seen by the Sheikh of Palmyra, Zadibel, fighting for the Seleucids at the battle of Raphia.[24] This is important as it shows that there were good relations between the Greeks and Palmyrenes and also that interaction took place between the two peoples. The evolution of Palmyrene society into a more urban centre saw the Palmyrenes adopt (perhaps in name only) Hellenistic style governance and Greek nomenclature.[25] [26] Influence can also be seen from elsewhere, as the Palmyrenes adopted Persian dress for funerary portraits, this was not done alone, as this Persian dress was combined with Greek and local Semitic clothing to create a unique blend of multiple cultures.[27] The unique combination of multiple cultures seen at Palmyra is further evidence of the creation of this creole culture. Similar to the process seen with deities, these identities were not limited to a combination of multiple cultures, with Greco-Semitic dress also evidence of the presence of sub-identities within Palmyra.[28] The temple of Bel is also an example of multicultural contributions. There is evidence that 3 individuals bearing Greek names were involved with the architecture and construction of the Temple.[29] Alongside this, it is suggested that the funding for the temple's construction initially came from Rome but was mainly funded by the Palmyrenes.[30] This is important as it shows the wide range of contribution to the temple by different culture groups, further highlighting the importance of this mixed cultural identity seen at Palmyra. It is also important to consider the very languages spoken at the time, as it is argued that Arabic would have been the most common language heard in Palmyra.[31] The prominence of Aramaic in inscription suggests that the language held greater cultural importance than Arabic, thus featured more prominently. The outward appearance of language is another element to consider when analysing cultural change, as evidence of the Greek language is not simply evidence of a Greek population but instead, could be evidence of a combination of different groups choosing to use Greek.

However, the Kandahar inscription is the first piece of evidence found of cultural change in the Indian subcontinent and its wider context details the beginning of this process. The initially Hellenocentric interpretation of the inscription helps us to understand the

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[24] Stoneman, p. 52.
[25] Stoneman, p. 53.
[26] Bryce, p. 280.
[27] Finlayson, p. 63.
[28] Finlayson, p. 63.
[29] Stoneman, p. 54.
[30] Bryce, p. 279.
[31] Bryce, p. 280.

process that took place. The inscription allows us to place a population of Greek-speaking people at the frontier of the old Seleucid territory, it does not prove that the inscription is Greek in nature or that this Greek-speaking population largely influenced local culture.[32] The Greek population at Kandahar were most likely descended from Greek settlers to newly founded cities such as Alexandria Arachosia, settling within Alexander the Great's empire. The Greeks were then under the Seleucid Empire before eventually coming under Mauryan control. If we presume this inscription is addressing the population of Alexandria Arachosia then we can observe that this Greek settled city contained a numerous amount of native Kamboja people, enough to be addressed by this edict. Following this, we can suggest that during the time period between the settling of Alexandria Arachosia and the creation of this inscription, elements of cultural change would have taken place. However, due to the geopolitical situation in Afghanistan, the excavations in Kandahar have been disrupted and thus we can only theorise that a similar process of combining cultures took place. Kandahar would eventually come under the rule of Bactria, and it is from there we can start to see the resulting process of cultural change taking place. Buddhism, as well as broader Indian philosophical beliefs, would later be adopted by the Bactrian king Menander. Menander's conversion, alongside the cohabitation of Greek and Kamboja peoples, is certainly evidence enough to suggest that some form of cultural change took place, resulting in a unique Greco-Indian identity. However, we are limited by the material in this location to make any more contextual assessments.

It is evident that cultural change in the Hellenistic period took place on a large scale between multiple different groups of people. The combination of identities can certainly be viewed through the lens of the process of creolization. Although a more modern model, creolization allows us to view culture as a spectrum of output, aiding us in assessing the formation of unique sub-identities. At both Kandahar and Palmyra, multiple cultures inter-mix with each other resulting in a unique combination of culture. This cultural formation is unique to the area it takes place and can take in many different shapes and forms, not only in language but also in religion, dress, and governance. The existence of combined mixed identities such as Greco-Palmyrene and Greco-Indian, and the ability for these identities to form simultaneously at the same location, progress the current views of cultural change that suggest cultural interaction is more rigid and monochrome. The fluidity of culture, as defined by the process of creolization, helps us to understand the intricate differences between cultures, as well as the intimate and personal nature of cultural change.

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[32] Carlo Gallavotti, 'The Greek Version of the Kandahar Bilingual Inscription of Asoka' *East and West* 3 (1959), p. 185; Umberto Scerrato, *'*An Inscription of Asoka Discovered in Afghanistan The Bilingual Greek-Aramaic of Kandahar*', East and West* 9 (1958), p. 5.

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