Introduction

Signification and cultural performance in Roman imperial Syria

The processes of Greek and Roman imperialism charged many social prac-
tices of the Near East with new significance. One such practice was the
worship of metal standards. Assyrians had worshipped metal standards,
and as Rome exerted authority in the Near East, the inhabitants of Hatra
in Mesopotamia venerated the Roman legionary standard as a divinity
named Samya.[1] Yet, the Hatrenes charged Samya with new meanings con-
forming to their conceptual universe. Significantly, their "translation" of
Samya transformed a military tool and "sign" of Roman imperialism into
an expression of local subjectivity. In fact, the Latin and Greek words for a
standard, *signum* and *sēmeion*, also meant "sign," and "Samya" was perhaps
an Aramaic transliteration of *sēmeion*. The Hatrenes had appropriated the
"sign" of Roman imperialism and recast it as a divinity through which they
signified "Hatreneness" amid Roman encroachment.

Under Greek and Roman imperialism, how provincial subjects organized
and charged with meaning material objects and symbols dictated cultural
politics and community formation in the Near East. The divine standard's
"signification" or "semantics" were thereby complex; Greek, Roman, and
Near Eastern traditions shaped their formation.[2] Also complex is how local
communities recast this symbol of Roman imperialism. A Parthian vassal,
Hatra repulsed two Roman invasions and only admitted Roman legions
amid the Sasanian threat of the 230s CE. The city never underwent the
ideological reorientation of the Greek city-states that Roman imperialism
had sustained in its eastern territories, and Hatrenes primarily used their
local Aramaic dialect until the Sasanians destroyed the city in 241 CE. By

---

[1] Sommer (2003a) 79, no. 114; Drijvers (1977) 834–35; Dirven (2009) 54–55 discuss the "standard"
along with a notable relief in which it appears with the god Nergal. Hatrean inscriptions H3, 52, 56,
65, 74–75, 79, 82, 151, 200–1, 209, 235, 338, 384(?), 1007, 1008a, 1010 attest.
[2] Dirven (2005). Dirven (2006–07) 379–80 treats standards in cult processions. Goldman (1999) 87,
Fig. 13–14: pictograms.

I

integrating Samya into their eclectic pantheon, the Hatrenes transformed the Roman legionary standard from a tool and signifier of Roman supremacy into a divine presence.[3] In fact, when Roman legions besieged Hatra in 198–199, they were repulsed by its king Abd-Samya (servant of Samya).

Yet, not all Near Eastern societies worshiped the "sign" of Rome's legionary standard in opposition to Greek civic life and Roman imperialism during this period. In fact, the "sign" that it represented was so polyvalent that it accommodated numerous significations. In Dura-Europos, *Europaioi* arguably integrated it into cult practices through which they expressed ethnic Greekness even while worshipping the Syrian divinity Atargatis and her consort.[4] Likewise, *On the Syrian Goddess*, a text of Lucian of Samosata, indicates that the significance of the standard or "sign" was so expansive that it encapsulated no single meaning or likeness. But it still bore images of numerous divinities. Its narrator states:

> Between both [Zeus and the Assyrian Hera] another golden statue stands, without resembling the other statues at all. It has no specific likeness (*morphēn*), but it bears images (*eidea*) of the other gods. It is called "standard/sign" (*sēmēïon*) even by the Assyrians themselves. And they have not ascribed any specific name (*ounoma*) to it, nor do they even say anything of its origin and its image (*eideos*).[5]

As the examples above indicate, signs are pregnant with polyvalent, unstable, and "multiform" significances. Their meanings depend on the demands of social, discursive, and performative contexts within which subjects act.[6] Syrians could thus perform the part of Greeks or Romans while embracing Near Eastern cultural idioms and practices, and they could produce new expressions of Syrianness by cultivating Greek and Roman ones.

The polyvalence of Lucian's "sign" thereby marks the variability through which Greekness could be expressed, and such complexity is one of this study's central topics. As it argues, Syrians of diverse cultural persuasions

---

[3] Likewise, Appadurai (1996) 91–105 discusses cricket's translation from a "British" to an "Indian" national pastime in decolonized India.

[4] *TEAD* 3, Pl. 14. Chapter 7 discusses Dura-Europos' temple of Atargatis.

[5] Lucian, *Syr. D.* 33. Elsner (2001b) 138–39; Richter (2011) 239–40 analyze Lucian's description. More literally, divine images often decorated standards. Chapters 9–10 discuss *On the Syrian Goddess* as a second-century Lucianic text.

[6] This study uses "discourse" and "performance" to describe how social agents, who navigate the constraints of social contexts, establish and maintain identifications and positions (even if unstable) before scrutinizing audiences through the spoken or written word, visible markers of status, and repeated physical acts. Bourdieu, Bakhtin, Butler, Foucault, Lacan, and various post-colonial thinkers, whom this work cites more specifically later, variously constitute (but not exhaustively) the theoretical basis for my usage.

participated in the civic life of the Greek *polis* (city-state), and the authoritative frameworks of Syria's *poleis* determined their Greek affiliations amid their cultivation of signs and material performances of Near Eastern origin. In fact, *poleis* produced fields of signification that interwove Greek and local symbols to redefine what spoken discourses, modes of performance, and objects were "Greek." In such discursive and performative fields, Syria's inhabitants reconstituted the categories of "Greek," "Syrian," "Roman," "Arab," and "Phoenician" in ways that enabled citizens to express Greek identifications with Near Eastern symbols and local, regional, or even indigenous ones with Greek idioms.[7] In some instances, such Greeks recast Greek signs as "Syrian" and Syrian signs as "Greek." They even sometimes spoke Aramaic and implemented Near Eastern or "hybrid" material practices instead of adopting classical Greek idioms.[8] They in fact reshaped and reconstituted expressions of Greekness (and its Roman and Syrian counterparts) amid the material and symbolic constraints that socio-economic and political contexts imposed. Moreover, inhabitants of Roman imperial Syria perhaps never created a universal "Syrian" culture embedded only in Near Eastern traditions. But they produced experiences of Syrian culture, with its local and regional variations, by cultivating Greek symbols or interweaving Greek and Near Eastern ones.

Lucian's suggestion that Greekness was polyvalent, complex, unstable, and embedded in diverse images, symbols, or idioms receives validation from an inscribed pillar erected in central India *c.* 110 BCE. In the inscription, Heliodoros, son of Dion, of Taxila offered his pillar to the Hindu divinity Vishnu, "the god of gods." Heliodoros' inscription was in Prakit, and it defined Heliodoros as "the Greek (*Yona*) ambassador of king" Antialkidas of Taxila.[9] Although far afield from Syria, his pillar shows that Greekness was not always embedded in Greek language or the worship of classical Greek divinities, as do "Buddhist" inscriptions that Yavanas or Yonakas (Greeks) raised in India.[10] In certain contexts, Greekness was expressed through idioms that classical Greeks deemed "barbarous," and this suggests that in Syria the cultivation of Aramaic, Near Eastern divinities, or Near Eastern material cultures could be embedded in Greek performance. Greekness (or Greek culture) was not a static, universal category. It was not always classical or homogenous.[11]

[7] Bowersock (1990) 7–9 describes how Syrians expressed local identifications through Hellenism.
[8] Butcher (2003) 281–83, 332–34; Sommer (2004a) 154–59; Versluys (2008) raise such issues. Eco (1976) 27–28 posits that all objects or entities can become symbolic phenomena and be inserted into systems of cultural units on which their semantic function depends.
[9] *IGSK* 65.409; Karttunen (1997) 297; Burstein (2003) 234, (2010) 185.   [10] Lerner (1999–2000).
[11] Burstein (2003) 227–40.

In this work, "culture" is defined as a dynamic system of idioms that symbolize and mark social, ethnic, or institutional sameness or difference. But if culture expresses social identifications, cultural frameworks still transform, shift boundaries, and integrate foreign idioms over time.[12] Even as Greek culture (Greekness) signified social, ethnic, or civic boundaries, its constituent parts sometimes differed from classical Greek idioms, symbols, and practices. In other words, what modern scholars uniformly label Greek culture is not necessarily what inhabitants of the ancient Near East experienced as Greek culture, or the idioms that expressed Greek social affiliations. The same principle governs Roman, Syrian, and other types of social identification and their cultural expressions. To convey such premises, this study uses "Greekness" to describe the transforming expressions of culture and the interweaving of diverse cultural idioms that subjects associated with their own Greek identifications, whether ethnic, social, citizen, or otherwise. It by contrast employs "Greek culture" or variations thereof to describe "classical" idioms, symbols, and practices that scholars typically treat as Greek.[13] In this sense, Greekness (what subjects framed as their Greek culture) in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East sometimes interwove idioms of heterogeneous origins, including Greek cultural idioms (as scholars normally define them) and those of Near Eastern ethnicities or societies.

From the reign of Antiochus IV (175–164 BCE) to the ascendancy of the Palmyrene dynasts (260–70s CE), the Greek communities of Syria did not express Greekness uniformly, nor did Syrians (who were often also Greeks) articulate Syrianness in a single standard way. Material conditions made this impossible. The region possessed many ethnicities, distinct social communities, and diverse ways for expressing identification categories. Many inhabitants of the Near East belonged to numerous overlapping groups determined by patrilineal genealogy, such as clans, "tribes," or ethnicities. Local subjects often experienced ethnic sameness through perceptions of kinship encapsulated by the terms *ethnos*, *phylē*, or *genos*, whether these were clans, "tribes," ethnicities, or races.[14] Such ethnic or social classifications

---

[12] Although "culture" is a debated concept, Whitmarsh (2001a) 37 defines it as "a dynamic social system providing the structures that enable and limit the construction of identity positions." This study examines how civic performances shaped culture, and vice versa.

[13] The same principles govern "Romanness" and "Syrianness" and their relationship to Roman, Greek, and Near Eastern cultural idioms. Although this study uses "Near Eastern" generically for idioms not introduced to the Near East by Greeks or Romans, it employs ethnically or socially specific labels (Syrians, Phoenician, etc.) whenever possible.

[14] Hall (1997) 25–33 defines "ethnicity" as the location of putative common descent in ways determining social interaction. Brubaker (2004a) 17–18; Brubaker *et al.* (2004) 64–87 emphasize that ethnicity is

intersected with Greek citizenship.[15] The categories of "Greek," "Roman," and "Syrian" were therefore not essential and unchanging classifications articulated through a stable or universal set of symbols. Imperial subjects produced these categories by enacting performances of ancestral, practical, or socio-political sameness and cultivating diverse cultural symbols that expressed it. They had significant points of intersection, and their formulations were embedded in the discursive and performative context through which the Greek *polis* generated perceptions of commonality.[16] Greek citizens, with their discrete "cultures," could belong to numerous ethnicities or social groups, with their own respective, yet intersecting, "cultures."

Within the Greek *polis'* conceptual framework, the categories of "Greek" and "Syrian" and their constituent parts underwent continual change during the Seleucid, Parthian, and Roman periods. The demands of various contexts and perspectives shaped them. In certain instances, the categories intersected and encompassed the same people or communities; in others, they did not. Because of this, one cannot define "Syrian" or "Greek" from the outset. This work in fact illustrates how the rhetorical and practical strategies of social subjects constituted these categories in various ways. One constant, as this study proposes, was that the discourses and performances of the Greek *polis* foremost defined, reconstituted, or eradicated conceptual and practical boundaries between Greeks and Syrians. Yet, these boundaries changed. Ethnic Syrians possessed Greek citizenship and signified Greek identifications under the Romans in ways that they had not under the Seleucids. As the Roman empire determined new socio-political, regional, and judicial categories, especially by organizing Greek peer polity networks into provinces and *koina*, Syrians expressed new forms of local subjectivity as they navigated or reinterpreted such categories.[17]

In other words, the formation of Greek and Syrian social identifications in the Seleucid and Roman Near East depended on imperial structuring.

a mode of cognition and categorical framing, not necessarily a group implementing mass organized action. This work does not address race, but it sometimes discusses how Greeks and Romans ascribed to Syrians hereditary traits. Isaac (2004); Buell (2005); Lape (2010) 31–52 analyze race's significance, mutability, and difference from ethnicity.

[15] A Greek citizen could trace a "non-Greek" ethnic genealogy. In a dedication, Pouplios Ailios Germanos, a civic councilor of Canatha, claims that he is "of the [sons] of *Bennathē*," a putative kinship group, "tribe," or ethnicity. Waddington (1870) 2339.

[16] Following Cooper and Brubaker (2005) 59–90, I generally refrain from using the word "identity," whose "hard" and "weak" usages in current scholarship either oversimplify social affiliations or fail to map consistent sameness over time.

[17] Whitmarsh (2010a); Ando (2010) frame the "global" and "local" as mutually constituting and treat imperialism as framing provincial subjectivities. Kaizer (2005) 204; (2006a) 41–47 stresses the importance of establishing local perspectives on Near Eastern religion.

The Seleucid and Roman imperial powers imposed cultural and civic categories upon Syria's landscape. Both endeavored to control it despite its geographic vulnerability to invasion from the Mediterranean or Iran.[18] Yet, they did so while categorizing the Near East's populations in different ways. Amid their imperial consolidation, the Seleucid Greeks defined a Syrian *ethnos*. They situated Aramaic-speakers in this ethnic category because they believed them to be descended from ancient Assyrians or Arameans.[19]

The Seleucids inherited their conception of an (As)Syrian *ethnos* from classical Greeks, who generally deemed Syrians and Assyrians identical. In the fifth century BCE, the historian Herodotus noted that those whom Persians called Assyrians were Syrians for Greeks. Under the emperor Augustus, the geographer Strabo retained this usage by describing the inhabitants of the neo-Assyrian empire (including Babylonia) as "Assyrian" and "Syrian."[20] A bilingual Luwian-Phoenician inscription (eighth century BCE) clarifies why Greeks conflated Syrians and Assyrians. The Phoenician portion labeled Assyrians as " ʾSHRYM," but the Luwian listed them as "su+ra/i-wa/i-za-ha(URBS)," which means "that Syrian House."[21] Seventh-century Neo-Assyrian texts also variously called Assyrians *Assūrāyu* and *Sūrāyu*.[22] Amid their contact with the Near East, classical Greeks therefore adopted the interchangeable use of "Syrian" and "Assyrian." Such usage was not uniform. Herodotus also routinely located Syria west of the Euphrates, and the Seleucid Greeks administered the districts of Seleucis, Coele Syria, and Commagene, in which they situated "Syrians" defined more restrictively.[23] But the conflation of Syrians and Assyrians still persisted.

By contrast, the Arameans were distinct from (As)Syrians in pre-Hellenistic times. The Seleucids complicated this distinction. Since "(As)Syrians" and "Arameans" by Achaemenid Persian rule often spoke Aramaic and shared cultural practices, Greeks increasingly categorized them as the same ethnicity, or thought that "Arameans" were what (As)Syrians

---

[18] G. Fowden (1993) 17–19 examines the Fertile Crescent's lack of "long-term political autonomy" in antiquity. Grainger (2010) 1–10 likewise for Syria.

[19] In the late second and early first millennium, as the Assyrians conquered the various Aramean kingdoms and deported Arameans into their interior, they increasingly shared language and cultural attributes. Kepinksi and Tenu (2009); Parpola (2004) 1–15; Beaulieu (2005).

[20] Hdt. 7.63; Strabo, 16.1.1–2; with Pomponius Mela 1.62–63; Pompeius Trogus via Justin 1.2.13; Pliny, *NH* 5.66–82. Likewise, Xen., *Anabasis* 1.4.19 uses Syria to describe what Persian kings called "Assyria," as the royal inscriptions of Briant (2002) 173 indicate. Frye (1992) 281–85 argues that "Syrian" and "Assyrian," as used by Greeks, described the same people.

[21] Rollinger (2006) 284–85, from a relief of Tarhunzas/Bel found near Adana.

[22] Parpola (2004) 16–17.

[23] Hdt. 2.104 and 3.5; Strabo, 16.2 (esp. 1–3). Capdetrey (2007) 244–50; Cotton and Wörrle (2007); Gera (2009) document and discuss such districts.

called themselves. These views penetrated Roman-era works. In the first
century CE, Josephus noted that the legendary figure Aramus had ruled
the Arameans, whom the "Greeks call Syrians." Strabo, citing Posido-
nius, stated that the people named Syrians by the Greeks called themselves
Arameans.[24] Greeks thereby often defined Assyrians, Syrians, and Arameans
to constitute the same society that inhabited a vast landscape containing
Syria proper, classical Assyria, Babylonia, and in between.

The (As)Syrian/Aramean *ethnos* that Seleucid Greeks had defined, in
its most exclusive and inclusive terms, suffered economic exploitation.
Syrian villages facilitated the economic stability of Greek *poleis* and colonies,
and Greeks did not integrate ethnic Syrians into their communities.
Syrians conceded land to Greek settlers and conferred tribute upon a
royal administration controlled by ethnic Greeks. Many Syrian peasants
paid rents or labored for Greek landlords. Otherwise, temple communi-
ties governed localities, without implementing Greek civic systems.[25] The
Seleucid empire accordingly ruled the Syrian *ethnos* as a subject ethnicity,
whether Greeks called it Syrian, Assyrian, or Aramean, and however they
defined it in various contexts. Even as the Seleucids treated Syrians as the
"indigenous" population residing in districts west of the Euphrates, the
premise that Syrians were in ethnic terms Assyrians/Arameans persisted.

The Romans and their client kings, however, reoriented the category
"Syrian" in ways that collapsed the distinction between Greek *politeia* and
Syrian *ethnos* over time. According to Roman-era perceptions, the Syrian
ethnos was a meaningful regional and social category informed by civic
criteria. As such, it was not an ethnicity defined by putative genealogy.
It also did not coordinate uniform mass action, and its constituent parts
shifted and incrementally expanded. But over time it still engendered a
social coherence and cognition sustained by a Greek peer polity network
that constituted the structuring principle of the "Syrian" province(s) and
its *koina* affiliations. While interspersed by "Arab" peoples, it included the
inhabitants of regions west of the Euphrates where ethnic Syrians, Phoeni-
cians, or, in certain contexts, Judeans or Cilicians dwelled.[26] In 63 BCE,

---

[24] Josephus, *AJ* 1.143–45; Strabo, 1.2.34 and 16.4.27 (Radt (2002-11) 5.132; 8.250–52; 8.395 adds clarity).
But Josephus, informed by Jewish scripture, distinguishes Arameans from Assyrians. Millar (1993a)
7–11 on Josephus is instructive.

[25] Van de Mieroop (2007) 282–85, 296 discusses how temple hierarchies structured urban community
and rural land.

[26] Strabo, 16.2 (esp. 1–3) includes among Syrians the inhabitants of Seleucis, Coele Syria, Com-
magene, and greater Phoenicia (which extended beyond classical Phoenicia, along the coast to
Gaza/Pelusium). The integration of greater Judea occurred incrementally over the first century CE,
with Hadrian's Syria Palestina being its fulfillment. The Severans incorporated Mesopotamian lands.
The "Arabs" (16.2.10–11, 18, 20) of "Parapotamia" and various rugged or dry regions (MacDonald

Pompey had circumscribed this *ethnos*, except for Commagene, Judea, and a patchwork of principalities, within a single province (*eparcheia*) and framed it as a regional social category with civic implications. Strabo, even while conflating ethnic Assyrians and Syrians, accordingly observed that "those called Syrian today" resided west of the Euphrates, in Roman Syria.[27] Thereafter citizens of Greek cities in Syria or Phoenicia assumed identifications as Greeks and Syrians, and people whom the Seleucids categorized as ethnic Syrians earned citizenship in Greek *poleis*, thereby becoming "legitimately Greek." Amid this process, "colonizers" and "colonized" became increasingly indistinct; "Greek" and "Syrian" described communities of citizens that shared civic performances.[28]

The scope of this study imposes certain limits. Because it focuses on the formation and impact of Greek *poleis* and citizenship, its narrative omits many important topics and materials. These include Syria's complex topographies and ecologies, rural life, economic trends, habitation patterns, infrastructure, political boundaries, Roman administrative tenures, experiences of Roman military intervention, cult practices, temple architecture, and (generally) Judeo-Christian writings and practices.[29] The shifts in funerary practices that Roman imperialism induced in cities and rural areas and their impact on gendered, civic, ethnic, or social presentation among elites and non-elites do not undergo examination.[30] In fact, much of the Near East's environmental determinants and its voluminous material culture cannot receive treatment, even at sites like Palmyra and Dura-Europos. This work also cannot explore the rise of Syriac in Osrhoene and its role in expressing Assyrian, Aramean, or Syrian identification and memory under late antique Roman, Persian, and Islamic Arab rule.[31] Finally, it cannot scrutinize which late antique or medieval Latin, Greek, Hebrew,

---

[27] (2009) 280–83 lists "Arab" regions) were included over time. My text references the form of the Syrian *ethnos* appropriate to the period discussed. Chapters 3; 6 clarify "Arabs."

[27] Strabo, 16.1.2. Josephus, *AJ* 18.1–2 describes how Judeans were integrated into the Syrian *ethnos* and its province *c.* 6 CE. Ando (2010) 31–40 treats Roman organization of provinces in spatial, geographical, and juridical terms.

[28] Imperial affairs constitute an "intricate web of relations," not simple dichotomies between colonizer and colonized. Comaroff (1997) 165.

[29] Villages and rural surveys receive treatment *passim*. Freyberger (1998); Steinsapir (2005): temples and rural sanctuaries. Dąbrowa (1998): Roman governors. Isaac (1990); Pollard (2000); Gebhardt (2002); De Giorgi (2007); Edwell (2008); Sommer (2004a): the military, frontier defense, or their impact. My account integrates other works whenever relevant.

[30] De Jong (2007); (2010).

[31] See for example Brock (1998); Brock, with Taylor (2001); Dalley (1998) on Mesopotamia, with Salveson's treatment of Aramaic sources; Healey (2007); Shepardson (2009); Walker (2006); Becker (2008); Haar Romeny (2009); Wood (2010); Andrade (2010–2011).

Syriac, or Arabic texts offer useful data for this period.[32] It prioritizes contemporary sources, when possible.

Because the civic contexts of Greek *poleis* were so significant in defining "Greek" and "Syrian," this study explores Greek civic communities and the categorization of "Syrian" in the Near East. It pursues a roughly chronological narrative from the reign of the Seleucid king Antiochus IV (175–164 BCE) to the end of the Palmyrene Roman empire (273 CE). The dispositions of Greek *poleis* in Syria are not consistently documented. The quality of evidence differs in time, place, and sources, whether literary, epigraphic, numismatic, or archaeological. Accordingly, this study traces the dispositions of Greek *poleis* in Roman Syria and some adjacent territories, but it focuses on instances in which materials, especially inscriptions and remains of urban landscapes, are sufficiently ample to illuminate how certain *poleis* were constituted at specific times and places over four centuries. Through this episodic approach and its test cases, it delineates transformations in Syria's Greek civic communities and their performances of Greekness. The following sections outline how.

Greek *poleis* and the Syrian *ethnos* (Part I)

In *On the Syrian Goddess*, Lucian stages an "Assyrian" narrator who describes the temple of "Assyrian Hera" at Hierapolis for a Greek audience. In this second-century Greek text, the narrator significantly indicates that Syrians, whom he describes in archaizing terms as "Assyrians," had integrated Greek narratives into their aetiologies for their discretely (As)Syrian temple and rites. According to one account that Hierapolis' priests told him, Dionysus had dedicated the original temple to Hera. Intriguingly, the narrator classifies this account as a "barbarian" one that generally agrees with those of Greeks. "Signs" (*sēmata*) for this foundation were stones, clothing, and ivory horns that Dionysus brought from "Ethiopia" and an inscription that Dionysus had dedicated, apparently in Greek. Moreover, sculptures of wooden men with large phalli that Greeks dedicated to Dionysus (*neuropasta*) also adorned the site.[33]

Chapter 10 examines the ludic and parodic complexities of Lucian's *On the Syrian Goddess* and its implications for contemporary Syrian cultural politics. But several points that it raises have bearing on Part I. The first is that Lucian's testimony regarding the adoption and adaptation of Greek

---

[32] As Ramelli (2009a) does for the fifth-century *Teaching of Addai*.
[33] *Syr. D.* 1, 11, 16. Lightfoot (2003) 334: Dionysian myth as "barbarian." Lucian's text simplifies the origins of objects. Lightfoot (2003) 363–74 (esp. 368–69).

narratives has parallels elsewhere in the Roman imperial Near East.[34] In
the second-century Hauran, the villagers of Soada (*Soadēnoi/Soadeēneis*)
became citizens of a new *polis*, perhaps Dionysias, and produced civic
structures and monuments typifying Roman imperial Greek *poleis*. They
boasted in a Greek inscription that Dionysus was their civic founder, but
they still belonged to "tribes" that bore indigenous ancestral names and were
perhaps clan-based even if acting in civic capacities.[35] The second point is
that the cultural systems of Syria were dynamic. They transformed and inte-
grated new idioms to accommodate shifting imperial contexts. The third
is that Syrian culture(s), which this work defines as the varied accretions
of idioms through which Syrians expressed Syrianness, often incorporated
Greek idioms.[36] Syrian cultural expressions occupied a vast spectrum of
diversity, were locally or regionally variable, and were not pegged solely to
Near Eastern languages and practices. In Lucian's account, the "barbarian"
myths and "signs" (*sēmata*) for Dionysus' foundation of Hierapolis' temple,
derived from Greek narratives, were integral to how priests and pilgrims
expressed their (As)Syrian past. After all, signs are unstable and polyvalent;
subjects give them new significance in different contexts or endow them
simultaneously with multiple overlapping saliences.

With such complexities in mind, Part 1 explores the shifting forma-
tions of the Syrian *ethnos* and Syria's Greek *poleis* during the late Seleucid
and early Roman imperial periods. It maps how ethnic Syrians became
citizens of Greek *poleis*, how their expressions of Greekness integrated
Near Eastern idioms, and how the Syrian *ethnos* fostered cognition of
social (not ethnic) commonality amid Roman imperialism. It also delin-
eates the diversity of cultural idioms that constituted Syrian culture(s)
for the Syrian *ethnos*' members. It thereby challenges the perspective that
no Syrian culture existed in Roman imperial Syria.[37] This perspective
premises that inhabitants of certain parts of Syria cultivated Aramaic
dialects, "Semitic" onomastics, and Near Eastern material forms and prac-
tices in ways that imply continuity from pre-Hellenistic times. But as it
correctly stresses, such continuity was not regionally consistent. Not all
parts of Roman imperial Syria provide evidence for it, and when they
do, different Near Eastern precedents (such as Aramean, Phoenician, and

---

[34] Inscriptions and coins at Nysa-Scythopolis accredit Dionysus as founder. Di Segni (1997) 140–43;
Belayche (2009b) 174–79.

[35] Waddington (1870) 2307–9 (=*IGR* 3.1275–77), 2370: *phylē Somaithēnōn* and *Bitaiēnōn*. Sartre (1982)
85–86, (2001a) 644; MacAdam (1986) 71–74, 108–109, 122, 128 deem the tribes civic. Dentzer *et al.*
(2010) 147–58 discuss Soada's urban formation.

[36] Bowersock (1990) 7–9; Kaizer (2011) provide important analysis.

[37] Millar (1993a) 492–93, 523; Sartre (2008): 34–35.