

India—Diplomacy and Ethnography at the Mauryan Frontier

From Alexander the Great's death at Babylon in 323 until the first decades of the third century the lands over which he had ruled were convulsed by the ambitions, assassinations, and alliances of his greatest generals. With almost forty years of warfare and betrayal, vertiginous collapse and unexpected rise, it is no surprise that *Tychē*, capricious Fate, achieves new causal prominence in the historiography of this period.¹ But if we stand at a distance from what Braudel called history's "crests of foam," we can understand the playing out of the succession crisis as the birth pangs of a new, but not unfamiliar, world order: the peer-kingdom international system.

Alexander's kingdom, like the Achaemenid imperial structure he conquered and reelaborated, was a hegemonic world empire characterized by an emphasis on totality and exclusivity.² The Persian Great King and Alexander monopolized legitimate sovereignty and recognized no entity as external and equivalent. The fragmentation of this all-embracing imperial formation after Alexander's death and the stabilization of independent kingdoms multiplied the royal persona and state. A diachronic succession of world-empires (Achaemenids to Alexander) was replaced with the synchronic coexistence of bounded kingdoms. The emergence of a few "Great Powers" (Antigonid Macedonia, Ptolemaic Egypt, Seleucid Asia, as well as Attalid Pergamum, Mauryan India, the Anatolian kingdoms, and Rome) gradually developed into a system of peer states with semiformalized procedures of interaction. In other words, the east Mediterranean–west Asian region settled back into the multipolarity that had characterized it in the Neo-Babylonian period, immediately before Cyrus' conquests and the foundation of the Persian empire, and in the famous Late Bronze Age of Amarna.³

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dian emperor is not known in detail—an obscurity that has tempted modern historians to political allegory and forgery.¹⁵ Certainly, Seleucus crossed his forces over the river Indus, so invading India proper,¹⁶ but whether Seleucid and Mauryan armies fought a pitched battle is still debated. Whatever happened, at some point, in a momentous and foundational act of the new world order, Seleucus and Chandragupta decided to make peace. The ancient historians Justin, Appian, and Strabo preserve the three main terms of what I will call the Treaty of the Indus:¹⁷

- (i) Seleucus transferred to Chandragupta's kingdom the easternmost satrapies of his empire, certainly Gandhara, Parapamisadae, and the eastern parts of Gedrosia,¹⁸ and possibly also Arachosia and Aria as far as Herat.¹⁹
- (ii) Chandragupta gave Seleucus 500 Indian war elephants.²⁰
- (iii) The two kings were joined by some kind of marriage alliance (*ἐπιγαμία* or *κῆδος*); most likely Chandragupta wed a female relative of Seleucus.²¹

The terms are interrelated: Seleucus' receipt of elephants is framed as an exchange (Strabo's verb is *ἀντιλαμβάνω*, "I take in return") for the territory or the marriage, and the marriage itself may have functioned as the security and guarantee of the treaty, with the ceded land considered a dowry.²²

This territory-for-elephants exchange was mutually beneficial. Geopolitically, Seleucus abandoned territories he could never securely hold in favor of peace and security in the east: the treaty and elephants allowed him to turn his attention to his rival, Antigonos Monophthalmus, Syria, and the Mediterranean.²³ Chandragupta gained unchallenged expansion into India's northwest corridor.²⁴ His gift of elephants may have alleviated the burden of fodder and the return march. Ambassadors and caravans, not conquering armies, would now pass through the intermediate zone. Moreover, the fact and terms of the treaty were a recognition of equal, royal status for kings who lacked the legitimacy of appointment or inheritance. It is even possible that Seleucus used the occasion of this treaty—a wedding on the Indus?—for formally completing his long march from satrap to king.²⁵

The Treaty of the Indus was a constitutive act of the Hellenistic state system, creating the Seleucid empire's eastern frontier by transferring land out of Seleucus' control. This act of delimitation marked the boundary of Seleucid power and sovereign claims. As such, it was a radical departure

from two centuries of Achaemenid and Alexandrian universalist pretensions. Persian kings had recognized no independent, equal monarchy to its east, and in Achaemenid geography, as far as it can be grasped through its Herodotean and Ctesian refractions, the world simply faded into nothingness beyond Persia's imperial possessions in India. The eastern boundary of Alexander's conquests was more problematic. From its outset, his *anabasis* had been a relentless march toward the eastern edge of the world; he was halted only at the Hyphasis river by an army mutiny, a form of internal historical agent entirely consistent with his empire's effacement of external powers. By contrast, the termination of Seleucus' eastern conquest was externally motivated. Seleucus, like Alexander, crossed the river Indus (a metonymy for royal invasion),²⁶ but he met his equal, Chandragupta. In other words, diplomacy is to bounded political space what mutiny is to universal political space. The new world order's multicentrism results in a historical narrative of multiple agency.

The terms of the treaty, no doubt much negotiated, indicate an economy of exchange. Space is convertible. Seleucid power was not yet embedded in a defined territory: its eastern lands function, like Chandragupta's elephants, as one resource of the kingdom. The very fact of the treaty's territorial clause indicates that land was still a possession to be negotiated over and divided up unproblematically. Moreover, the treaty created new spatial units, ignoring the boundaries of ethnic communities and the historical precedents of Achaemenid and Alexandrian imperialism.

The Treaty of the Indus satisfactorily secured the eastern periphery of the Seleucid empire and the western periphery of the Mauryan empire. The Seleucid frontier with the Indian kingdom, settled once and for all, never became an important location for the legitimating of monarchic identity through territorial claims or military aggression; there was no attempt to reconquer the ceded territories or to redraw the border, a clear contrast to the ping-pong regions of Coele Syria and Asia Minor. Likewise, the Mauryan kingdom, satisfied with its territorial gains in the northwest, appears to have turned its attentions eastward and southward.²⁷ Friendly contacts were maintained by Seleucid diplomats resident in the Mauryan capital, Pataliputra (Gr. Palimbothra, mod. Patna), including, as we will see, Seleucus I's envoy Megasthenes, and it is very probable that Chandragupta's representatives were attached to the Seleucid court; his grandson Ashoka certainly sent them.²⁸ Relations continued into the kingdoms' second generation: Strabo reports that Megasthenes was replaced by Deimachus, am-

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bassador of Seleucus' successor, Antiochus I, to Chandragupta's successor, Amitrochates (Bindusara).²⁹

In the new context of permanent, amicable diplomacy opened by the Treaty of the Indus, the land-for-elephants agreement was reperformed as regular, ceremonial gift-giving, exchanges that generated solidarity and renewed equality of rank, as in the Bronze Age "Great Powers" system of Amarna diplomacy,³⁰ rather than functioning as unidirectional signs of subservience, as in Persepolitan imperialism.³¹ The Hellenistic historian Phylarchus, in a passage preserved by Athenaeus, indicates that Chandragupta sent Seleucus a gift package, including Indian aphrodisiacs.³² The incense trees that Seleucus attempted to import by sea from India³³ and the tigers he sent to the Athenians (see Chapter 4) may well have originated as Chandragupta's diplomatic gifts. Athenaeus repeats Hegesander's report that Chandragupta's son, Amitrochates (Bindusara), requested from Antiochus I wine, figs, and a sophist. Antiochus responded, ἰσχάδας μὲν καὶ γλυκὺν ἀποστελοῦμέν σοι, σοφιστὴν δ' ἐν Ἑλλήσιν οὐ νόμιμον πωλεῖσθαι, "The figs and sweet wine we will send you, but it is not lawful among the Greeks for a sophist to be sold."³⁴ This delightful passage demonstrates not only that the diplomatic gift exchange between the Seleucid and Mauryan kings was well known and recorded by contemporary authors but also that it was imagined to be open to curiosity, request, negotiation, and refusal: giving is complemented by keeping.³⁵ The frequency with which the exchanged gifts appear to be of an ethnographic character may be a consequence of our sources' paradoxographical preferences, but the sending of figs eastward or tigers westward could only reinforce the new world order's assertion of independent, essentially external territories.

Almost a century after Seleucus I had given land for peace, the greatest of his successors, Antiochus III, led a new imperial army into India. No Seleucid ruler had penetrated to the distant eastern borders of the kingdom since Seleucus Nicator had delineated them at the Treaty of the Indus. Polybius describes this second encounter of Seleucid and Indian monarchs:

[Antiochus III] crossed the Caucasus and descended into India, renewed his friendship (τὴν τε φιλίαν ἀνεκνέωσατο) with Sophagasenus, king of the Indians (τὸν βασιλέα τῶν Ἰνδῶν), and received more elephants, raising their number to a total of one hundred and fifty, and provisioned his army once more on the spot. He himself broke camp with his troops, leaving

behind Androstenes of Cyzicus to bring back the treasure which the king (Sophagasenus) had agreed to give him.³⁶

King Sophagasenus, a name probably derived from Subhagasena,³⁷ is here identified as ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰνδῶν, "the king of the Indians." This title falsely suggests a unified Indian kingdom such as Chandragupta's: a projection of imperial stability in line with Antiochus III's own internally rejuvenating objectives. In fact, the Mauryan state entity had disintegrated, for various reasons, following the death of Ashoka in 232; Sophagasenus was ruler of a northwestern splinter kingdom. Without doubt, the "renewal of friendship" was imposed from a position of strength on the Indian king by the sudden arrival of a large, well-tested, recently reinforced and rested army. In practical terms, it was not an alliance between equals: Androstenes of Cyzicus was left behind to transport Sophagasenus' own treasure, while king Antiochus simply took the elephants (compare his λαβὼν ἐλέφαντας "taking the elephants" with Seleucus I's ἀντιλαβὼν ἐλέφαντας "taking in return the elephants"; that is, seizure versus reciprocal exchange³⁸). Given his immediate, on-the-ground advantages, it is striking that Antiochus III neither claimed superiority of status nor attempted to integrate these trans-Caucasian territories into his imperial structure, a clear contrast with his actions earlier in his eastern expedition, where he had framed a similar payment from Xerxes, the local ruler of Armenia, as the legitimate extraction of long-overdue tribute³⁹ and had made an extraordinary, but ultimately unsuccessful, effort to avoid recognizing the royal status and independence of Euthydemus of Bactria.⁴⁰ Antiochus' activities in India are explicitly considered an act of renewal. The encounter of Antiochus and Sophagasenus is very clearly framed as a historical reenactment of the Seleucus-Chandragupta Treaty of the Indus (τὴν τε φιλίαν ἀνεκένωσατο, "he renewed the friendship"), guaranteeing amicable relations and uncontested boundaries between the Seleucid and Indian kingdoms by means of, as before, mutual recognition of equivalent status and the gift of elephants. The continuity is, as we have seen, an engineered ideological fiction. Antiochus' actions in northwestern India, a curious combination of compulsion and renunciation, demonstrate his unproblematic acceptance of the Treaty of the Indus and its century-old territorial transfer. Despite marching his army over the Hindu Kush, Antiochus made no attempt to "conquer" India. Rather, he acknowledged the spatial limitation of his own sovereignty, which is to say, the boundedness of Seleucid imperial territory. As we will

see in Chapter 5, Antiochus constitutes a kind of person, interior to

Demonstrably, the kingdom's official diplomatic royal encounter and its continued geopolitical ideological motivation and most influential Megasthenes, Seleucus turn.

Megasthenes' India

Seleucus I's relationship with the kingdom's security with the Mauryan empire; Seleucus I defeated Antiochus and the kingdom; Seleucus I as a success and Seleucus I had abandoned the kingdom; Seleucus I had died; Seleucus I Graeco-Macedonian monarchies on the periphery; Seleucus I was hailed as ἐλεφαντίου, Demetrius Poliorcetes that he was being recognized as king of Syracuse, which collapsed, was hailed

I will argue here that Seleucus I's engagement with the kingdom in this embarrassing, the ethnography of Seleucus I's Indian conquests in the post-treaty Mauryan kingdom for Seleucus I, an examination of a host of ethnographic

see in Chapter 5, Antiochus' changed behavior on crossing the border constitutes a kind of threshold ritual: the king distinguished, in his own person, interior from exterior, Seleucid from non-Seleucid territory.

Demonstrably, the Treaty of the Indus retained its salience within the kingdom's official dynastic memory, both as a magnificent episode of grand royal encounter and as a first act of territorial delimitation.⁴¹ In addition to its continued geopolitical importance, the peace treaty also provided the ideological motivation and diplomatic conditions for perhaps the greatest and most influential literary work of the Seleucid court—the *Indica* of Megasthenes, Seleucus' envoy to the Mauryan court—to which we now turn.

Megasthenes' *Indica*

Seleucus I's relationship with India was complex. On the one hand, his kingdom's security and ultimate success were founded on his relationship with the Mauryan empire: the 500 war elephants received from Chandragupta defeated Antigonus Monophthalmus at Ipsus in 301.⁴² Seleucus' coinage and the kingdom's official historiography depicted the Treaty of the Indus as a success and celebrated it accordingly.⁴³ On the other hand, Seleucus had abandoned the very territories in which he had first achieved prominence; he had diminished, not extended, Macedonian rule; Alexander's Graeco-Macedonian settlers in the Hindu Kush would now be Yona minorities on the periphery of the Indian kingdom. So when Seleucus was toasted as ἐλεφαντάρχης, "elephant-commander," at the banquets of his rival, Demetrius Poliorcetes, the son of Antigonus Monophthalmus, it is likely that he was being mocked for his withdrawal from India, much as Agathocles of Syracuse, whose dream to expand from Sicily to Africa had recently collapsed, was hailed as νησιάρχης, "island-commander," at the same feast.⁴⁴

I will argue here that Megasthenes' ethnography of India, as a sensitive engagement with the new, multipolar world order, attempted to neutralize this embarrassing, ideologically confusing contradiction. We will see that the ethnography legitimized Seleucus' formal renunciation of the Macedonian conquests in India, reformulated Indian geography to naturalize the post-treaty Mauryan-Seleucid border, and established India as an analogous kingdom for thinking through Seleucid state formation. More generally, an examination of Megasthenes' *Indica*, the best known and preserved of a host of ethnographies written for the Seleucid kingdom in its pioneering

phase, will uncover the considerable energies devoted to generating, ordering, and deploying a governmentally useful spatial knowledge.

Even though historical narrative and monarchic ideology inevitably emplot the Treaty of the Indus as the meeting of two great rulers, it cannot be doubted that the negotiations were parleyed by Indian and Graeco-Macedonian regional experts. It is possible that Megasthenes was Seleucus' main negotiator in 305/4,⁴⁵ probable that he was the main literary source for the diplomatic terms,⁴⁶ and certain that he was the Seleucid ambassador to the court of Chandragupta Maurya, at Pataliputra on the Ganges; the Appendix discusses the *testimonia* for Megasthenes' career. At some point during or after his tenure as ambassador, Megasthenes published an ethnographic treatise, titled *Indica*. The work, like so much of Hellenistic literature, has not survived from antiquity in its own right⁴⁷ and so must be reconstructed from the quotations, paraphrases, and allusions of later, extant authors. But we are unusually lucky: the rise of Parthia, the emancipation of Graeco-Bactria, and the collapse of the Mauryan empire after Ashoka's death restricted land access to the Ganges; the discovery of the Gulf trade winds (and the consequent commerce in Indian luxuries) in the first century exploited the west Indian littoral rather than the country's interior. As a result, Megasthenes' *Indica* was established as the most authoritative ethnography of the Gangetic basin, quickly becoming the standard description of the Indian interior.⁴⁸ Extensive and overlapping portions of the *Indica* have been preserved in Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, and Arrian, as well as brief but eye-catching passages in the Jewish/Christian and paradoxographical literary traditions.⁴⁹ Broad similarities of content as well as specific equivalences of vocabulary and phrase permit a relatively unproblematic identification of Megasthenes' material even when he is not explicitly named.⁵⁰ The reconstruction of the work's structure and internal logic is greatly aided both by the unity of Diodorus' epitome and by a basic similarity to Hecataeus of Abdera's *Aigyptiaca*.⁵¹ It is likely that Megasthenes wrote the *Indica* in three books:⁵² the first discussed India's geography, natural history, and climate; the second, the country's primitive life, early civilization, and historical developments; the third, the customs and administration of the contemporary Mauryan state.

The *Indica*'s historical account narrated a culture myth, explicitly represented as indigenous Indian tradition, of the transformation of Indian society by a conquering Dionysus and an autochthonous Heracles.⁵³ Such "ascent of man" narratives were regularly treated in universal histories and

ethnographic treatise. The extant ethnographic work will systematically work out the logic of Megasthenes' categorization. The play out of the categorization is made

Prehistoric Indian beginnings of cultural differentiation of primitive Indian functions as the play out of behaviors:

Long ago the Indians who, wandering at one time or another, were building shrines of the

In Megasthenes' *Indica* is dedicated not only to the presence of territoriality in the Scythian steppe, but also to the language here is : toward Herodotus on emphatically to elements of a general grain; devouring Megasthenes, the very ble space: "[Dionysus] (μηδεμιάς οὐσης ἀνδρῶν) could be conquered and conquers a connection resonates through

Dionysus' invasion paraphrases:

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ethnographic treatises.⁵⁴ The *Indica's Kulturgegeschichte* establish the important ethnographic principles and patterns of historical causation that the work will systematically deploy. Accordingly, they play a central role in the logic of Megasthenes' Seleucid apology: as the modalities of cultural formation play out over the course of Indian history, Seleucus' territorial abandonment is made inevitable.

Prehistoric India, that is, India before the arrival of Dionysus and the beginnings of cultural memory, is a world without cities. In the characterization of primitive India's state of nature, this absence is mentioned first and functions as the primary and determinant condition for all other barbarous behaviors:

Long ago the Indians were nomads, just like the nonagricultural Scythians, who, wandering in their wagons, exchange one part of Scythia for another at one time or another (ἄλλοτε ἄλλην), neither inhabiting cities nor honoring shrines of the gods (οὔτε πόλῃας οἰκέοντες οὔτε ἱερὰ θεῶν σέβοντες).⁵⁵

In Megasthenes' stagist model, the earliest condition of Indian man was indicated not only by a lack of urbanism or religious piety but also by an absence of territoriality. Indian space was unmarked and expansive and, like the Scythian steppe, uninvested with meaning; it could be abandoned willy-nilly (effectively underlined by the juxtaposition ἄλλοτε ἄλλην). The *Indica's* language here is strikingly Herodotean, and the comparison clearly points toward Herodotus' Scythian ethnography.⁵⁶ Megasthenes' account moves on emphatically to associate the absence of cities and religion with the stock elements of a generic barbarity: wearing skins, not clothes; eating bark, not grain; devouring meat raw, not cooked.⁵⁷ This absence of cities is, for Megasthenes, the very condition of Dionysus' conquest. India is an open, accessible space: "[Dionysus] overran all of India, since there was no important city (μηδεμιᾶς οὔσης ἀξιολόγου πόλεως) powerful enough to oppose him."⁵⁸ India could be conquered because the Indians were nomads. Megasthenes establishes a connection between urban power and resistance to conquest that resonates throughout his treatise.

Dionysus' invasion puts an end to this timeless, primitive India. Arrian paraphrases:

When Dionysus came and became master of the Indians he founded cities and established laws in the cities (πόλῃας τε οἰκίσαι καὶ νόμους θέσθαι τῇσι πόλεσιν), he dispensed wine to the Indians, just as to the Greeks, he taught

them to sow the land, giving them seeds . . . Dionysus was the first to yoke the oxen to the plough, and made the majority of Indians agriculturalists instead of nomads; he also armed them with weapons of war. Dionysus also taught them to worship other gods, but himself most of all, clashing cymbals and playing drums.⁵⁹

Megasthenes has avoided the naturalistic, impersonal, random, and gradualist historical anthropology associated with Democritus, Protagoras, and Dicaearchus⁶⁰ in favor of Dionysus' momentous role as benefactor, teacher, and inventor. Culture arrives with monarchy: Megasthenes' *Kulturgeschichte* construct, with other early Hellenistic texts, an image of the monarchic monopoly of historical agency, the royal profile of master-builder, and the cocreation of a political and spatial centrality.⁶¹ And, as in much of Hellenistic literature, Dionysus' violence is suppressed; though bearing the cult-title ὠμάδιος or ὠμηστής ("devourer of raw flesh") in the Greek world, he leads Megasthenes' Indians from the raw to the cooked.⁶² Alongside the standardly Bacchic satyric dance, long hair, perfumery, invention of wine, and visibility of women, the continued performances of which were witnessed in India at the time of Alexander's invasion, it is Dionysus' role as city founder that is most unusual and striking. Just as the lack of cities was primitive life's first mentioned and fundamental absence, so the creation of cities is the first mentioned act of civilization and the requirement for associated cultural processes. In Diodorus' parallel account, Dionysus' urban foundations invest the landscape with difference: the unstriated space of prehistoric India is now marked with value (τοὺς εὐθέτους τόπους, "well-placed sites") where the cities are located.⁶³ Moreover, Diodorus' Dionysus is an oecist of πόλεων ἀξιολόγων, "important cities": the diction here responds directly to primitive India's absence of a single *important* city, which was, as we have seen, the precondition of Dionysus' very conquest.

Dionysus' city-founding activities abolish the very circumstance that permitted the success of his own invasion, making it a unique episode in Indian history. Dionysus is also the inventor of Indian warfare, arming the population with weapons of war and influencing their battle order, which obviously goes hand in hand with the land's new urban defensibility. Alongside its generic civilizing function, therefore, the invasion of Dionysus operates as a guarantee of India's future isolation and impregnability, characteristics which Megasthenes' ethnographic descriptions and continued historical narrative repeatedly emphasize. As demonstrated by the failure of

all subsequent invasion, the tractable, open space in

The *Indica* introduces generations after Diodorus' Indian authority.⁶⁴ In principle, Heracles is a weapon to those of the tractability of the land in addition to purging land "was the founder of no distinguished and large expensive palace and city with worthy dit τάφροις ἀξιολόγοις ποῦ urbanization, and the ὀλίγων). Palimbothra only named city. The gence in the second, code the city's late rise The adjective ἀξιόλογ works (τάφροις ἀξιολο sthenes' ethnographi

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etrable, open space into a closed, fortified, and unconquerable territory.

The *Indica* introduces a second civilizing superman, Heracles, fifteen
generations after Dionysus' invasion; as before, the account is attributed to
Indian authority.⁶⁴ In accordance with the now established ethnographic
principle, Heracles is no invader. Despite the similarity of his clothing and
weapon to those of the Theban hero,⁶⁵ the new impregnability and inac-
cessibility of the land require that he be an autochthonous son of India. In
addition to purging land and sea of wild beasts,⁶⁶ we are told that Heracles
"was the founder of not a few cities (κτίστην τε πόλεων οὐκ ὀλίγων), the most
distinguished and largest of which he called Palimbothra. In it he built an
expensive palace and established a great number of settlers; he fortified the
city with worthy ditches filled with river water (τήν τε πόλιν ὀχυρῶσαι
τάφροις ἀξιόλογοις ποταμίῳ ὕδασι πληρουμέναις)."⁶⁷ Heracles continues the
urbanization, and thus fortification, of India on a grand scale (πόλεων οὐκ
ὀλίγων). Palimbothra, the Mauryan capital, Pataliputra, stands out as the
only named city. That it is founded by Heracles, not Dionysus (i.e., its emer-
gence in the second, not the first, stage of cultural development), may en-
code the city's late rise to primacy under the last Nandas and Chandragupta.⁶⁸
The adjective ἀξιόλογος appears again, here qualifying the city's defensive
works (τάφροις ἀξιόλογοις)—precisely the feature of urbanism that Mega-
sthenes' ethnographic principle should underline.

The ethnographic logic outlined in Indian prehistory—the correlation of
urbanism and unconquerability—plays out in Megasthenes' discussion of
contemporary India. By the time of Megasthenes' sojourn there, he reports
that progressive urbanization has transformed India from an empty ex-
panse of aimless nomadic wanderings into a land garrisoned by countless
cities: "One cannot enumerate accurately the cities in India because of their
number."⁶⁹ The *Indica's* description of Palimbothra should be understood as
the culminating instantiation of this development. Having established the
city as the index of indigenous power, Megasthenes deploys this principle in
the synchronous ethnography of his third book to demonstrate the might of
the new Mauryan kingdom:

At the junction of this (the Ganges) and the other river (the Erranoboas,
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corporated as a specific

economic occupation within the monarch-centered "caste system": the
shepherds and hunters, the third μέρος or "class," "live a wandering tent-
living existence";⁷⁶ "they do not live in cities or villages, but are nomads
and live up in the mountains."⁷⁷ They receive a regular food allowance
from the king in return for freeing the land from wild beasts. That is to say,
the single civilizing act of Heracles has become the socially embedded caste
identity of a particular group, whose marginal, nomadic existence guaran-
tees the settled, urban life for the rest of the kingdom. The Mauryan kingdom
accomplishes its own ever-renewing cultural heroism through occupational
differentiation. Similarly, Megasthenes tells of ascetic Garmanes, who enact
a conscious primitivism, living in the wild, gathering fruit, refraining from
wine, clothed in the bark of trees.⁷⁸ The primitive lifestyle functions here,
just as for the Cynics in Greece, as an entirely modern rejection of the urban;
its cultural forms depend on the *Kulturgeschichte* outlined earlier.

Second, Megasthenes has inverted a key and ubiquitous principle of
Greek ethnography. As we have seen, his description of primitive India
makes clear reference to Herodotus' Scythian *logoi*, paralleling early Indian
and contemporary Scythian nonagricultural nomads. One of the most fa-
mous passages in all of Herodotus' histories is his statement that Scythian
nomadism was the greatest of all human discoveries because it was the key
to unconquerability:

But the Scythian people has made the cleverest discovery that we know in
what is the most important of all human affairs; I do not praise the Scyth-
ians in all respects, but in this, the most important: that they have con-
trived that no one who attacks them can escape, and no one can catch them
if they do not want to be found. For when men have no established cities or
forts (τοῖσι γὰρ μήτε ἄστεα μήτε τείχεα ἢ ἐκτισμένα), but are all nomads and
mounted archers, not living by tilling the soil but by raising cattle and carry-
ing their dwellings on wagons, how can they not be invincible and unap-
proachable (ἄμαχοί τε καὶ ἄποροι προσμίσγειν)?⁷⁹

The causation could not be clearer. Herodotus' Scythians are ἄμαχοί τε καὶ
ἄποροι, "invincible and unapproachable," because they are nomads. Scythian
nomadism is a cultural discovery, a strategy of space, and a deliberate choice.
It is not associated, as in Megasthenes, with primitivism: the Scythians sacri-
fice, cook, and wear clothes. Rather, in Hartog's felicitous formulation,
nomadism is a strategy which is in addition a way of life.⁸⁰ And it works:
Herodotus is emphatic that Darius I's great invasion of Scythia failed because

of the absence of cities. Comparable assertions of nomadic unconquerability recur throughout post-Herodotean ethnography and historiography. In Arrian's *Bithynica*, for example, contemporary Scythian nomadism is represented as a historically situated rejection of an earlier farming and urban phase, when the settled Scythians had been overrun by the Thracians.⁸¹ Similarly, for Hieronymus of Cardia, a peer of Megasthenes, the Nabataeans of Arabia secured their independence from Antigonid aggression by means of their dogmatic opposition to settled habitation and agriculture;⁸² for Agatharchides, nomadism had allowed the Nabataeans to successfully resist Assyrian, Persian, and Macedonian imperial ambitions.⁸³ A passage in Quintus Curtius Rufus, most likely deriving from Cleitarchus⁸⁴ (another contemporary), depicts a Sasan embassy's use of this trope in an attempt to deter Alexander from crossing the Iaxartes river in Central Asia.⁸⁵ Greek ethnographic literature in general characterized the nomadic life as permanently hostile and aggressive.⁸⁶ In striking contrast, nomadism in Megasthenes' *Indica* functions as a vulnerability. It is an aberrant way of life, defined only by its deficiencies. Megasthenes represents Indian nomadism as anterior, primitive, and unmarked. It is the baseline of existence, superseded by cultural discovery. Nomadism, that is to say, the absence of cities, allows Dionysus' invasion to succeed.

Can we trace the genealogy of Megasthenes' inversion? I would suggest that the *Indica*'s principle of urban defensibility is a sensitive response to two, perhaps three, traditions. In the historiographical tradition's accounts of prehistory, the civilizing quality of city foundation appears in several instances of comprehensive cultural heroism but does not have a defensive function.⁸⁷ We must look, instead, to strands of fifth- and fourth-century Greek *Kulturgeschichte*. Here the independent city-state naturally manifested the *telos* of the civilizing process, and nomadism the primordial state of nature out of which humanity laboriously dragged itself. The primitive nomad was an exposed, vulnerable being, culturally naked, and defenseless against beast and nature.⁸⁸ For certain naturalistic models, perhaps deriving from Democritean anthropology,⁸⁹ city foundation was motivated by communal defensive requirements, albeit of a limited and local nature.⁹⁰ Aristotle's model of heroic kingship's benefactions focuses, like that of Megasthenes, on synoecism and defensibility.⁹¹

Political and military activities of the fourth century manifest a growing awareness of the transformative potential of urban foundations. The first major demonstrations of a deliberate urbanistic strategy within Greece

were the Theban polis in the 360s, explicitly a defensive move; however, this is not comparable to the Peloponnesian synoecism, which was an alliance of oligarchic city-states with people power. The Peloponnesian synoecism was an alliance of oligarchic city-states with people power. The Peloponnesian synoecism was an alliance of oligarchic city-states with people power. The Peloponnesian synoecism was an alliance of oligarchic city-states with people power.

It seems that the Macedonian king's historic anthropological possibility of the macy of city foundation identity of the region, the polarity of foundations with theorized, of Bal Megasthenes' practice the Seleucid court religious culture, *Indica*'s prehistory.

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dic unconquerability historiography. In Ar-nomadism is repre-farming and urban by the Thracians.⁸¹ nes, the Nabataeans aggression by means agriculture;⁸² for Ag-uccessfully resist As-A passage in Quintus (another contempo-ttempt to deter Alex-Greek ethnographic permanently hostile Megasthenes' *Indica* e, defined only by its 1 as anterior, primi-perseded by cultural es, allows Dionysus'

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were the Theban general Epaminondas' synoecisms of Messene and Megalopolis in the 360s as bastions against Sparta: Megalopolis is considered explicitly a defensive foundation to strengthen Arcadian resistance.⁹² However, this is not quite the urbanism of Megasthenes' ethnography. Peloponnesian synoecism was more a matter of politics than space, associated with people power and an anti-Spartan foreign policy, which threatened the alliance of oligarchic interests on which Lacedaemon's soft imperialism in the Peloponnese depended.⁹³ Moreover, there is an important distinction between city foundation as the generating act of a single, independent political community, such as Megalopolis or Messene, and urbanization as a form of nodal, defensible power in the creation of an expansive, territorial, monarchic state. This second type, separating a city's military function from any autonomous political pretensions, developed as a spatial strategy of the Macedonian kingdom.⁹⁴ Philip II's numerous fortified settlements, concentrated in Thrace and Upper Macedonia, were primary foundations of previously nonurbanized peoples, designed to bring security to rugged areas.⁹⁵

It seems that Megasthenes combined the practical motivation behind Macedonian kings' urbanization and the theoretical musings of prehistoric anthropology into an ethnographic causal principle. Moreover, the possibility of Mesopotamian influence should not be ignored. The primacy of city foundation, the single moment of cultural heroism, the divine identity of the founder figure, the cocreation of urbanism and religion, the polarity of nomad and city, and the coexistence of multiple urban foundations within a single kingdom are all elements, albeit not explicitly theorized, of Babylonian genesis accounts.⁹⁶ It is not impossible, given Megasthenes' praise of Nebuchadnezzar II (see later) and his attachment to the Seleucid court, as well as Seleucus' own participation in Babylonian religious culture, that these Near Eastern myths helped to shape the *Indica's* prehistory.

The *Indica's* emphatic urbanism, a historical trajectory culminating in the contemporary Mauryan empire and its megalopolis of Palimbothra, has an apologetic function. The founding of cities means the closing of India. By the time of Megasthenes, the country is, quite simply, unconquerable and Seleucus' treaty with "Sandrocottus-Palimbothros" is a recognition of this basic power reality.⁹⁷ Moreover, the ethnographic principle encoded in the *Indica's* *Kulturgeschichte*, historical narrative, and contemporary ethnography is an eminently suitable representation of Seleucus' own city-founding activities. That is to say, Megasthenes does not merely legitimate a territorial