

Translated excerpt

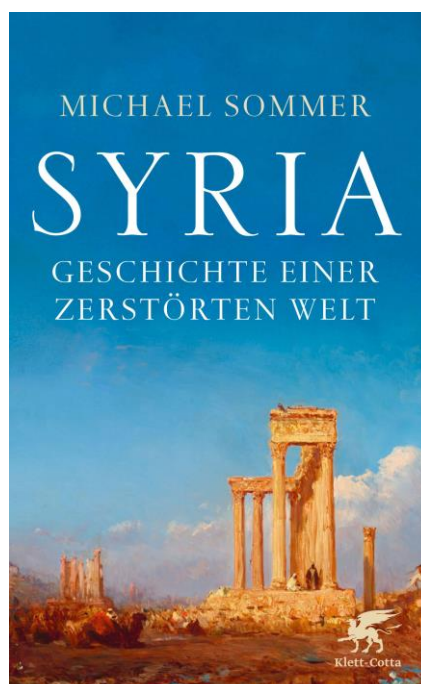
Michael Sommer
Syria. Geschichte einer zerstörten Welt

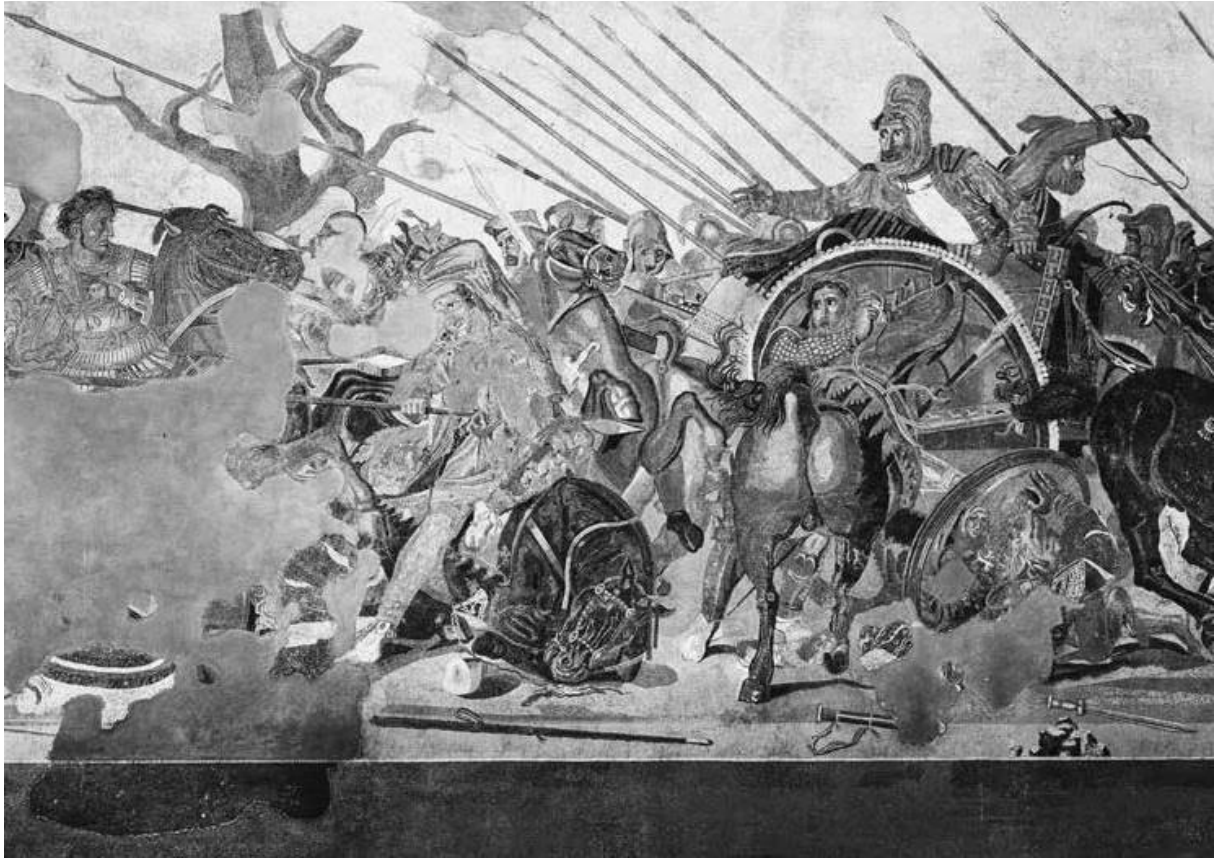
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Syria. History of a devastated world

Translated by Diana Sommer





Issus

The hero who came from the West

Ancient Issus is not one of the places where world-moving history usually takes place. The town has stretched, since ancient times, on the banks of the small Pinarus river, which empties nearby into a pouch-like gulf carved into the South-Anatolian mountains. The Greeks had named the sea gulf after Issus, today it bears the name of the Turkish town İskenderun. Xenophon, the historian and philosopher, relates that Issus was a prospering trading center around 400 BC. Otherwise the sources are silent about the town.

Gate to the East

And yet: Issus is the gate to Syria. It is this circumstance which made the place into the scene of a major chapter of world history. Issus lies in the middle of the narrow coastal plain between the Amanus mountains and the sea. The least cumbersome route from Asia Minor into Syria - and vice versa - leads through this plain. So numerous armies have tried, since antiquity, to push their way through one of either directions near Issus.

Defenders, however, have had it easier to bring the enemy attack to a halt. In AD 193, the Roman usurper Pescennius Niger attempted this tactic in the civil war against his rival Septimius Severus - without success. Severus' legions managed to enter Syria, Niger's cause was lost.

More than 500 years before Severus, a much greater soldier triumphed near Issus. The Macedonian Alexander, succeeding to his father Philip, ruled since 336 BC over the small kingdom on the edge of the Greek world. The late autumn of 333 BC, when Alexander's victory over the Persian king Darius III. took place, marks one of the most important historical turning points of antiquity, as well as a political tidal change for West and Central Asia, which was felt, directly or indirectly, by practically every person between the Bosphorus and the Indus. After the Battle of Issus, nothing remained so as it had been for centuries long.

For historians, Alexander the Great marks the beginning of a new age - "Hellenism". The period's name was coined by the German historian Johann Gustav Droysen (1808-1884), who already at a young age wrote a biography of Alexander and for describing the novelty, in a sense the globalism, of the new era, employed the Greek term *Hellenismós*. *Hellenismós* had been used by the ancients for referring to Greek-speaking Jews, "Hellenism" was, for Droysen, the great synthesis of East and West achieved by Alexander, which in the long run had created the basis for the spread of Christianity. The assumption has long been superseded, the name for the epoch has nevertheless become firmly established in research. So in a sense, Alexander's victory at Issus opened the door to a new world.

To begin with, however, the battle was no world-shattering event, but rather a tactical challenge for the military commanders. They found themselves in the bizarre situation of an encounter with reversed fronts. The two armies had passed each other without anyone taking notice of it: Alexander with his Greeks and Macedonians on the move along the coast towards the south, Darius with his Persians crossing the Amanus mountains towards the north. The Persians were thus in the comfortable position of being able to cut Alexander's army from its supply lines. Up to the 5th of November, the two armies had set out for battle: the at least two times superior Persians on the north bank of the Pinarus, with their strong cavalry on the right flank facing the sea; Alexander's Macedonian Phalanx facing them in the south. The elite of the Macedonian army was concentrated in the east, at the foothills of the Amanus. From this position, Alexander managed to break the enemy's front and massively attack the center of the Persian army. Darius at this point was aware of his defeat and fled the field.

Alexander had won a battle, but not the war. For that, he had yet to conquer the Levant and Egypt, then to vanquish Darius in a second great battle, at Gaugamela in 331 BC, and finally pursue the defeated Persian

king across the Iranian uplands, as far as Hecatompylus, the city of the hundred gates. There, Darius found his death by murder, Alexander became ruler of the Persian Empire, or rather, of what was left of it. For the Macedonian was, above all, not the creator of a great empire, but its destroyer. Alexander did not rule a real empire, but a bunch of satrapies instead, whose rulers had partly been taken over from Darius, partly been appointed by himself, but whose loyalty almost always depended on how near or far away the king was.

The fact that this "empire" could not hold together in the long run, that its power of integration was weak and the intensity of government relatively low, became obvious when Alexander, a victim of his own frenzied life, died in Babylon on 10 June 323 BC. "The strongest," Alexander is said to have answered when asked on his deathbed, which one of the military leaders should be his successor. Adding: "Great funerary games will take place around my corpse." Indeed, for almost half a century, men from Alexander's closest circle, the "Diadochi," set fighting against each other trying to get for themselves as much as possible of his inheritance. Three large and several middle-sized empires resulted from the Diadochi wars, while the control over the East - Alexander had gone as far as India - was soon lost to the Macedonian rulers.

Terra Nova

As a slightly diminished version of the former Persian Empire, the empire which was proclaimed by Seleucus, former commander of Alexander's bodyguard, in Babylon in 312 BC, was by far the largest and most resourceful of the new empires. Its core areas lay in Syria and Mesopotamia, and especially there, the Seleucids made rapid efforts to increase the intensity of their government. The most effective way to achieve this was the massive influx of Macedonian and Greek settlers, whose hunger for land was as great as their gratitude towards the Seleucid kings. Alexander had already founded dozens of cities, all of which bore his name, as well as such resounding by-names as *Prophthasia* ("the forward-looking") or *Eschate* ("the outermost", located at the foothills of the Pamir Mountains). At first Alexander's veterans settled there. However, they and countless other cities founded by Seleucus and his successors, were really filled with life only when the Seleucids began to systematically recruit settlers from Greece and Macedonia in order to fill their empire with loyal subjects and their army with conscripts. Those who settled in Syria or Mesopotamia brought their own cultural and social conventions with them. The polis, the autonomous and self-reliant Greek municipality, was, of course, the socio-political model after which the newcomers organized themselves. They built temples for their gods, practiced sports in the gymnasium and trade on the Agora, went to the theatre and constantly rivaled with each other for political posts. They

committed themselves, if they could afford it, as benefactors (*euergeteis*) to the polis community.

Anyone who came to Asia as a Greek or Macedonian followed the lure of fast money. The settlers from the West did not come to virgin land. It was inhabited, and it had previously belonged to people. As successors of Alexander, the Seleucid kings regarded themselves as rightful owners of all the land that the Macedonians had acquired "with the spear". So they felt free to make this land available to others as they liked. It was this offer that magically attracted the land-hungry masses of people from the Aegean, setting in motion the great trek towards the east. Once arrived, they found relatively paradisiacal conditions for themselves: each newcomer automatically belonged to an exclusive elite, who could afford to let others work for them. Those who under the Persians had tilled the land for a foreign upper class, did now the same for the no less foreign master race of the Greco-Macedonians. As *perioikoi* ("living in the neighborhood ") or *proskoroi* ("not equals"), they had no share whatsoever in the socio-political life of the polis.

The masterplan for the gigantic *Lebensraum* agenda had been drafted a long time ago, when Alexander set off on his Persian campaign. In a speech titled *Panegyricus*, the Athenian orator Isocrates had called on his Hellenic countrymen for a war of loot and conquest against the Persian Empire as early as in 380 BC. The Great King of Persia supposedly ruled his vast empire only by relying on an army which was far greater than any of the armies of the subjugated peoples, and not due to the affection of his subjects. So if the Greeks were able to muster an even greater military force, then "the whole of Asia could be plundered without any risk at all." The speech, held perhaps on the occasion of an Olympiad, was the intellectual blueprint for Alexander's war of subjugation and the subsequent colonization, only that Isocrates had not meant Macedonia, but Athens to play the leading role.

Certainly, Alexander and the Seleucid kings did not act out of concern for the Greeks, who were suffering due to land scarcity, and not out of missionary zeal either. It was not their intention to spread Greek as a language and as a way of life to the Near East. Not in the least did they have in mind a Greco-Persian civilization or cultural cohabitation of any kind, no synthesis of East and West, as it has been suggested about Alexander, who shortly before his death, in the spring of 324 BC, ordered the Macedonians of his entourage to marry ladies from the Persian ruling elite. What entered history as the "mass wedding of Susa" was not driven by any cultural policy, but a strategic decision. If Alexander really wanted to build an empire out of the conquered provinces, then he needed an elite which was rooted in both worlds.

The experiment thoroughly failed: Alexander's dead body had scarcely cooled down in Babylon, than all of the newlywed Macedonians got

themselves divorced from their Persian wives. With one exception. And that was Seleucus, the one who became ruler of the former Persian Near East. But even he did not achieve, or even aim to achieve, any synthesis of the different cultures that were housed in his empire. The striking *mélange* of the Seleucid empire cannot be reduced anyway to the simple formula of Orient versus Occident. Firstly, East and West were, even before Alexander, no opposites, but interwoven with each other through manifold relations. Since around 1000 BC, when Phoenicians discovered the still marginal Hellas as a market for their products, a long history of periodic conflicts, but above all of reciprocal exchange of people, goods and ideas connected Greece with the Levant. Hospitality and business partnerships linked people on both sides of the sea. Merchants from the Levant had settled in Corinth and Athens; Greeks, on the other hand, always gladly offered themselves as mercenaries in the Near East and Egypt. When around 500 BC the Persians conquered the west coast of Asia Minor, i.e. a region inhabited by Greeks, East and West had long since ceased to be foreigners, even though Greek authors such as Herodotus tried to convey this impression. Orient and Occident stand out as no opposites, but at best as parts of a "world" which had been amazingly tightly networked even before Alexander.

Secondly, the Persian Near East was by no means as monolithic as it was represented by the Greek perspective. The Persian Empire was not a sheer tyranny over slaves, who were completely and utterly subject to the despotic will of a Great King. The Persians themselves were in numbers only a small minority in their multi-ethnic empire. The so-called Daiva inscription from the early 5th century BC shows the extent to which Persians themselves were aware of the diversity prevailing in their empire: "Xerxes the king proclaims. According to the will of Ahuramazda, these are the countries to which I was king." What follows is a list of more than thirty countries and ethnicities, including Media, Elam, Parthia, Bactria, Sogdia, Babylon, Assyria, Ionia (Greece), Arabia, Egypt and Libya. Persian was not even the administrative or common language of the empire. This function was exercised by Aramaic, a language closely related to biblical Hebrew.

The existence of different cultures next to, with and against each other had already been a reality between the Mediterranean and Iran before the Macedonians took power. It had always been a fundamental part of everyday life in a polity marked by ethnic, linguistic and religious divides. The arrival of Greco-Macedonian settlers, however, boosted the differences. Above all, the polis, as an autonomous community of free citizens being equal before the law, was a foreign body in an environment characterized by completely different political traditions. Cities such as Antioch, Laodicea, Apamea on the Orontes or Seleucia Pieria, with their institutions, architecture, rhythms of social life, could hardly be distinguished from the poleis in their Hellenic homeland. Yet, they had scarcely anything in common with the cities which had been typical of the

Near East until the Persian period. Ancient Babylon, for centuries the rulers' residence, functioned as a city completely differently from neighboring newly-built Seleucia on the Tigris, where the Seleucids made their home amidst the polis' citizens. "A municipality in the full sense of the word has been known as a mass phenomenon [...] only in the occident," formulates Max Weber in his fragmentary study *The City*. Then he vaguely adds: "As well as in a part of the Near East (Syria and Phoenicia, perhaps Mesopotamia), though only temporarily and only in part." The decisive innovation reaching the Near East with the arrival of the settlers from the West was citizenship. Suddenly there were citizens everywhere, while previously there had only been subjects - and they formed an economically potent, socially highly-regarded and politically influential segment of the population. They became thus objects of envy, but also role models for the local population.

Greek lifestyle and feeling at ease in Greek ways of thinking advanced into a status symbol in the better circles of the local population. Being Greek was not an ethnic, certainly not a racial, category. Being Greek was a question of habitus. By speaking Greek, dressing as a Greek, learning to think as one and adopting Greek habits, one could become a Greek. The admission ticket to being Greek was *paideia*, education - the all-round formation of a person from an early age on, based again on the very Greek ideal of the *arete*. In the widest sense, *arete* refers to a person's efficiency and excellence in achieving real results.

Education for everybody?

The new arrivals from the West brought something else with them: their memory. The towns' names already reveal that. If they were not named after members of the ruling dynasty, as it was common practice since Alexander, towns kept alive the memory of places in the Greek or Macedonian homeland: Pella, Europus, Edessa, Larissa, Amphipolis. Sooner or later, people began to tell stories about the foundation of their own city, binding it mentally to the geography of the wider Greek world. These stories found their way into the great memory repository, which was designated by the Greeks with the word "myth" and which allowed them at any time to assess their self in comparison to others. For the city of Dura-Europus on the middle Euphrates, for example, Seleucus I, the king to whom the city owed its existence, became *heros ktistes*, founder hero, who virtually hobnobbed with the gods. The native inhabitants of Syria and Mesopotamia - the barbarians, the others, the strangers - who had been there long before the Greeks came: they had obviously no place in the myth. But even in the mythical landscape, *paideia* was the key giving access to its domain: whoever had acquired it, whether they came from Egypt, Mesopotamia or Iran, could contribute narratives and thus enrich the myth with further perspectives - and this, of course, in Greek.

The material, as well as mental occupation of the Near East by the Greeks is only imperfectly described by the term "Hellenization." On the surface, the Near East did receive an almost ubiquitous Hellenic imprint: with Greek institutions, Greek place names, Greek language and an upper class cultivating Greek lifestyle. Material remains of this period reveal a lot: inscriptions that are written in Greek, notably reveal patterns of behavior and ways of thinking, at least in the upper classes, as we know them from Greece. Architecture and burial scenes testify to the normative force of the Greek tradition as well. Even pottery before long radically changed its appearance. Mum's good tableware in Babylon did not fail to adjust itself to the Greek fashion, as was shown by research in south-Mesopotamian Uruk. And with it, consumption practices, eating habits and cooking techniques themselves underwent transformation.

From this point of view, the battle of Issus marks indeed a turning point in the history of the Middle East. It ushered the Macedonian rule, which changed not only the political map of Greater Syria, but also the everyday life of countless people from the Mediterranean to the Iranian highlands. It expanded the influence of Greek civilization and culture, the Oecumene, deep down to India. However, the process of acquisition, to which Issus formed the overture, was more complicated than one might suppose at first sight. It was nonlinear and frequently broken, no one-way street, but a mutual crossing of adaptation and adoption, not only from top to bottom, but in the opposite direction as well. The immigrants from the West set the political and economic framework for change, they did not, however, impose their culture on the local population. On the contrary, being Greek was, at least for the upper classes, so attractive, that they were themselves striving after *paideia* - or what they thought it was. The advantage of the new, its aesthetics and its contents, was also that it was open to interpretation and selective takeover. The new citizens of the Oecumene repeatedly demonstrated remarkable creativity while appropriating foreign traditions. In a certain sense, the local people resembled customers going shopping in a general store with shopping lists compiled according to their personal wishes and needs. Greeks and Macedonians appropriated land and resources of the fallen Persian Empire, but they lost, to a certain extent, the authority of interpretation over what actually constituted being Greek.

"Hellenistic civilization remained Greek in language, customs and above all in self-consciousness," argued classicist Arnaldo Momigliano more than 40 years ago [Alien Wisdom, p. 7]. He was right, but the idea of what was "Greek" changed with time. "Greece" was no longer the relatively bare, water-framed southern tip of the Balkan Peninsula. "Greece" was the spiritual home of countless people who inhabited an Oecumene, which soon stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indus, and many of them

never saw the true Greece. Only under this premise, the term "Hellenization" asserts its value as an analytical category.

The Seleucid Empire began to decline soon after its foundation. Its component parts were too heterogeneous to be held together even under extreme effort. Many dynasties in its far east preferred to go their own ways, as soon as the opportunity offered itself. And this was the case, at least in India, Central Asia, and in the Iranian highlands, but also in Asia Minor, shortly after the death of Seleucus I (281 BC). An attempt by King Antiochus III (223-187 BC) to restore Seleucid rule over Parthia, Bactria, and India with an energetic, Alexander-style campaign, earned him wide admiration in the Greek world, politically however it was a terrific failure. In the second century BC, the empire, which was also tormented by internal turmoil, was eroded by two empires on the rise: the Parthian Empire in the east and Rome in the west. Finally, the Seleucid rump state in Syria dwindled to a client kingdom of the Armenian king Tigranes II (c. 95-55 BC), before the Roman general Pompey incorporated its remains as the province of Syria to the Roman Empire (63 BC).