

## THE HELLENISTIC ENVIRONMENT

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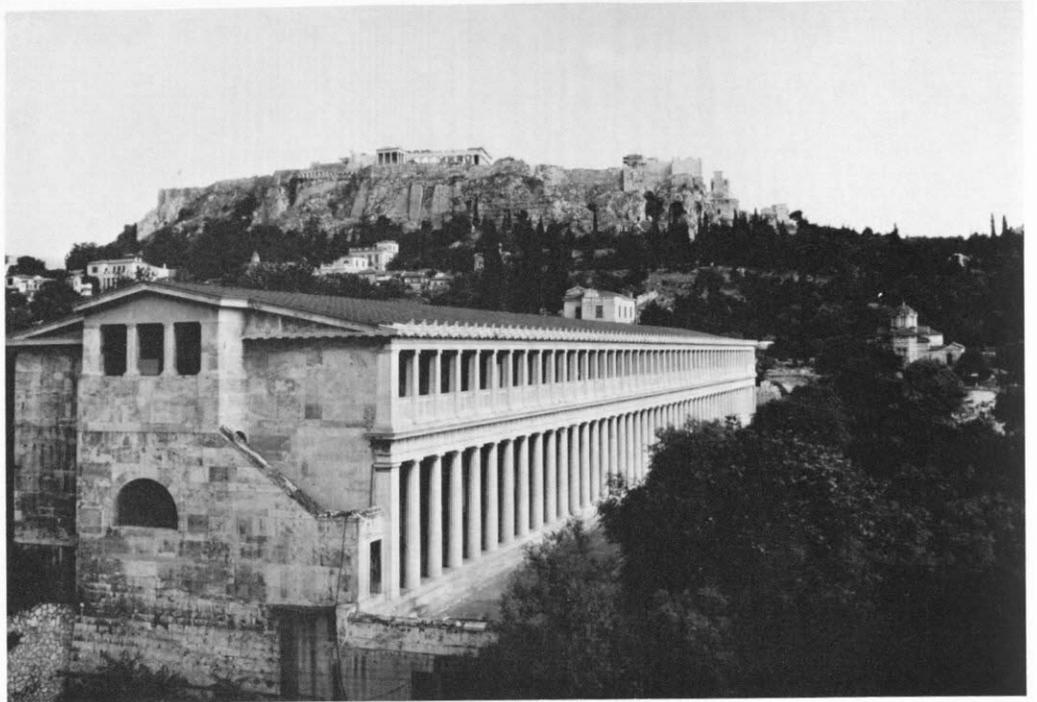


Fig. 1. The Stoa of Attalos, ca. 150 B.C., as reconstructed by the American School of Classical Studies, Agora Excavations, 1953–56. Photograph, John Dean.

THE VERY NOTION OF “HELLENISTIC,” the term by which we describe the three centuries following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C., is only a century and a half old. It was the German historian J. G. Droysen who introduced it to the language of scholarship, building on the notion of a “Hellenistic” language, Greek mixed with non-Greek elements, and the word first appears in English as a term for an age, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in a book of J. P. Mahaffy published in 1874. The main point of the word when it came into the modern languages was one central to discussion of the period even today: the learning and use of the Greek language and Greek ways by the peoples of the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East.

Greeks were not a novelty in Egypt, on the Levantine coast, or even in Iran, by the time of Alexander. Their presence in the East had been continuous at least from the eighth century B.C., and there were certainly Greek-speaking natives of these regions more than a century before Alexander’s arrival. But the conqueror’s mighty work of destruction and slaughter had in a mere ten years toppled the Persian Empire, the last of the major regional states that had dominated the Near East for centuries, replacing it with rule by Macedonians and Greeks. And his death without an adult heir left little likelihood that any single world-state would survive him. His legacy, therefore, was a field of opportunities for smaller kingdoms inhabited mostly by non-Greek peoples but ruled by Greek-speakers—both Macedonians and Greeks, whose bitter differences at home soon became invisible when they were a tiny minority together abroad.

These basic facts are the framework for the civilization of these centuries. Substantial numbers of Greeks moved east to take advantage of opportunities for exploiting these new possessions, and where they went new Greek cities came into existence, usually founded by the kings. In institutions and physical shape, these cities were much like their predecessors in the Greek world of the Aegean, but they coexisted with a numerically dominant population of Egyptians, or Syrians, or Persians, or Bactrians. And their political horizon was dominated by the powerful figure of the king. In this environment, Greek culture lived in daily juxtaposition to indigenous people and civilization. Although the mixture of the two, of which Droysen and many after him wrote, was greatly exaggerated, the two worlds could not live side-by-side for centuries without both changing. The life of Greek cities of the Hellenistic period is in many ways very similar to that of cities of the Classical period, and the continuities of native life in the East—not only from earlier times to the Hellenistic period, but even down to the present—are striking. But the changes are more interesting.

Even with the Hellenistic period, it would be a mistake to suppose uniform conditions and development. There are enormous differences between an older Greek city of Ionia—Miletos, say—and a new settlement in Bactria. And the changes from the early third century to the later first century are at least as great. Egypt of the first two Ptolemies may almost suggest a state of apartheid between Greeks and Egyptians, but when the Romans came they largely lumped the two together as a single status, so difficult was it to untangle things. Civic democracy was widespread in the early Hellenistic period, but growing disparities of wealth and later the influence of Rome led to an increasingly oligarchic structure of city government through most of the Greek world.



Fig. 2. The Stoa of Attalos, interior view. Photograph, John Dean.

### The City Environment

Greek cities, old and new, big and small, were found over a tremendous geographical span—from Sicily to Afghanistan, from the Crimea to southern Egypt. In the older Greek world of the Aegean, distances from one city to its nearest neighbor might be very small, a day's walk or less. Further east, however, the density of cities was usually less. The Ptolemies, who were unenthusiastic about founding cities in Egypt, added only one (Ptolemais) to the old settlement of Naukratis and Alexander's famous foundation of Alexandria. Ptolemais, in Upper Egypt, was thus several hundred miles from any other Hellenic polity. Many of the Greek cities of the "upper satrapies," the eastern parts of Alexander's empire such as Media and Bactria, were similarly distant from other cities and, given the sparsity of Greek population, very isolated. Ancient communications were slow, dependent on sailing ships, animals, and human feet. But Hellenism was powerfully dynamic: the excavations of Ai Khanoum in Afghanistan have shown that cities could flourish and maintain a staunchly Hellenic character even at such distances from the Greek homeland.

Most cities were small by modern standards. Even in a relatively large one, a resident could reach the center on foot from any point in no more than thirty minutes, and in the majority of towns, thirty minutes might suffice to walk around the outside of the walls. A total adult citizen population of ten to twenty thousand was perhaps typical, though we have reliable figures only very rarely. The land around a city and belonging to it was similarly manageable; in most cases a few hours' walk would bring one to the borders, and rare was the case of a radius greater than a day's walk. Though the physical environment varied with location, cities tended to pick hills of moderate height for building, thus providing for defense and avoiding the use of scarce arable land.

Inside the ubiquitous walls stood temples to the civic gods, the standard buildings of civic life, and domestic and commercial structures. Hellenistic cities do not quite convey the sameness of architectural character that we find in Roman towns, but they are well along in that development. Everywhere a visitor would feel at home, with theater, agora, porticoes, gymnasium, and government buildings like

council-chambers. Life centered on these public areas, with an intensity hard for the inhabitant of a large, dispersed, and private modern city to imagine. Public architecture and public art were constantly visible to all men, a part of their daily world.

These public buildings were the setting for the corporate life of a city. Throughout the fourth century, as the city gained ground in Greece as a form of political organization, democracy became more prevalent as well: democracy of a limited and defined body of male citizens, to be sure, excluding from politics not only women and slaves but foreigners and those who did not meet whatever property qualifications were imposed in a given city. Many, perhaps most, cities suffered from periodic civil strife between the wealthier strata, who wanted a narrower franchise, and the poorer, who wanted it widened. The Hellenistic period saw the gap between rich and poor, which was mostly modest in classical times, become gradually greater, as the ever more dominant role of rich benefactors in the cities shows.

Yet we know little about the absolute level of prosperity of most citizens. The rise of mass-produced works of art, particularly terracottas, to prominence in the surviving art of the Hellenistic period suggests a wide diffusion of moderate means among the population. Equally, the large numbers of less modest surviving works of art point to the existence of a very wealthy aristocracy; thanks to the papyri from Egypt, we know something of the composition of this class in Alexandria, where royal officials and courtiers took the role that the local landed gentry would in smaller cities. Alexander's capture of the Persian treasuries was followed by the putting into circulation of gold and silver hoarded for centuries by the kings, as first Alexander himself and then still more his successors paid troops and made gifts for construction of temples and other public buildings. After long years of the deflationary effects of hoarding, this comparatively free spending produced economic expansion in the earlier part of the Hellenistic period. That this monetary growth was not then followed by any more sustained economic development is a natural result of other permanent factors in the ancient economy, notably the lack of basic technological progress (except in warfare) and the systematic use of slave labor rather than free hired labor.

The public spaces of Hellenistic cities came increasingly to be filled not only with buildings and art works but also with inscriptions on stone. A world lacking printing presses and electronic communication media had few choices for the popular dissemination of information and ideas. Public speech was by far the dominant means; in a small community it is, after all, perfectly possible to address all of one's fellow-citizens together as they sit in the theater. But for any lasting public record, stone inscriptions were the medium of choice; though hardly cheap to have cut, they endured. Many were handsome, and often they were parts of sculptural monuments, inscribed bases of statues, for example. This developing habit of inscription presupposes widespread, though not necessarily universal, literacy on the part of the citizens.

Communal life had many other aspects as well. The most important by far was religion, always central to the character of the Greek city. The calendar of a Greek city, though lacking the repetitive rhythm of our weeks, was sprinkled with festivals in honor of the various gods and heroes of the city. To the traditional ones were added cults of members of the royal house ruling the area at the moment. This public face of religion involved processions and public sacrifices, followed by eating the roasted meat of the victims. The community solidarity of the citizens was intimately bound up with these rituals, which furnished a staple social life for the population, including the women, who found themselves outside much of the other public activity of their city.

There was much entertainment linked to the religious festivals, too. Drama began at Athens as part of festivals of Dionysos, and he remained the patron of tragedy and comedy when their performance spread through the Greek world. The "artisans of Dionysos," organized into regional synods, traveled from city to city providing professional performances. Greek drama embraced music and dance along with the spoken word and acting. Religious festivals commonly involved other musical performances as well. A few of the principal celebrations added substantial competitions in athletics—gymnastics, boxing, wrestling, and other contests—and often music (trumpeters, heralds, and the like). The most ambitious of these were modeled on the Olympic or Pythian games held every four years at Olympia and Delphi, but there were countless smaller and less ambitious sets of games. Cities competed vigorously for the prestige and international recognition of their festivals, and top athletes increasingly made a tour of contests. Athletics in Greek cities were as central to high culture as they were welcome to popular taste.



Fig. 3. The Theater at Priene, second century B.C. Photograph, John Dean.

### Private Life in the City

Behind all the flourishing public life visible in inscriptions, architecture, and literature, there lay the private life of the citizens. Our knowledge of this realm is less systematic than of the public, but it has often been observed that private activities seem more important in the Hellenistic period than in classical Greece. Certainly important changes are visible in Greek settlements in the East. The extremely tight-knit communities of the classical cities could not be replicated in new foundations with populations drawn from many quarters. The papyri suggest, for example, that women's lives in Ptolemaic Egypt became much less segregated; women made their own marriage choices much more than they once had, influenced perhaps by the freedom women had in Egyptian society as well as by their distance from their ancestral communities.

Households contained children, too. Middle-class families were likely to have slave pedagogues to take care of them in their earlier years. Hellenistic cities increasingly had provision for public support of elementary education for citizen boys, but higher education was always a private concern and expense; only the well-off were likely to go beyond grammar school. Whether the increased prominence of children in Hellenistic art indicates some change in their status in the family, or merely a shift in representational tastes, is hard to say; but there is much feeling in such depictions. The normal high mortality rate of infants and children did not anesthetize parents to emotional involvement in their offspring. It may even be that the partial deracination of emigrant society led people to find more of their emotional grounding in their families, less in the outer community. The pathos of death remains universal, as visible and poignant in funerary art of the Hellenistic period as it had been earlier.

Beyond the most basic needs, much varied with economic status. All households but the poorest would normally include slaves, whose relationship to their masters ran the full range from close affection to sullen hatred. Feeding the family might not be easy, even for the wealthy. Crop failures could and did leave whole cities vulnerable to famine; relief would come only from timely imports. Alexandria, with Egypt's resources behind it, must have faced this problem only rarely, but for island cities with poor land the shortages were perennial.

Even the poor households seem to have had more artwork than was found in the classical period; at least they had the mass-produced figurines so characteristic of the times. But it was in the richer homes that the change is more visible, in the works whose materials and workmanship were clearly very expensive and yet which cannot have been destined for a public place. Just as other aspects of life were more private than before, so was the experience of art. Accordingly, smaller objects become more common than they had been, things that would fit in a domestic environment rather than dominating a public place. Some of this, to be sure, was not just for display. In an economy that lacked most of the means by which the modern world holds, uses, and recycles wealth, such as stocks, bonds, and certificates of deposit, the rich—and even the middle class—would keep much of their wealth in gold and silver objects which could always serve as bullion. No matter how much the thought of melting down beautiful platters and bowls, not to speak of jewelry and figurines, may horrify a modern sensibility brought up to see art as almost sacred, these objects were the inert repositories of their owners' assets. They were relatively portable, always marketable, and comparatively easy to hide. Their bullion value, of course, is responsible for the small portion of them that have survived to the present.

Religion, too, had its place in the private sphere. Public festivals were often accompanied by smaller sacrifices on private home altars, sometimes on the roof. Many cults not part of traditional civic religion attracted worshippers. Greeks in a new land tended to pay attention to local divinities, on the prudent



Fig. 4. The House of Hermes, Delos, second century B.C. Photograph, John Dean.

principle that any god the local residents had discovered to be powerful probably was and deserved propitiation. A number of Syrian and Egyptian gods gained a popularity, spread in the main by private initiative, far beyond their original homes; the process ultimately took them to virtually every corner of the Roman Empire. It is a modern superstition to believe that people of the Hellenistic period found religion less emotionally important than those of earlier or later times; the description of women at the festival of Adonis in Alexandria provided by Theokritos in his *Idyll* 15 shows how involved even spectators might be.

Getting close to private feelings, however, is usually difficult. Letters are businesslike rather than emotional, and court literature mostly obeyed canons of its own that cannot be assumed to reflect popular views. What are we to make, for instance, of the great increase in the popularity of erotic art, particularly female nudes? These ornamental statues were surely not meant for the agora; surely many, if not most, decorated homes. An increased importance for home and family life could well have led to a greater emphasis on eroticism in marriage, in contrast to attitudes prevalent in Classical Athens, where courtesans and boys occupy the center of attention when love is the subject. But it is hard to be confident of such interpretations; changes of taste could have other explanations.

There were other currents in taste. Not only eroticism but everyday experience in general becomes popular as a source of motifs; this is perhaps yet another reflection of the privatization of experience of which we find traces elsewhere. A wide variety of styles, often combined, turns up to reflect interests both broad in culture and deep in historical perspective. Greeks did not hesitate to borrow Egyptian artistic motifs in their houses and tombs, nor to imitate the art of several hundred years previously. This eclectic approach seems equally at home in literature, where the works of authors from Homer down to contemporaries circulated and the scholars of the Alexandrian Museum edited their predecessors at the same time as Egyptian and Jewish traditions were being translated into Greek.

### The Larger World

The horizon of both individual and city was bounded, far more than in earlier periods, by permanent external forces. The most obvious and ubiquitous of these was the king. Whether in Greece or in Bactria, it was a rare city that spent many years free of control by one of the Hellenistic monarchies. There was a wide range of forms and degrees of royal control. At one extreme stood royal capitals like Alexandria, Antioch, or Pergamon, where the king was usually resident and utterly dominant. Political institutions coexisted to some degree with the royal court, but there could be no mistaking where the power lay. For most cities, however, the king was more distant. From that distance, and from the kings' need for the cities—as a source of manpower and taxes—came some balance in the equation. No city could stand up to the king, but neither could the king be everywhere at once if his burdensomeness caused pandemic revolt. Relations were generally conducted with considerable politeness on both sides, often by ambassadors behaving as if the two parties were on an equal footing.

The kings were eager to see their standing with their subjects rest on something more than coercion. Kings protected their domains in war, often from barbarians such as the Gauls who for many years threatened Asia Minor. Many public buildings in the cities were gifts of kings. A gymnasium here, a stoa there, and the king could acquire the reputation of generosity. In prominent cities like Athens, a significant part of its public face might be owed to such royal gifts. A competent and generous king could at least hope that his cities would consider his rule preferable to that of others, even if they would really have preferred no master at all.

Royal power was from the point of view of the city a remarkable phenomenon, difficult to comprehend within the framework of these small communities and even harder to domesticate. Where the cities' need to find a way of understanding the kings in their own terms met the kings' need to see the

relationship develop beyond the purely businesslike we find the growth of royal cults. When Rhodes established a cult of Ptolemy I as Soter (Savior) after his extensive help to them in resisting a siege by Demetrios Poliorketes, it was choosing a form of relationship that recognized the more than human beneficent power displayed by Ptolemy. That does not mean that the Rhodians did not know the difference between the divinity of Zeus and the status they assigned to Ptolemy, but neither should we cynically suppose it was just so much empty show.

Royal propaganda tried as well to use other religious themes. Kings sought, for example, to adopt for themselves the image of Herakles, who was a paradigm of the human who through great deeds acquires immortality. In a society with the limited means of communication that antiquity possessed, putting across these connections was no simple matter. One key means of spreading widely the royal image and the links to it that the king wanted was coinage. What the average citizen thought of all this, we have little evidence; inscriptions tell us mostly what cities found it politic to say publicly.

Not all of the kings were as Hellenic as the major monarchies. A Greek city might be under the dominion of a king of Iranian background. This was, of course, no new experience for Greeks, for many of them in Asia had lived under Persian rule for significant portions of the preceding three centuries. The kings themselves, in places like Pontos and Bithynia, could hardly devote their energies solely to making their Greek subjects feel kinship with the rulers, since most of the kingdom was peopled with other than Greeks. The northern part of Asia Minor, heavily Iranized over centuries of Persian rule and virtually bypassed by Alexander, had Greek cities, mainly on the coast, but an Anatolian and Iranian population in the interior. The coins of the kings of these regions often display an only partially Hellenic character.

The centrality of military prowess in the royal image reflects Hellenistic reality. Reading Diodoros's account of the wars of succession after Alexander's death might well give one the impression that war was constant everywhere. The reality was far more bearable, but war was nonetheless always a threat in many places and sometimes a threat virtually everywhere. The historical record informs us mainly about the wars of kings against kings, but cities were often the proximate targets in these conflicts. Cities still campaigned against each other at times, mostly over disputed territory. And the external enemies, barbarians, menaced many areas from time to time. Upper Egypt rose against the Ptolemies several times and had to be subdued with considerable bloodshed.

Even in peace, however, most Greek cities of the East had to coexist with their non-Greek neighbors, that dominant fact of life that gives definition to Hellenism. Part of their relationship was exploitation: natives worked the fields around many cities in Asia Minor and Syria owned by Greek residents of the cities; and military "settlers" in Egypt, given the use of tracts of royal land for their support, mostly preferred to lease them to Egyptian peasants rather than working them personally. Slaves in Greek urban



Fig. 5. The House of the Masks, Delos, second century B.C. Photograph, John Dean.

households were mostly, and preferably, barbarians of one sort or another. Greek underwriters made money by guaranteeing the amounts to be collected in taxes from the Egyptian peasantry.

On the other hand, it was Greek language and culture that counted, not "racial" identity. Natives discovered quickly that by learning Greek they could move up economically and eventually even socially. There was always a market for competent bilingual literate bureaucrats, for the kings needed administrators who could communicate both with the subjects and with the ruling cadres. And many existing privileged groups in native societies endured, such as the Egyptian priesthoods, the members of which collaborated with the king and helped give him legitimacy, in return for grants and privileges. Natives who became Hellenized did not necessarily, or even normally, lose their own cultural backgrounds; it is certainly in part to such bicultural people that we owe works of art and literature in which Greek and native elements are joined.

Movement in the other direction existed too, though no doubt to a lesser extent. Greeks mostly did not learn alien languages. Some did, however, marry native women. We can rarely see into the interior of such unions, but their offspring certainly could often operate in both spheres, blurring the lines to a substantial degree. This assimilation in both directions was certainly resisted by those whose positions it undermined. The most famous example of such resistance, of course, is the determined Jewish struggle to avoid Hellenization at the hands of Antiochos IV. Even there, however, the fight was as much internal—between those favoring Hellenization and those opposing it—as it was external. The more we learn about any particular Hellenistic society, the more complex the separateness and linkages of cultures appear. The coexistence of this complex diversity with broad common patterns of unity mark the Hellenistic world as one in which the *oikoumene*, the inhabited world, was united into one civilization without the suppression of any of its rich particularity.

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