

THE
HELLENISTIC
AGE



PETER THONEMANN

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PREFACE

The three centuries which followed the Macedonian conquest of Asia, from the death of Alexander the Great (323 BC) to the fall of the Ptolemaic kingdom of Egypt (30 BC), are perhaps the most thrilling of all periods of ancient history. In this short book I have tried to convey some of the richness and variety of Hellenistic civilization, from the Library and Museum of Alexandria to the wild Afghan colonial frontier. The story of the Greek adventure in the East is one of the great romances of human history, and I hope that this book will inspire some readers to explore it further. A few suggestions for further reading will be found at the end.

The Hellenistic world spanned a vast geographic area, from the western Mediterranean to the Hindu Kush, and readers may find it helpful to use the maps on pages xii–xiii for orientation.

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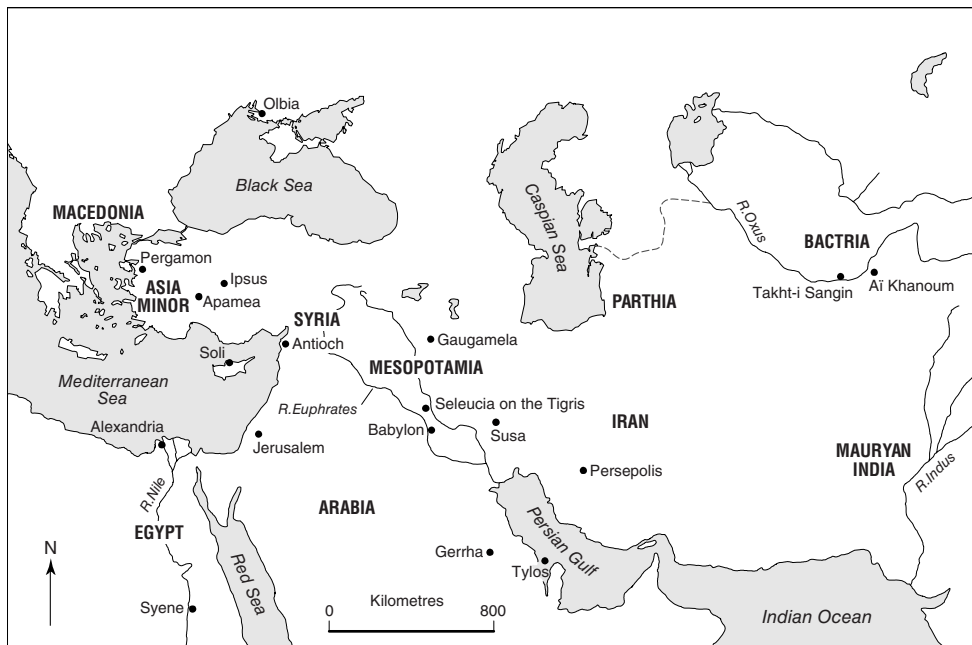
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Map 1 The Hellenistic Aegean.



Map 2 The Hellenistic Near East.

1



The Idea of the Hellenistic

The Man from Soli

Imagine a boy, born around 350 BC in the small Greek city of Soli on Cyprus. Like some 35 million others, he grew up as the subject of an Iranian king: Artaxerxes III of Persia, King of Kings, King of the four corners of the earth, ruler of Jews, Babylonians, Iranians, Egyptians, and Greeks (though not, it is true, *all* Greeks). The Persian empire, 200 years old, and stretching from the shores of the Aegean to the foothills of the Himalayas, must have seemed as stable as the heavens.

This boy—let us call him Clearchus—came to manhood with the world shifting around him. In the spring of 334 BC, a Macedonian army, led by the young Alexander the Great, crossed into Asia. Cyprus itself fell to Alexander less than two years later, and by autumn 331, with the defeat of King Darius III of Persia at the battle of Gaugamela, the Persian empire of the Achaemenid kings had crumbled into history.

As Alexander's army marched on into the plains of Asia, Clearchus sailed west to Athens, where he studied

philosophy at Aristotle's Lyceum. He visited Apollo's sanctuary at Delphi, where he carefully copied the god's oracular sayings ('Know thyself'; 'A friend's affairs are one's own'). He began to write, and he wrote about the strange new world starting to come into being: the religion of the Jews, Indian wisdom, the Persian Magi. Thanks to quotations preserved by later writers, we can still read a few fragments of Clearchus' lost philosophical works, *On Education*, *On Flattery*, *On Friendship* and others.

In the summer of 323 BC, Alexander, king of the world, died at Babylon. Within a few months, Alexander's empire had already begun to fracture into regional fiefdoms in the hands of hard-faced Macedonian generals: Ptolemy in Egypt, Antipater (and later Cassander) in Macedon, Perdiccas (and later Antigonos) in Asia. But for a young man of an inquisitive disposition, the world was opening up. Other young men of Soli had already made unimaginable lives for themselves in the Greek New World: Stasanor of Soli ruled as the governor ('satrap') of Drangiana in eastern Iran, and the sea-captain Hiero of Soli had explored the Arabian coast of the Red Sea as far as the Hormuz straits.

And so it was, in the first years of the third century BC, that the man from Soli set out for the East. All the lands from Syria to central Asia were now ruled by the greatest of Alexander's successors, King Seleucus I Nicator ('the Conqueror'). From the Syrian coast, Clearchus rode eastwards to the Euphrates; then downstream to the new Seleucid royal capital, Seleucia on the Tigris, a day's journey south of modern Baghdad. He crossed the Zagros mountains, and skirted the northern flank of the Iranian desert, on the long and

dusty road to world's end: the great fortress of Ai Khanoum, on the banks of the River Oxus, in the far north-east of modern Afghanistan (described in Chapter 5).

Here, Clearchus found a little community of Greeks, building a new city beneath the snows of the Hindu Kush, 5,000 miles from Delphi. The city had a Greek theatre, and a Greek gymnasium; part of a lost work by Aristotle survives on a scrap of papyrus from the palace treasury at Ai Khanoum. Where Clearchus went next we can only guess: perhaps he crossed over the mountains into India, or maybe he set out on the long path back to the Mediterranean. But he left his mark on the stones of Ai Khanoum. In the tomb-complex of the city's founder, Kineas of Thessaly, Clearchus set up a limestone column bearing the sayings of the Seven Sages of Greece, which he had laboriously copied at Delphi thirty years earlier: 'As a child, be well-behaved; as a young man, self-controlled; in middle age, just; in old age, a good counsellor; in dying, without grief.' On the base of the column he had the following epigram inscribed:

These wise sayings of famous men of old
Are consecrated in holy Pytho (Delphi).
There Clearchus copied them carefully, and brought them
Here, to set them up, shining afar, in Kineas' precinct.

The stone survives today, a little battered by nomad invasions, but with the letters as crisp and clear as the day they were cut (see Figure 1). Since 2006 it has travelled even further than Clearchus did, as part of a roving worldwide exhibition of treasures from the Kabul Museum: it has been on show at the Musée Guimet in Paris, the British Museum

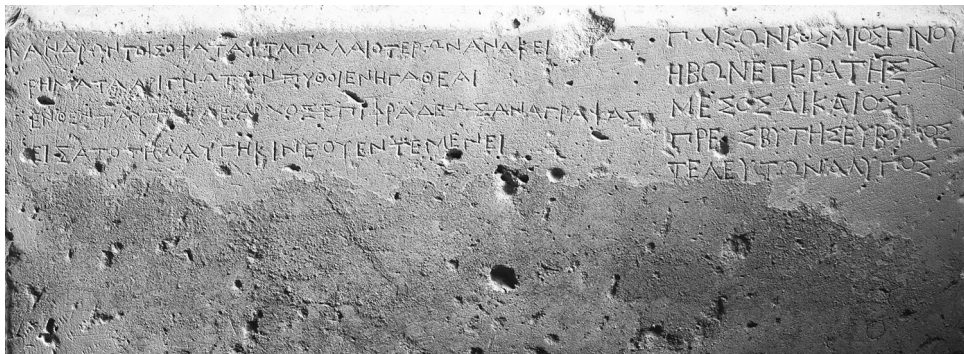


Figure 1 Clearchus of Soli at Ai Khanoum.

in London, and is due to spend 2016 on tour across Japan. If the museum guard looks the other way for long enough, you can run your finger across the name 'Clearchus', and reflect on a life less ordinary: beginning on the shores of Cyprus, and ending (perhaps) under the hard glare of a Bactrian sun. A Hellenistic life, if ever there was one.

A 'Hellenistic' Age?

Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Early Modern period; Flavian Rome, Tudor England, *les trente glorieuses*; Archaic, Classical, Hellenistic. Historical 'periods' are blunt instruments, but without them we cannot talk about the past at all. Ancient Greek history is today conventionally divided into four periods: Archaic (from around 800 to 500 BC), Classical (500 to 323 BC), Hellenistic (323 to 30 BC) and Roman Imperial (30 BC to—say—AD 284). Hellenistic history, thus arbitrarily defined, is the subject of this book.

Like most epochs in ancient history (the 'Iron Age', the 'fifth century BC', 'Late Antiquity'), the idea of the 'Hellenistic' is a modern invention. The word itself is ultimately descended from a passage in the Biblical Acts of the Apostles, where the Jewish followers of Jesus are divided into *hellenistai* and *hebraioi*, terms which probably refer simply to their spoken language of choice (Greek or Hebrew). Early Modern Biblical scholars believed that the Jewish *hellenistai* used a special Greek dialect, the 'Hellenistic tongue' (*lingua hellenistica*), reflected in the Greek of the New Testament and the Septuagint.

The German scholar Johann Gustav Droysen (1808–84) was the first to use the term ‘Hellenistic’ not just of a dialect of the Greek language, but of a whole epoch in Mediterranean civilization, beginning with the Asiatic conquests of Alexander the Great in the late fourth century BC (334–323 BC). At the time of Alexander’s conquests, wrote Droysen:

East and West were ripe for fusion (*Verschmelzung*), and on both sides fermentation and transformation quickly followed. The new awakening of popular life led to ever more novel developments in the state and the intellectual sphere, in commerce and art, in religion and morality. Let us describe this new world-historical principle with the word ‘Hellenistic’. Greek culture, in dominating the life of the world of the East, also fertilised it, and so created that Hellenism in which the paganism of Asia and Greece—indeed all antiquity itself—was destined to culminate.

For Droysen, the ultimate result of this cross-breeding between East and West was Christianity itself. Alexander’s conquest of the East, and indeed the whole history of the Hellenistic world, was to culminate in the Christian faith, a quintessentially ‘Hellenistic’ religion born out of the fusion of the Greek and Oriental spirit. Happily, not all of Droysen’s work was infected with this sort of nebulous mysticism: his enormous, unfinished *History of Hellenism* (1836–43) is, for the most part, a rather sober political history of the century from 323 to 222 BC.

For better or worse, Droysen’s terminology caught on. Today, the word ‘Hellenistic’ is used to refer both to a historical epoch (the Hellenistic period) and to a geographical region (the Hellenistic world). It is also used of a whole

range of cultural phenomena seen as characteristic of this region and period, such as Hellenistic kingdoms, Hellenistic poetry, Hellenistic sculpture, Hellenistic religion and so on.

The Hellenistic world, as usually understood, was a relatively narrow temperate zone of western Afro-Eurasia between the 25th and 45th parallels, stretching from the Adriatic and Libya in the west to the Himalayas in the east—broadly speaking, the lands ruled by Alexander the Great at his death in 323 BC. This zone includes the whole of the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea, Egypt and the Levant, Mesopotamia, the Iranian plateau, and the lands immediately to the north and south of the Hindu Kush. From the fourth to the first century BC, all of these regions were either Greek-speaking or ruled by Greek-speaking dynasties. Historians sometimes refer to Hellenistic Carthage, Hellenistic Arabi, or even Hellenistic India, in order to highlight the cultural connections between those outlying regions and the ‘core’ Hellenistic world; but most people would find something perverse about the notion of, say, Hellenistic Ireland or Hellenistic China.

Most modern histories of the Hellenistic period begin in 323 BC, with the death of Alexander the Great, and finish in 30 BC, with Octavian’s incorporation of Ptolemaic Egypt into the Roman empire. The starting point is obvious enough. Alexander’s swift, violent, and dramatic conquest of the Achaemenid Persian empire between 334 and 323 BC was a geopolitical event of the first significance, establishing Macedonian rule across vast stretches of western Asia. The ‘globalization’ of Greek culture in the wake of Alexander’s

conquests is perhaps the best argument for separating off a 'Hellenistic' Age from earlier periods of Greek history.

Things are much less clear-cut at the lower end of the period. The major Macedonian successor kingdoms in Europe, Africa, and Asia eventually collapsed in the face of Roman expansion in the west and Parthian expansion in the east, but the process was drawn-out and uneven. Macedon itself became a Roman province as early as 146 BC, but the Ptolemaic dynasty of Egypt lasted until 30 BC, and some small Hellenistic states (such as the Bosporan kingdom of the eastern Crimea) survived deep into the Roman Imperial period. As a result, the modern historiography of the later Hellenistic period is, frankly, a bit of a mess. Macedon after 146 BC is usually treated as part of Roman history, even though in most respects 'early Roman Macedonia' had far more in common with the late Hellenistic kingdoms in Asia than it did with, say, Roman Spain.

'Hellenistic culture' is, as we would expect, the fuzziest category of all. Here Droysen's idea of 'fusion' (*Verschmelzung*) still exercises a spectral influence. The Hellenistic period certainly saw large-scale migrations of Greek-speaking peoples into Egypt and Asia, and the Greek language, Greek lifestyles, and the institutions of the Greek city-state were widely diffused in the non-Greek lands conquered by Alexander. But whether we should see eastern Hellenism as marked by cultural fusion between Greeks and non-Greeks or, instead, by colonialism and apartheid, remains a hotly debated question.

Can we speak of a 'unified' Hellenistic world? The Seleucid, Antigonid, Ptolemaic, and Attalid monarchies really did have

more in common with one another than with any kingdom of the fifth or fourth century BC; the eastern Roman provinces really were different—though not as different as you might think—from the Hellenistic kingdoms that preceded them. Distinctive new artistic styles (individualized portraiture, genre realism, the ‘Hellenistic baroque’) left their mark everywhere from Greece to the Ganges, and new ‘Oriental’ cults (such as the worship of the Egyptian deities Isis and Serapis) were popular throughout the Greek-speaking world.

That said, we should not let the category ‘Hellenistic’ do our thinking for us. It is hard to make meaningful generalizations about, say, the Hellenistic family or the Hellenistic economy, let alone a Hellenistic aesthetic or a distinctively Hellenistic ‘world-view’. And it is all too easy to impose an artificial unity on the Hellenistic world by the arbitrary exclusion of peoples and cultures which fail to fit our preconceptions of what the Hellenistic world ‘really was’. The Greek cities of third-century Sicily get short shrift in most histories of the period (too far west), as do the kings of Parthia (too Iranian) and the peoples of Iron Age Europe (too uncivilized). The book of Ecclesiasticus, written around 200 BC, is not usually treated as Hellenistic literature (too Jewish), nor are the *Annales* of Ennius, a Latin imitation of Greek epic poetry by an Oscan-speaking native of south Italy (too Roman). The Hellenistic world is, very largely, what we make it.

Writing Hellenistic History

Most books on the Hellenistic world begin by lamenting the state of our evidence for the period. This is nonsense. On

almost any criterion, we know far more about Hellenistic history than we do about the Archaic or Classical Greek world.

It is true that we are not well supplied with ancient narrative histories of the Hellenistic kingdoms. The break-up of Alexander's empire between 323 and 302 BC is recounted in Books 18–20 of Diodorus Siculus' *Library of History* (compiled c. 60–30 BC), supplemented by several early Hellenistic *Lives* by the biographer Plutarch (c. AD 45–120). Rome's rise to world power between 220 and 145 BC was described in the massive forty-book history of Polybius of Megalopolis (c. 200–118 BC). Only Polybius' first five books survive intact, but many of the missing portions can be reconstructed from Books 31–45 of Livy's *History of Rome*, which drew heavily on Polybius' lost narrative. The history of the Jewish people in the Hellenistic period is known in rich and circumstantial detail: I and II Maccabees (part of the Biblical *Apocrypha*) give a gripping contemporary narrative of the Jewish revolt against Seleucid rule in the 160s BC, and Books 11–12 of Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* (first century AD) are a mine of information on Hellenistic Judaism.

The biggest gap in our knowledge is the political and military history of the third century BC, for which no reliable continuous account survives. Much of the 'core' narrative history of the third century is still deeply obscure: there may or may not have been a 'War of the Syrian Succession' between Antiochus I and Ptolemy II in 280/279 BC; we do not know whether the battle of Cos took place in 262 or 255 BC; and pretty much all that we can say about the Seleucid loss of southern Iran is that it must have happened some time between 280 BC and the early second century.

But narrative history is not everything, and the Hellenistic historian is amply compensated by an amazing wealth of documentary evidence of all kinds. The sands of Ptolemaic Egypt have preserved tens of thousands of bureaucratic and literary papyri, revealing the internal workings of the Ptolemaic state to a level of detail unimaginable for any earlier Mediterranean society. A single junior Ptolemaic financial official of the mid-third century BC, Zeno of Caunus, has left us an immense archive of more than 2,000 business documents, mostly relating to the management of a large private estate in the Fayyum oasis, south of modern Cairo. Papyri also offer us intimate access to the daily lives and mentalities of ordinary people in the Ptolemaic kingdom. We can read private letters, divorce-contracts, school exercises, and even the quirky dream-diaries of a Greek recluse and two little Egyptian twin girls in the temple of Serapis at Memphis:

The dream that the girl Thauēs, one of a twin, saw on the 17th of the month Pachon. I seemed in my dream to be walking down the street, counting nine houses. I wanted to turn back. I said, 'All this is at most nine.' They say, 'Well, you are free to go.' I said, 'It is too late for me.'

The dream that Ptolemaios saw at the Moon Festival on the 25th of the month Pachon. I seem to see Thauēs singing aloud in a rather sweet voice and in good spirits; and I see Taous laughing, and her foot is big and clean.

With rare exceptions, the papyri bear only on the internal history of Ptolemaic Egypt. Elsewhere in the Hellenistic world, our richest documentary evidence comes in the form of countless thousands of Greek inscriptions on stone. Hellenistic

cities were a hubbub of public and private inscriptions, many of them running to hundreds of lines of vivid and intricate prose: inter-state treaties, honours for great civic benefactors, letters from Hellenistic kings; land-sales, temple-inventories, disputed wills, and accounts of divine epiphanies. An inscription from Pergamon in north-west Turkey, 237 lines long, describes in meticulous detail the duties of the city's *astynomoi*, the officials responsible for the upkeep of roads, fountains, cisterns, toilets and other public works. From the small city of Magnesia on the Maeander comes a dossier of more than sixty letters and decrees from Hellenistic kings and cities, recognizing the inviolability of the city and its territory. In many cases, these are the only surviving public documents from the cities concerned, making the Magnesian dossier a treasure-trove of evidence for Greek civic institutions from the Adriatic to the Persian Gulf.

Inscriptions often shed new light on major historical events. As Plutarch tells us in three curt sentences of his *Life of Demetrius* (written in the late first century AD), the year 287 BC saw a successful Athenian uprising against the rule of King Demetrius the Besieger (whose career is sketched in Chapter 3). In 1971, archaeologists working in the Athenian Agora uncovered a long honorific decree for a certain Callias of Sphettus, the commander of a Ptolemaic mercenary force in the Aegean. The inscription describes the course of the Athenian revolution in rich and moving detail, beginning as follows:

When the revolution of the People took place against those occupying the city, they drove out the enemy soldiers from

the urban centre; but the fort on the Mouseion hill was still occupied, the countryside was in a state of war at the hands of the troops stationed in Piraeus, and Demetrius was marching from the Peloponnese with his army against the city. Callias, learning of the danger to the city, selected a thousand of the mercenaries stationed with him on Andros, paying their wages and providing grain-rations, and came at once to the city to help the People, acting in accordance with the goodwill of King Ptolemy towards the people; and he marched his troops into the countryside and made every effort to protect the grain-harvest, so that as much food as possible could be brought into the city . . . (etc.)

Only thanks to this text do we know that the Athenian rebels were backed by King Ptolemy I Soter (reigned 305–282 BC), Demetrius' chief rival for power in the Aegean basin. The inscription for Callias is now the cornerstone of our understanding of Ptolemaic foreign policy in the 280s BC.

Alongside written texts, the Hellenistic historian also has a terrific range of material evidence to draw on. Dozens of Hellenistic cities, sanctuaries, and fortresses have been excavated, from Greece to Afghanistan, among them the extraordinary Greek city of Priene, described in Chapter 6. The formidable site of Heraclea under Latmus in south-west Turkey preserves its entire Hellenistic wall-circuit all but intact, complete with towers, wallwalks and guardhouses (see Figure 2). Some of our best surviving examples of Hellenistic architecture come from Jordan: the fortress of Qasr il Abd near modern Amman (described by the Jewish historian Josephus) is a Hellenistic palace in miniature, and the city of Petra, capital of the Nabataean kingdom, gives us



Figure 2 The Hellenistic fortifications of Heraclea under Latmus.

a wonderful sense of the baroque cityscape of a late Hellenistic royal capital.

The study of gold, silver and bronze coins is more central to Hellenistic history than to any other period of antiquity. Several major Hellenistic states—most notably the Bactrian kingdom of central Asia and the Indo-Greek kingdoms of the Punjab—are effectively known to us only through their coin-issues. Coins also illuminate unexpected cultural and economic connections between far-flung parts of the Hellenistic world. In the third and second centuries BC, the Celtic peoples of north-west Europe struck coins for the first time; almost all of these coinages imitate the gold



Figure 3 A gold coin of Philip II of Macedon, minted c. 340–328 BC, and a Celtic imitation struck in Northern France or Belgium, c. 150–100 BC (images not to scale).

coins of Philip II of Macedon (359–336 BC), reflecting the extensive use of Celtic mercenaries by the major Hellenistic kingdoms (see Figure 3).

Finally, although contemporary narrative histories are thin on the ground, the Hellenistic states have left us a

wonderful body of literary and scientific texts (the subject of Chapter 4). In the field of poetry, the *Mimiambes* of Herodas and some of the *Idylls* of Theocritus offer vivid sketches of daily life in the Hellenistic world; the *Exagoge* of Exekiel the Tragedian translates the Biblical narrative of Moses' flight from Egypt into the language and form of Greek tragic drama. We have a startlingly rich corpus of Hellenistic mathematical texts, including major works by Archimedes, Euclid, and Apollonius of Perge. At the interface between poetry and science stand 'didactic' poems such as Aratus' *Phaenomena* (on the constellations) and Nicander's *Theriaca* and *Alexipharmaca* (on venomous animals and poisons). New finds continue to enrich our knowledge of Hellenistic literature: 2001 saw the publication of a papyrus containing more than a hundred new epigrams by the third-century poet Posidippus.

As will be clear from the preceding pages, the Hellenistic historian has a rich and varied tapestry of sources to work from. One incidental result of this is that Hellenistic history is fun to write, and fun to read. Since 'straight' narrative history is usually impossible, we have to use our imagination. Ancient-history writing has few brighter jewels to show than Arnaldo Momigliano's *Alien Wisdom* (1975), Elias Bickerman's *The Jews in the Greek Age* (1988) or John Ma's *Antiochos III and the Cities of Western Asia Minor* (1999). William Tarn is not a fashionable writer nowadays—too Victorian, too moralizing, unsound on imperialism—but the incomparable opening pages of his *Antigonos Gonatas* (1913) still capture some of the excitement of Hellenistic history:

No part of Greek history should come home to us like the third century BC. It is the only period that we can in the least compare with our own; indeed, in some ways it is quite startlingly modern. We meet with half the things that we ourselves do, half the problems that we ourselves know. The days of Salamis and Sophokles are as remote from the men of that time as the days of Shakespeare or the Spanish Armada from ourselves. All the horizons have widened and opened out; civilization pulsates with new life, and an eager desire to try all things. Almost all the barriers are already down . . . And there is so much to be done; nothing less than the conquest, material, social, intellectual, of a whole new world.

This new world, in all its kaleidoscopic variety, is the subject of this book.