

## Chapter Five

### The Greco- Roman world from Alexander to Hadrian

In 334 BC Alexander, ruler of Macedon and Greece, crossed from Europe into Asia and began the historic conquest that was to change profoundly the ancient world. Perhaps the most important of the changes that resulted from his conquests was the formation of Hellenistic Judaism, rabbinic Judaism, and the various Christian movements. All of these were well under way by the time that Hadrian took control of the Roman empire in 117 CE. The four hundred and fifty years that intervened between Alexander's expedition and the accession of Hadrian were therefore as momentous as any period in recorded history. Chapters 7-14 will present a detailed account of the development of Judaism and Christianity. As a preface to that account, this chapter and the next are a cursory survey of the Greco-Roman background against which Judaism and Christianity emerged.<sup>1</sup>

The Classical period of Greek history is usually defined as ending with Philip of Macedon and his son, Alexander the Great. At this point, according to our historical conventions, the Hellenistic period began, and ran for about three hundred years. More precisely, the Hellenistic period began with the defeat of the Greek city-states by Philip and Alexander at Chaeronea in August of 338 BC. For much of the Hellenistic period the great powers in the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East were the four Greco-Macedonian kingdoms that arose out of Alexander's empire: the Ptolemies, the Seleukids, the Antigonids and the Attalids. Greek was the language of government in all four monarchies, and Greek culture was spread in at least a thin veneer over most of the cities from the Tigris river westward to Macedon in Europe and to Cyrenaica in North Africa.

Their professional armies and fleets kept the Hellenistic monarchies strong for a long time, but eventually an even stronger power arose in Italy. That was Rome, originally a city-state but after ca. 400 BC a territorial state that expanded steadily until, by the 260s BC, it extended over most of the Italian peninsula. With Italy dominated, the Roman republic - led by its senate - contested with the republic of Carthage for control of the central and western Mediterranean. Between 264 and 201 BC the Romans expelled the Carthaginians from three large islands - Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica - and then from Spain. All of these lands were made Roman provinces. Next, the Roman senate used its "divide and conquer" strategy to expand into the Hellenistic world of the eastern Mediterranean. The Hellenistic period ended in 31 BC with the battle of Actium, where Octavian (soon to be acclaimed as Caesar Augustus) defeated Marcus Antonius and Queen Cleopatra, the last Ptolemaic ruler of Egypt.

After Actium, all of the Mediterranean and most of the Near East was ruled by the Romans. The Romans themselves, however, were ruled by their emperors, the republic having collapsed in a series of civil wars between a corrupt senate on the one side and ambitious proconsuls and demagogic leaders of the popular assemblies on the other side. The Julio-Claudian emperors ruled for almost a century (31 BC - 68 CE) and were followed by the Flavians (69-96 CE). A series of adoptive emperors began with Nerva and Trajan, under whom the Roman empire reached its greatest territorial extent. Trajan's successor was Hadrian (ruled

117-138 CE), who in some ways epitomizes the Greco-Roman world at its ostensible best.

It was in this world of great powers that little Judaea for a brief time enjoyed the status or the illusion of being an independent kingdom. In fact the Judaeian monarchy was at all times a protégé of Rome, and when the Caesars decided that it was no longer useful to them they abolished it. The repercussions of Judaea's gaining and losing its sovereignty radically changed the direction of Judaism, and led to the sudden appearance of Christianity. How this happened will be the subject of later chapters. Here we will look at the Greco-Roman world within which it happened.

## **The Hellenistic kingdoms**

In the thirteen years between his accession to the Macedonian throne in 336 and his death in 323 BC, Alexander the Great changed the course of history.<sup>2</sup> His conquests, from the Hellespont (Dardanelles) to Egypt and then east to the Panjab of India, were of immediate importance in a negative way. They put an end to the Persian empire, which had ruled most of the ancient world since the middle of the sixth century BC. But the long-range consequences of Alexander's career went far beyond military and political relationships. By removing the barriers that had long separated the Greek world from the East, Alexander's conquests accelerated the religious changes that would eventually put an end to Classical Greco-Roman civilization and turn the world over to Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Alexander conquered the Persian empire with a professional army that at the outset numbered some 40,000 men, and that by 323 BC was about twice that size. When he died unexpectedly at the age of 33, his generals parceled out his huge empire into manageable chunks, each general appropriating a division of the army and enough gold and silver to hire thousands more professional troops. Most of the infantrymen were Greek or Macedonian, because the Greeks and Macedonians had long experience of fighting in a hoplite phalanx, but the recruiting nets were wide enough to bring in young men from other lands. One requirement for these "barbarian" recruits was that they learn the Greek language, since the officers all spoke Greek and the administrative language of Alexander's entire empire was Greek.

The senior generals who divided up Alexander's empire in 323 BC did not long survive, most of them killed in conflicts with rivals or unruly subordinates. The long-term winners were second-tier officers. At the outset they were content to call themselves *diadochoi*, or "successors" of Alexander. But after Alexander's son was murdered at the age of twelve in 310 BC, and no one was left from the old royal family of Macedon, the Diadochs one by one claimed the title of *basileus*, or "king." So arose the Hellenistic kingdoms that were to dominate the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East for the next two hundred years.

Ptolemy I (Soter, or "Savior"), who took over Egypt, not only was able to keep it but even - with a victory at Gaza over a rival in 312 BC - added the southern Levant to his holdings. For his capital Ptolemy chose Alexandria, recently founded on the coast of the Nile delta, and he made the city the grandest in the ancient world. To fill this city, and to help him make Egypt as productive and profitable as it could be, Ptolemy invited more than a hundred thousand Hellenes to Egypt. They came from the Greek cities of Anatolia, Greece, southern Italy and Sicily,

willingly abandoning their old republican city-states in order to live under a powerful but benevolent monarch. By the death of Ptolemy Soter in 283 BC his kingdom stretched from the Nile Cataracts at Syene (today Aswan) to Cyrenaica and the mountains of Lebanon, and included more than 10,000,000 subjects.

Seleukos was a bit later in asserting himself as one of Alexander's Diadochs. In 312 BC - with the help of Ptolemy and also as a consequence of the battle at Gaza - Seleukos rode across the desert to Babylon, took the city, and soon controlled all of Mesopotamia and western Iran. After 301 BC Seleukos added Syria and southern Anatolia to his empire. Eager to have immediate access to the Greek world, he moved his capital from Mesopotamia to the Syrian coast: the new city of Antioch, which for the next thousand years was one of the world's great cities. Seleukos' success on the battlefield continued, and at the moment of his murder in 280 BC his realm stretched from the Iranian desert to the Hellespont. By that time some 25,000,000 people were Seleukid subjects.

The Antigonids were the third great dynasty founded in the aftermath of Alexander's conquests. The first two Antigonids - Antigonos the One-Eyed and his son Demetrios - won great empires and lost them, their fortunes rising and falling with dramatic reverses. It was not until 279 BC that the third in the Antigonid line - Antigonos Gonatas - carved out a stable kingdom. This was Macedon itself, and from their capital at Pella the Antigonids henceforth ruled Macedon, controlled much of central and northern Greece, and exercised a good bit of influence over the islands of the Aegean. Their subjects numbered only a few million people, but because of the Greek and Macedonian military tradition the Antigonids had no shortage of professional troops, and in military power were fully an equal of the Ptolemies and the Seleukids.

The last of the Hellenistic monarchies to emerge was the Attalid, based at Pergamon, in northwest Anatolia. Attalos I made himself independent of the Seleukids, and came to be regarded as a protector by the rich Greek cities along the Anatolian coast. The Attalids, however, were perennially threatened by the Seleukids, who hoped to recover western Anatolia and its large Greek population. To maintain themselves the Attalids had to rely on alliances with stronger powers. From the 270s until 200 BC their saviors were the Ptolemies, and after 200 BC the Attalids depended on Rome.

Ultimately, the Romans put an end to all four Hellenistic kingdoms. The Antigonids were the first to succumb, in 168 BC. The last of the Attalids willed his kingdom to Rome in 133 BC. The Seleukids were eliminated in 64 BC, and with Cleopatra's suicide in 30 BC the Ptolemaic dynasty ended and Egypt became the personal property of Caesar Augustus. The chronology of the Hellenistic kingdoms that emerged from Alexander's conquests can be summarized as follows:

|             |             |              |               |
|-------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|
| Ptolemies   | Seleukids   | Antigonids   | Attalids      |
| 323 - 30 BC | 312 - 64 BC | 279 - 168 BC | 270s - 133 BC |

### **The city-states of old Greece, and their subjugation to Rome**

While the four monarchies were the great powers in the Hellenistic world, the old city-states of Greece played a very subordinate role. Gone were the days when Athens and Sparta could fend for themselves. In the third and second centuries BC a city-state in Greece typically joined an alliance in order to maintain its independence from the great monarchies. On the horizon of the city-states the monarchy that loomed the largest was the Antigonid, based in Pella, just north of Mt. Olympos. The city-states of central Greece, which were most immediately threatened by the Antigonids, formed an alliance conventionally called the Aetolian League ("league" is an archaic translation of the Greek *koinon*). In the Peloponnesos was another alliance: the Achaean League, headquartered at Corinth.

The leagues did preserve some republican autonomy for the Hellenes, although often a league had also to ally itself with one of the great powers - the Ptolemaic or Attalid kingdom, or the Roman republic - to deter the Antigonids in the north. Finally, as the shadow of Rome fell increasingly over the Greek mainland the leagues had either to submit to the Romans or be vanquished. The Roman senate all but abolished the Aetolian League in 188 BC. The Achaean League survived a bit longer, but in 146 BC the Roman senate demanded that Corinth separate itself from the league. The league bravely rejected the ultimatum and went to war with Rome. By the end of the year the Achaean League no longer existed and a Roman army had sacked the city of Corinth and burned it to the ground. A hundred years later Julius Caesar rebuilt Corinth, making it home for a colony of Roman veterans and freedmen.

Over the course of two centuries several hundred thousand Hellenes were enslaved by the Romans. During their wars with Carthage the Romans enslaved the entire citizen population of Akragas and Tarentum, these cities having sided with Carthage, and they treated Syracuse almost as brutally. The worst enslavement occurred in 166 BC, when the proconsul Aemilius Paullus rounded up 150,000 men in the Epeiros region and sent them to the slave markets. In 146 BC all of the Corinthians - men, women, children - were enslaved.

Athens was the last state in Greece to defy the Romans. In 88 BC the Athenians made an alliance with Mithridates of Pontus in order to renounce their status as Roman clients. The Roman senate put Lucius Cornelius Sulla in charge of a proconsular army, with orders to defeat Mithridates, and Sulla did that with ease. He then punished Athens for its "rebellion." Most of the city's moveable treasures, including much bronze and marble statuary, was shipped to Rome. The proconsul placed the Athenian government in the hands of oligarchs who could be relied upon to follow directives from the Roman senate.

During the Roman civil wars Greece was frequently a battlefield between the Roman factions. In August of 48 BC Julius Caesar defeated Pompeius and his senatorial supporters at Pharsalus, in Thessaly. Six years later Brutus and Cassius lost their lives, and the Roman republic came to an end, at Philippi, a few miles inland from the northern shore of the Aegean sea. And it was at Actium, on the western coast of central Greece, that Octavian defeated Antonius and Cleopatra in 31 BC. In each of these campaigns huge Roman armies battled each other, and for the duration of the campaign the Greek cities lying along the lines of march were required to provide the armies with common labor and with supplies.

## The Pax Romana

With his rivals eliminated, Octavian fashioned his personal rule of the Roman empire. In the new arrangement the Roman senate was, by a pious fiction, addressed as the partner of the *imperator* Octavian, or Caesar Augustus, as he was titled by the senate in 27 BC. The popular assemblies of the Roman republic were discontinued, and so long as the empire lasted real power lay with the emperor and the army.

Augustus secured the Roman empire's eastern frontier by negotiation, in 19 BC coming to an understanding with the Parthian king that the Euphrates river would be the line of demarcation between their realms. In 16-15 BC Augustus sent Roman armies under his stepsons, Drusus and Tiberius, to annex the lands between the Alps and the Danube. These new provinces were anchored by military colonies: Augusta Vindelicorum and Vindobona became, over the centuries, the cities of Augsburg and Vienna. A few years later the conquest of Pannonia extended Roman control of the Danube's right bank another hundred miles downstream from Vindobona. Apart from a disastrous campaign across the Rhine into Germany, Augustus attempted no further conquests, and by his death in 14 CE *pax* ("peace") had become the watchword in all the provinces. This ideal of peace, the *pax Romana*, replaced the old ideal of continuous conquests, and the hitherto barbarous lands of western Europe began to be Romanized and civilized. Occasionally Augustus' successors ordered campaigns to expand the empire, but such campaigns were the exceptions. Claudius (41-54) annexed the province of Britannia (southern Britain), and Domitian (81-96) added the Rhine-Danube salient. Here the indispensable legionary headquarters were Moguntiacum (Mainz) and Regina Castra (Regensburg). Trajan temporarily pushed the Roman frontier eastward against the Parthians, annexing provinces up to and even beyond the Tigris river, but these territories were quickly given up by Hadrian, who settled on a defensive policy for the empire. Hadrian's Wall in northern Britain was a symbol of that policy, the wall being erected to defend Roman Britannia against the barbarous Picts, who lived in what is now Scotland. Hadrian's successor, Antoninus Pius (138-161), presided over the most tranquil years in Roman history, no war of any significance marring the Pax Romana.

Latin was of course the original language of Roman administration, and in all of the western provinces it continued to be so. Greek, however, was the language of Roman government in all of the provinces from the empire's eastern frontier westward as far as Lower Moesia in the Balkans and Cyrenaica in North Africa. It is therefore conventional, in speaking about the Roman empire, to divide it into "the Greek east" and "the Latin west."<sup>3</sup> Provincial governors and their staffs posted in the Greek east were required to be fluent in Greek, and the governors themselves were expected to have an education in Greek literature. Many of the provincials in this broad area were not comfortable speaking Greek, and if they had to deal with a Roman official they secured the services of an interpreter who knew both Greek and the native vernacular. Most Egyptian villagers, for example, spoke only Coptic (Egyptian), and if summoned to court they had to depend on agents who were bilingual in Coptic and Greek. When the Christian apostle Paul spoke to a tumultuous crowd in Jerusalem he spoke in Aramaic, but when he spoke to the commander of the Roman cohort he spoke in Greek.<sup>4</sup>

## **Traditional society in Egypt and the Near East**

During the first century and a half of Roman rule Egypt and the Near East continued to evolve away from their deep and storied past, but the most far-reaching changes in these lands had been made long before: in the late fourth and the third centuries BC. By introducing Hellenism to the Near East, these changes did much to bring ancient Near Eastern civilization to a close. The changes were largely the work of the early Seleukid, Ptolemaic, Attalid and - to a lesser extent - the Antigonid kings. The Hellenistic Diadochs and kings bet their survival on a strong professional army, and on an efficient and productive system of taxation. Their motivation was always self-interest, but in the process of serving their own interests they superficially Hellenized - and therefore “modernized” - their kingdoms. In order to see the significance of this Hellenization we need first to see what Near Eastern society had been on the eve of Alexander’s conquests.

### **1. Absence of a military tradition**

Urban and civilized populations in the Near East had for a very long time left matters of warfare and defense to the kings and professional armies. This was in contrast to the citizen-militia tradition that characterized the city-states of Greece and Italy, and to the habitual violence that characterized such uncivilized lands as Iran, Armenia, Arabia, and North Africa. The inhabitants of the Phoenician and Palestinian cities on the coast of the Levant had no tradition of military service, nor did the Egyptians, the Mesopotamians, and most people who lived in the cities of Anatolia (Phrygia, Lydia, Cilicia).

In less urbanized areas a military tradition still continued. In the Tauros and Zagros mountains and in hill country such as Israel and Judah daily life was more dangerous, and virtually every man knew how to hunt wild animals and how to use a spear and shield on the battlefield. During the centuries of Persian rule young men from Judah continued to enlist for military service, now as professional troops in the Persian army. So it is not surprising that the first Ptolemy enrolled thousands of Judahites to serve in his army, bringing them to Egypt and stationing many of them at Alexandria. For the most part, however, the Hellenistic kings looked for recruits in the Greek-speaking areas of Anatolia and in Greece itself.

### **2. Languages and literacy**

By the fourth century BC Aramaic was the language spoken throughout the heart of the Near East: the Levant, northeastern Syria, and Mesopotamia, all of which lands are often called by the single name, “the Fertile Crescent.” Aramaic was a Northwest Semitic language, cognate with Hebrew and Arabic. The Aramaic dialect spoken in Mesopotamia differed somewhat from the Aramaic of the Levant, but not enough to prevent a resident of Sidon or Jerusalem from readily understanding a visitor from Babylon. Aramaic had spread in part because of the alphabetic script in which it was written, a script so simple that it could be mastered in a few days by anyone sufficiently motivated to learn it. The cuneiform script that preceded the alphabet had for two millennia been used to write Akkadian, but the cuneiform syllabary required long study and so it, along with the Akkadian language, was by the fourth century BC known

only to a few specialists, mostly priests and astrologers. Aramaic served as the *lingua franca* of the Persian empire, the Persians recognizing that their own Persian language was virtually unknown outside Persia itself.

Very few Aramaic books were available in the Persian period.<sup>5</sup> Papyri of *The Tale of Ahiqar* were found at Elephantine in Upper Egypt, where a Judahite garrison had been posted by the Persian kings, and the papyri seem to have been inscribed in the late fifth century BC. But by and large the reading of books anywhere in the Near East was extraordinary before Alexander's conquest. Qoheleth 12:12 (AV) regrets that "of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh," but the Preacher was writing in the third or second century BC, by which time books had indeed become familiar to the Judaeans.<sup>6</sup> Before the arrival of the Hellenes, most people in the Near East had no need to read or write anything, and especially in the villages illiteracy was the norm. In contrast to the thousands of Greek inscriptions that have been recovered from all over the Greek-speaking world, less than a hundred Aramaic inscriptions have been found in all of the Near East. It is likely that in the cities the average man was able with some effort to read a simple sentence, and perhaps to write his name and patronymic, but fluent literacy must have been limited to a very small minority.

The Egyptians spoke Egyptian, an evolved form of the language which in the Old Kingdom had been spoken by the builders of the great pyramids at Gizeh. Egyptian continued to be spoken in the villages and countryside of Egypt all through the Hellenistic and Roman periods, and in fact until the eleventh and twelfth centuries, by which time most Egyptians had learned Arabic and converted to Islam. In Egypt too literacy was rare in the fourth century BC. The most prestigious script was hieroglyphic, and royal inscriptions continued to be written in hieroglyphs, but to carve a hieroglyphic sentence in stone was a day's work for a scribe, a draftsman, and a stone-carver. For writing with pen and papyrus two simpler scripts - hieratic and demotic - had been devised, but neither was nearly so efficient as an alphabet. An alphabetic script for Egyptian was not worked out until the first or second century CE. In the third century CE this "Coptic" script, borrowed and adapted from the Greek alphabet, became a literary vehicle as Egyptian Christians used it to write Egyptian versions of their scriptures, prayers, liturgies and theological works.

The Anatolians too were by and large illiterate in the fourth century BC. Their problems were especially intractable, since many of the Anatolian languages - Carian, Lycian, Lykaonian, Sidetic, Pisidian, and even Lydian - had scarcely been written at all. Because they had no scribal tradition in their vernaculars, when priests and rulers in Anatolia needed to write something as long as a paragraph they usually assigned the chore to a scribe who was literate in either Greek or Aramaic. The rarity of literacy in any of the languages of Anatolia helps to explain why - once the Greek language became readily accessible - Anatolians by the hundreds of thousands were quick to learn it and use it. The old languages of Anatolia withered and died.

### **3. The persistence of the old cults**

The next chapter will deal in more detail with the religious aspects of the Near East in the Hellenistic and early Roman period. Here it is sufficient to observe that despite the new

directions in religious thought in the sixth and fifth centuries BC, at the time of Alexander most of the Near East was still under the sway of the old gods. The theocentric character of the Near East in fact helps explain the ease with which Alexander had conquered so vast a territory, and the lack of hostility to the Hellenes who moved to the Near East in the wake of Alexander's conquests. We may find it surprising, emerging as we are from two centuries of nationalism, that in the Hellenistic period the attitudes of Asiatic and Egyptian natives toward the immigrant Hellenes were either cordial or - at worst - neutral. What mattered to most Near Easterners was not language or nationality but the gods in their temples. The immigrant Hellenes, contrarily, were heirs of a semi-secular outlook that was almost four hundred years old. They treated all of the gods - both the Near Easterners' and their own - with respect, but also with considerable skepticism.

In many communities in the Near East a temple - which typically had been in existence since the Bronze Age - was the center not only of religious life, but of *all* life. In an Anatolian temple-state, usually no more than forty or fifty miles across, the deity (most often a goddess) owned much of the land and many of the people ("slaves of the goddess" they were happy to call themselves). The deity was assumed to be responsible for the sun and the rain, for the fertility of herds and flocks, and for the well-being of all who lived in the vicinity of the great temple. The high priest, accordingly, was both the religious and the political authority for the region. Although the temple mentality was based on ignorance and superstition, it obviously worked very well - both for the individual and for the community. Everyone, from the high priest to the lowliest field worker, performed without question what the goddess demanded, and in return for their obedience the goddess gave her subjects a regulated life and serenity of mind.

## **The Hellenization of Egypt and western Asia**

### **1. The new Greek cities**

The vehicles of Hellenization in the Near East were the new cities, and the building of these was as important as anything that happened in the early Hellenistic period. By 200 BC more than a hundred Greek cities stood in lands in which there had been none at all when Alexander crossed into Asia. Alexander and the Diadochs built cities in order to house the Hellenic subjects whom they already had, and to attract more of them. A Diadoch courted Hellenes because Hellenes were what the defense and the administration of his realm depended upon. His army, first of all, was Hellenic. The most valued hoplites came from the Aegean: hardened Greek professionals, who could be found congregating at the mercenary markets of Crete and Lakonia, and who signed on with the king who offered the highest wages. These men, of course, spoke Greek as their native language. Other recruits were born "barbarian," but they too were taught some Greek during military training (Alexander had imposed the language requirement), and in the course of their service learned much more of it.

The many military colonies (*katoikiai*) built by Alexander and his successors were intended in the first place as homes for reservists. Soldiers were paid a daily wage for the duration of their service, and were given a bonus at retirement. But it was important for a Diadoch to keep such men nearby and available, should there be a sudden need for their services,



and it was for that reason that Alexander and his Diadochs built military colonies. When retired from active duty, the veteran thus was supported by a small farm, and lived in a community that had at least a few of the amenities of a Greek city. Usually a military colony, consisting of a thousand or more veterans and their families, was built next door to an ancient Asiatic city, and in such cases the veterans had the best of both worlds. So at Aleppo the Seleukids established the military colony of Beroea, and at Urhai the colony of Edessa. These and many other military colonies were named after cities in Macedon or Greece. Less desirable colonies were those placed near a nondescript village, or even in the middle of nowhere. Over the centuries, however, even some of these evolved into very respectable cities. In western Anatolia a chain of seven cities (one of which was the Thyateira to which the Apocalypse of St. John addresses a benediction and a warning) originated from seven military colonies set up by the Seleukids.

In addition to the military colony, there was the full-fledged city. The new city was officially styled as a *polis*. It was not, of course, an independent city-state, being very much under the control of the Hellenistic king who established it, but it did have local or municipal autonomy. The founding of a polis was a spectacular undertaking, and involved the labor of thousands of people over several years. A Diadoch provided a new polis with everything that a city should have: straight streets, a colonnaded market, and a city-wall, of course, but also a gymnasium, odeon and theater, and in many cases even a library, baths and a temple or two. The new polis was also outfitted with a full set of civic institutions, adding up to an oligarchy or occasionally a limited democracy. The citizens were grouped in property classes and divided into *phylai*, a law-code was borrowed (usually from Athens or one of the other major cities in the Aegean), and a *boulē* (council) and magistrates were elected to govern the city. The latter were invariably drawn from the top property class, the “governing class” which saw itself as especially dependent upon the Seleukid or Ptolemaic monarchy that had established the city. It was this governing class, an economic and cultural elite atop the Hellenic minority, that enthusiastically perpetuated Greek culture, or *paideia*.

To launch a full-fledged city was expensive, and it was not done without a great deal of forethought. The poleis built by Alexander were called Alexandrias, and when a Diadoch built a polis he also named it either after himself or after a loved one. The Ptolemies founded cities named Ptolemais, Arsinoe, or Philadelphia (after Ptolemy II Philadelphos). Seleukos built various Seleukeias, but also cities named Apameia (after his first wife, an Iranian woman), Antioch (after his father, Antiochos), or Laodicea (his mother's name). The population of these royal foundations ranged considerably. Seleukeia-on-the-Tigris eventually numbered more than half a million people, and Syrian Apameia at least a hundred thousand. Perhaps more typical was Seleukeia-in-Pieria, a beautiful city built on a mountain slope on the Syrian coast: this city had a population of 30,000 in Polybios' time. Altogether it appears that in the century after Alexander's death a million or more Hellenes emigrated from Greece, southern Italy and Sicily, to take up residence in one of the new cities of Egypt, Syria, the interior of Anatolia, and Mesopotamia.

Except for the fact that it did not have a *boulē* (the Ptolemies themselves governed the city), Alexandria in Egypt is the parade example of what a new city could be. At an excellent harbor-site chosen by Alexander himself, this city was intended to be the greatest that the world had ever seen, and it was. It was only when Julius Caesar saw Alexandria that he realized how

much needed to be done for Rome. The streets of Alexandria were broad, and of course were all laid out on a grid pattern. The principal east-west and north-south avenues were, according to Strabo, more than a hundred feet wide. The several Ptolemies each built palaces for themselves, but in addition to the palaces the kings built magnificent structures for the populace: a stadium, an amphitheater, a gymnasium with porticoes more than six hundred feet long, a law-court surrounded by groves. The city boasted a zoo, in which exotic animals were displayed for the public's amusement. In the harbor stood a lighthouse whose height is reputed to have been more than a hundred meters (at the very top a fire burned all night long, and mirrors magnified the light of the flames so that it could be seen far out at sea). And the royal library at Alexandria was the best in the world, with about half a million papyrus rolls on its shelves. Although Alexandria, like most of the new cities, had few temples, it did boast one that was magnificent: the Serapeum.<sup>7</sup> Built to house the statue of Sarapis, a god created by Ptolemy I Soter to be the dynasty's principal Egyptian deity, the Serapeum remained one of the "wonders of the world" until its destruction by a Christian mob in 391 CE. Around the colonnaded central sanctuary of the Serapeum were various related buildings and annexes, including the temple's own library with more than 40,000 rolls.

Although in the new poleis the only people with citizen status were the Hellenes who had been accepted for enlistment, the cities were not closed to "barbarians." If a considerable number of the latter were accepted as residents they were assigned their own quarter. There they spoke their traditional language, maintained their traditional cults, and had their own *politeuma* ("political organization"). It was in this way that a Judaeon enclave was established in many of the "Greek" cities of Egypt and Asia. In a large Hellenistic foundation there might be several such quarters, each for a different language group. Nationalism was not yet a problem in the early Hellenistic period, and the restriction of citizenship to Hellenes was accepted by all as entirely appropriate for a Hellenic city. In the typical new polis the *boulē* was at any rate likely to make a special grant of citizenship to individual Asiatics who were wealthy, who were educated in Greek, and who wanted to participate in civic affairs.

Quite different from the new Greek cities were the old Asiatic cities that masqueraded as Greek. Because the cachet of living in a Greek city was so desirable, the residents of "barbarian" cities found various ways of labeling their cities so as to give themselves a Greek address. Ambitious Syrians, for example, referred to their old city of Urhai as "Edessa," which in fact was only the name of the military colony in Urhai's suburbs, and the old city of Aleppo may also have borrowed the name "Beroea" from the colony next door. If there was no colony nearby, the populace could simply request a Greek name for their old city. A Hellenistic king was usually happy to grant such requests, and would give the change of name some concrete expression by constructing a magnificent building or two in the midst of the old city. The list of ancient oriental cities that obtained a Greek name in the early Hellenistic period is long. Amman, which today is the capital of Jordan, was Rabbath-Ammon in the Persian period, but under the Ptolemies became "Philadelphia" (the Hellenistic theater in Amman is a monument of this phase of the city's history). Akko, on the coast of Palestine, became Ptolemais, Susa became one of the many Seleukeias, Baalbek became Heliopolis, and Uruk Orchoi. For generations Tarsus was officially one of the Antiochs, and for a few years so even was Jerusalem.

## **2. Spread of the Greek language**

The advent of the Greek language to the Near East had profound consequences, and these were in the first instance linguistic. In the Near East in Alexander's day the various spoken languages were simply means of communication. They were not expressions of a nationalist ideology or vehicles of a cultural heritage, because there was not yet a literature in any language other than Greek (the "dead languages" of the temples were another matter, but they were at any rate unintelligible to the average person). As a result, Near Easterners were not inhibited from learning the language of the Hellenes. The progress of Hellenization was most rapid in western and southern Anatolia: by 200 BC most Bithynians, Lydians, Lycians and Cilicians spoke Greek, and their native vernaculars were headed toward extinction. Greek also went far toward replacing Aramaic in the cities of the Levant. East of the Euphrates and in rural Judaea Aramaic persisted, but in the coastal cities of the southern Levant (Tyre and Sidon, for example) Greek virtually drove out the local Aramaic. More surprisingly, it appears that by the end of the Hellenistic period even western Syria was largely Greek speaking (Aramaic must have hung on in the villages and small towns, but has left no written documentation).<sup>8</sup> Hellenization was much slower in Egypt than in western Asia, and in the early Hellenistic period the villages and towns of the Nile valley must have contrasted sharply with the three officially Greek cities (Alexandria, Naukratis and Ptolemais). In the villages, especially in Upper Egypt, Greek never did become more than a second language, learned by those few villagers whose work necessitated communicating with Hellenes or Hellenized Egyptians.

The kind of Greek that spread over the Near East was an Ionicized Attic dialect that eventually came to be called the "common" or *koinē* dialect, because it supplanted the regional dialects of Classical Greece: Doric, Aeolic, Ionic, Attic, and others.<sup>9</sup> Most Hellenistic prose writers - for example, the geographer Strabo, the philosopher Poseidonios, and the historians Polybios and Diodoros - wrote in an elevated form of the *koinē* dialect. Alongside this "standard Hellenistic" or "higher koine," however, there soon appeared a lower koine. The lower koine, a drastically streamlined and simplified form of standard Hellenistic, proliferated especially among the lower economic classes in Egypt and the Near East, but eventually spread also to Greece itself. What most contributed to the spread of the lower koine was the adoption of Greek as a second language by those people, almost all of them illiterate, whose first language was Macedonian, Phrygian, Aramaic, Egyptian or any of the other languages spoken in the lands that Alexander had ruled. An Asiatic shopkeeper who learned just enough Greek to communicate in it was content to learn a small vocabulary and a few basic inflections for nouns and verbs. The goal, after all, was to be understood rather than to be elegant or even correct. The result of this linguistic evolution was a stripped-down vehicle serviceable to millions of people in the eastern Mediterranean. We know the lower koine especially from the Christian New Testament, but it also appears in papyri, in epitaphs and graffiti, and in a few published works. Although it would be an exaggeration to call the lower koine a "pidgin" language, it was a sub-standard form of the higher koine, and until the Roman period nobody wrote in it. To the ears of an educated person, a speaker of the lower koine mispronounced almost every other word. For example, the word for "peoples" - δῆμοι - was "correctly" pronounced *daymoy*, but eventually came to be pronounced *dheemee*. Because the number of people speaking lower koine was many times larger than the number speaking a more elevated form of Greek, as the centuries went by the lower koine spread even to the Aegean and the Greek mainland. The "demotic" Greek that is today spoken in Athens is descended from the koine that was once spoken in Egypt and Asia.

### 3. Literacy and the elementary schools

A change even more significant - because this one was permanent - brought about in the Near East by the advent of the Greek language was cultural: the habit of literacy, the appearance of schools, and the proliferation of books. The wealthier "barbarians" who learned to speak Greek also learned how to read it, and for the first time encountered the pleasure of reading books. These were available on a wide range of topics: histories, philosophical speculation, poetry, "how-to" manuals, descriptions of far-off lands and peoples, biographies, and even a few novels. Before Alexander's conquests not one Near Easterner in a hundred had read a book. As indicated above, the *Tale of Ahiqar* and perhaps a few other Aramaic "wisdom books" were in circulation, and in Egypt a few stories written in the Demotic script, but the range of this Aramaic and Egyptian literature was narrow. Hellenic bibliophiles, in contrast, had available far more books than they could ever hope to read: mention has already been made of the half million books reputedly shelved in the Alexandria library. In the Hellenistic and Roman periods privileged Asiatics and Egyptians became avid readers and then industrious writers, first in Greek and eventually in their own vernaculars. By the second century BC Judaeans were writing in Greek, Aramaic and Hebrew some of the texts that were to become fundamental for Judaism; and by the third century CE Egyptians and eastern Syrians were translating the Christian gospels into Coptic and Syriac. By the fifth century Ethiopians, Georgians and Armenians all had a Christian literature in their own vernaculars.

In all of the new cities and even in the military colonies established in the early Hellenistic period the Greek immigrants set up elementary schools in which boys (and occasionally girls) were taught to read and write koine Greek.<sup>10</sup> At the age of six or seven a boy would begin to learn his letters. A *grammatistēs* (teacher of letters) normally was able to make his students functionally literate in four or five years. The instruction was carried on in a room that the *grammatistēs* owned or rented, and for each boy in his class he charged the father a monthly tuition. The ability to read and write was in the early Hellenistic period just as general among the Hellenes of the new cities as it had been in the Aegean.

Greek elementary schools, then, in the early Hellenistic period spread throughout the Near East. Evidently there was nothing comparable in any other language. Scribal schools had long been familiar in the Near East, but these were professional schools in which a scribal elite learned the difficult art of reading and writing the sacred scripts: the hieroglyphs in Egypt, Akkadian cuneiform in Mesopotamia, and Hebrew in the Jerusalem temple. The ability to read and write Aramaic was much more widespread (most craftsmen, shopkeepers and merchants in the Fertile Crescent were functionally literate in Aramaic), but not even in Aramaic is there evidence for a literate public before the Hellenistic period, or for schools in which children learned to read and write Aramaic. Aramaic inscriptions were not set up during the Hellenistic period, and that suggests that even in places such as Damascus, Jerusalem and Babylon most adults had difficulty reading an Aramaic sentence. In short, in the Near East there seems to have been no such thing as elementary education, and very little publication of books, until the arrival of the Hellenes. For practical purposes, this meant that in the early Hellenistic period Asiatic and Egyptian children who learned how to read and write learned these skills in Greek.

### 4. Secondary schools: *paideia*, and the definition of "Hellenes"

Although primary education began in the Aegean and was then extended into the Near East, secondary education moved the other way. Secondary schools were an innovation of the early Hellenistic period and they seem to have appeared first in the new cities of the Hellenistic kingdoms. In a Classical polis in Old Greece public education stopped at the primary level. The only other institution that had any resemblance at all to a school was the gymnasium, where wealthy youths in their late 'teens or early twenties tended to congregate. After hours of physical exercise, the young men enjoyed listening to speeches or debates on diverse topics, and it was in such a setting that Sokrates had found an audience.

The gymnasium, as we shall see, was also central to the social life of upper-class Hellenes in the new cities in Asia and Egypt, but here a new institution came into being. By providing a formal education for the adolescent it bridged the gap between the primary school and the gymnasium, and its subject was literature. In Classical times the well-to-do Hellene had known by heart long passages from the epics of Homer and Hesiod, as well as many poems of the great lyricists. For generations Archaic poetry is what Greek aristocrats had regaled themselves with at symposia and dinner parties, after they had drunk plenty of wine. Unless a man knew the old songs, he was not a *kalo'k'agathos* ("gentleman") but a boor. The Classical aristocrat had learned his poetry from a private tutor, just as he had learned privately his skills in music and gymnastic. In the Hellenistic period the learning of literature was institutionalized, thanks to the proliferation of what we may call "literature schools." In such a school a class of about twenty boys, ranging in age from eleven or twelve to fifteen or sixteen, learned the great old poems from a *grammatikos*. Since tuition at the secondary level was at least three times that of the elementary school it was beyond the reach of most citizens. But for the wealthier citizens (those of the governing class), and for a few well-to-do native families, the enrollment of their sons in a literature school was an obligatory investment.

Literature teachers in the Hellenistic kingdoms did more than teach their students songs for social occasions. An even greater necessity for upper-class Hellenes living in Asia or Egypt was the re-enforcement of "proper" language, both oral and written. Without that, you might sound like a soldier or - worse yet - a barbarian. For reaching the goal of proper diction and spelling Homer and Hesiod were ill-suited vehicles, as were the lyric poems, many of which were written in Doric or Aeolic Greek. What was needed were models closer to the higher koine spoken by educated Hellenes - the kind of Greek used in the schools of Plato and Aristotle. Plato's own dialogues served as models, but more interesting texts came from the dramatic stage. The comedies of Menander provided the adolescents with amusing stories on which to practice reading and reciting good, contemporary Greek. Prestige also attached, however, to the person whose Greek was slightly old-fashioned. The orations of Demosthenes set a good example, as did the histories of Thucydides and Xenophon and the tragedies of Aischylos, Sophokles and Euripides. In 341 BC the Athenian archons had begun staging one of the classical tragedies every year in the Great Dionysia; and the oligarchic regime at Athens had entered the publishing business, employing professional scribes to make copies of the more popular works of the city's three greatest tragedians. By the early third century BC volumes of the classical Athenian poets could be purchased from most booksellers.

The secondary school thus arose in Asia and Egypt as a means of instilling in young Hellenes of the upper class not only the poetic patrimony of all Hellas but also the language of

their educated contemporaries, and that language was best conveyed by the great Athenian writers. By 200 BC a three- or four-year stint with a teacher of literature was in the Ptolemaic, Seleukid and Attalid cities indispensable for any boy whose parents valued *paideia*. The word can be translated as "education," but its connotations were not nearly so democratic as our word "education." We may better translate it as "Culture," with a capital C, in the sense of that cultivation or refinement that sets the privileged apart from the masses.<sup>11</sup> Although aristocrats had always - in Greece and elsewhere - been able to boast of accomplishments that set them apart from the lower classes (music, athletics, and equestrian skills had served this purpose for the aristocracy of fifth-century Greece), never before had language and literature been so clearly the litmus test for social standing. In Hellenistic Egypt and Asia, *paideia* was what distinguished the Hellenic governing class from the millions who spoke the lower koine. Although in the Aegean itself such an education was less urgent, by the second century BC literature schools were beginning to appear also in the cities of Old Greece.

Outside the Aegean, the new emphasis on language and education as the distinguishing marks of a Hellene had an unforeseen but vastly important consequence: it made it possible for many Egyptians and Asiatics to *become* Hellenes. The son of a wealthy Syrian or Judaeon, for example, might be enrolled in a grammarian's school and there learn what was required of a proper Hellene. Cultural mobility was tantamount to ethnic mobility. Even in the Classical period Hellenes had set little store by genealogies or "racial purity," and had defined themselves in cultural rather than biological terms. So, for example, Pythagoras was the son of a Phoenician trader, Herodotos' mother was from Caria, and Thucydides' father was Thracian. Throughout the Hellenistic world, therefore, nothing prevented barbarians from becoming Hellenes, provided that they made the effort to do so..

A Hellene was anyone listed on the citizen rolls of a Greek city. As a case in point we may take Dura-Europos, on the right bank of the Euphrates river in Syria and some twenty miles downstream from the inflow of the Khabur tributary. Seleukos I founded the place, with a Hippodamian town-plan and a stout defensive wall, as a military colony shortly after 300 BC. Seleukos named the colony "Europos," after the Macedonian town in which he had been born (after its destruction in 257 CE the ruins came to be called *Dura*, a Semitic term for "fortress"). Early in the third century BC the Hellenes of Dura-Europos either were veterans who had served in Seleukos' army or were immigrants from one of the old Greek cities. But as the generations passed many neighbors of Syrian ancestry were added to the list of citizens at Dura-Europos and thereupon became full-fledged Hellenes.

Many of the later philosophers and writers whom we casually (and correctly) label as "Greek" were descended from "barbarians." Syrian or Egyptian parents who had themselves learned to speak Greek often gave their sons Greek names and a Greek education. Those who went on to become successful writers or orators were acclaimed as Hellenes, and many were given citizenship in a Greek city and thereupon were legally Hellenes. In the third century BC the poet Aratus and the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus wrote and taught at the Antigonid court at Pella and in Athens, but they came from the Cilician city of Soloi, famous for the poor Greek spoken there by the Cilicians. The essayist Lucian was born in Syrian Samosata, and his parents' native language was Aramaic. They sent Lucian to fine Greek schools and he rewarded their efforts by becoming one of the most eminent Greek writers of his day. Plotinus, the father

of Neoplatonism, was born in the Delta of Egypt and may have been the first in his family to become a Hellene. His disciple and biographer, Porphyry, was a Hellene by choice but a Phoenician by birth. Julian the Apostate, who took such pride in his Hellenism, was descended from Pannonian stock.

## 5. The gymnasium and the ephebate

Language and literature were not quite everything, and gymnastic and athletic events continued to be important in Hellenic life. The gymnasium was a standard feature in (or, often, just outside) any new city, and the larger cities had more than one. The *sine qua non* for a gymnasium was a large playing field, perhaps a hundred meters square, or even a stade (about two hundred meters) long. Here the young men would run, jump, wrestle, and throw the discus or javelin. On one side of the field, and on some occasions all around the perimeter, was a colonnaded building that offered a variety of amenities: baths, massage-rooms, lounges, lecture-rooms, music rooms, and even small libraries. Typically the gymnasts were men in their twenties or thirties, and eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds were admitted with some restrictions. Membership in a gymnasium was reserved for the rich: the gymnasial class of a city was synonymous with the governing class, demarcated by a property qualification. Once again, however, the doors were opened to those Egyptians and Asiatics who had the requisite wealth, and who had a Greek education. In the typical Hellenistic city the gymnasiarch, who oversaw the gymnasium and its membership, was one of the two or three most important municipal officials.

Initiation into the gymnasium was through the ephebate. In Classical Athens ephebes were the newest citizens (young men of eighteen and nineteen years), who from time to time were given instruction in their duties and privileges as citizens. Lykourgos had formalized the ephebate in Athens in the 330s BC, and had made it a full-time activity: during the ephebe's two-year stint he wore a black cloak and a large hat (the *petasos*), lived in a barracks, and received a good deal of military training along with some instruction about the city's cults and traditions. As envisaged by Lykourgos, a year's cohort of ephebes was to include every Athenian male who had in the preceding year passed his eighteenth birthday, and the purpose of the ephebate was above all military and political. In the third century BC, however, this democratic institution became an aristocratic preserve. Reduced to one year and no longer compulsory, the ephebate in the Hellenistic cities became what Henri Marrou called a "Higher Institute of Physical Education."<sup>12</sup> The ephebes were the sons of a city's privileged class, they had no conceivable military utility, and their project was to learn how best to enjoy their ample leisure.

## Hellenistic science and exploration

The early Hellenistic period was the zenith of Greek mathematics, science and exploration. In medicine, astronomy, geography and even mechanics the Hellenistic kings - and especially the Ptolemies - provided generous support for scholars. Some of the most famous of these were Theophrastos, Euclid, Eratosthenes and Aristarchos. At Athens, Theophrastos carried on Aristotle's investigation of plants, animals and minerals. At Alexandria, in the reign of the first Ptolemy, Euclid wrote the thirteen books of his *Elements of Geometry*. Euclid

systematically organized and presented those axioms of plane and solid geometry which he and his predecessors had established. A "school of mathematics" thus took root in Alexandria, and survived until the eighth century. Eratosthenes calculated the circumference of the earth, Aristarchos determined that the moon reflected the light of the sun, and some one proposed at least the beginnings of a "Copernican" solar system.<sup>13</sup> Pytheas of Massilia (Marseilles) sailed north from Gibraltar, circumnavigated Britain and reached the latitudes of the midnight sun. After his return to the Mediterranean he published an account of what he had seen. Herophilos of Chalcedon, by the dissection of cadavers that the Ptolemies supplied for him, learned much about arteries, veins, and the respiratory and digestive systems.

In Archimedes of Syracuse (287-211 BC), ancient mathematics and engineering reached their highest point of development. As a youth Archimedes studied mathematics in Alexandria, and it was there that he began the famous experiments that he continued in Syracuse. He worked out formulas for calculating volumes of all sorts of shapes: spheres, cylinders, cones, and even parabolas. His experiments with tools, or devices, showed what could be done with pulleys, with levers ("give me a point to stand, and I can move the earth"), and with the "Archimedean screw," which raised water from one level to another. When Syracuse was besieged by the Romans, Archimedes invented machines for use against the besiegers, and legend has it that he was killed by a Roman soldier who found him outlining a geometrical problem in the sand. Archimedes was more interested in theoretical questions than in the practical application of mathematical or physical laws. One of his proudest achievements was a planetarium, driven by an elaborate system of gears, that showed the movement of the sun, moon, stars and planets. He also proposed the distances of all of the heavenly bodies - the moon, the sun, the planets, the fixed stars - from the earth, which he supposed was the center of the universe.<sup>14</sup>

By the end of the second century BC the Antigonid and Attalid kingdoms had been absorbed by Rome, the Seleukids were tottering, and the Ptolemaic kingdom survived only because Rome propped it up. The great days of exploration were gone, but intellects who needed no royal support were still doing good things. Philosophy, as we shall see in the next chapter, continued to flourish into the first century BC. Excellent histories were written by Polybios and Poseidonios, and of course poets and orators continued to pour out belles lettres for the amusement of the educated elite.

## **Greco-Roman culture and the Hellenes' status in the Roman empire**

In 23 BC Octavian, who had recently become Caesar Augustus, the Romans' first emperor, organized Greece as a Roman province. He named the province "Achaea," and placed its Roman governor at Corinth. Augustus allotted to the governor only a few garrison troops, because the Hellenes were by the 20s BC thoroughly pacified. During the period of the Roman republic, all Roman provinces had been routinely squeezed by tax-collectors (*publicani*) and extortionist governors. Augustus cleaned up Roman provincial administration, lessening the burden for provincials, and for that they were grateful. When Augustus set up a cult dedicated to *Roma et Augustus* the Hellenes welcomed it, and men of wealth were eager to serve as priests in the imperial cult. The Augustan Age (31 BC - 14 CE) can be seen as the period in which the Hellenes were finally integrated into the Roman empire.



Despite all that the Hellenes of the Greek mainland and Anatolia had suffered at the hands of the Romans, Hellenes everywhere eventually came to consider Rome as a friend and even a benefactor. In Egypt and the Near East, the Hellenes had merely traded one imperial master - the Ptolemies, Seleukids or Attalids - for another. In Greece itself, later generations remembered little of the brutalities that had been inflicted on their ancestors by Rome (such recent history was neither taught in the schools nor drummed into children by their parents). More important was the Hellenization of Rome, and the great admiration of Hellenism by the Roman elite. Roman culture was an offspring of Greek culture, and the Romans prided themselves on their physical descent - mythical, of course - from the Homeric hero Aeneas and his band of Trojans.

In the early centuries of the Roman republic, whatever culture the Romans had was in the Greek language. All along, most Roman senators were able to speak, read and write in Greek, and some became as fluent in Greek as in Latin. Nothing like a literary tradition was to be found in the Latin language until late in the third century BC, when a Greek slave translated Homer's *Odyssey* into Latin verse. In the second century BC more Greek literature was rendered into Latin, and Latin writers began to write their own works in imitation of Greek models. So Plautus and Terence wrote Latin comedies not very different from those that Menander had written in Greek. Cato the Elder, who died in 149 BC, was the first Latin prose writer: his *Origines* sketched the early history of Rome, and his many speeches were read by later generations of Roman orators.<sup>15</sup> The evolution of Latin culture along Greek lines continued in the waning days of the Roman republic, which produced such philhellenic writers as Cicero, Lucretius and Catullus.

The Augustan Age saw the acme of Latin literature, with Vergil, Horace and Ovid. Each of these Latin poets was deeply grounded in Greek poetry and the Latin poetry they produced was as accomplished as that of their Greek predecessors. It remained very much within the Greek cultural tradition. As expressed by Horace,

Greece, the captive, captivated her rough conqueror,  
And brought culture to wild Latium.<sup>16</sup>

During the last century of the Roman republic, lower-class Romans had been taught to malign the Hellenes as cowardly and untrustworthy. That was in large part to compensate for the inferiority to the Classical Hellenes that all Romans had to acknowledge in matters of culture. Equally important, however, was the Roman senate's need to justify its brutality toward the contemporary Greek world, just as denigration of the Carthaginians was intended to excuse Rome for having stolen the Carthaginians' empire and having utterly destroyed the city of Carthage. Octavian himself fed the anti-Greek prejudice of the Roman plebs in order to stir up hatred against Cleopatra and her lover, Marcus Antonius. After the battle of Actium in 31 BC Octavian, or Caesar Augustus as he now preferred to be called, no longer found it necessary to encourage Hellenophobia. Across from Actium he built a new city, Nicopolis ("Victory City"), to commemorate his triumph, and then he began to mend his relationship with all of the Greek world. Rome itself began to take on a Greek appearance, with marble replacing brick facades. Most of what we regard as classical Greek sculptures are Roman copies of Greek originals: the

copies were made during the first and second centuries CE for wealthy Roman collectors of Greek art.

From the Augustan Age onward, educated Romans considered themselves as Latin-speaking Hellenes, if we may use such a contradiction in terms. They assumed, in other words, that the Romans and Hellenes together stood opposite “the barbarians”: all of those people who lived outside and apart from the Greco-Roman cultural tradition. Educated Romans, and that included virtually all of the governing class, knew the Greek classics well enough to quote from them - in Greek - when the occasion was appropriate.<sup>17</sup> Altogether, the early imperial period of Rome was a very good time in which to be a Hellene, in contrast to the disasters of the late Hellenistic period. Even though the world was ruled from Rome, the prestige of Greek civilization now stood higher - over a wider area and among more people - than ever before.

The emperors took the lead in philhellenism. All of the Julio-Claudians spoke Greek fluently. Before his accession Tiberius, who ruled the empire from 14 to 37 CE, had spent nine years in semi-seclusion on Rhodes, preferring that Greek island to Rome. During the last eleven years of his rule he secluded himself once more, this time on the island of Capri in the bay of Naples. Capri had first been settled by Greek colonists, and Greek remained the language of most natives until Late Antiquity. Nero (54-68) was idolized by the Hellenes. He not only spoke an elegant Attic Greek, but sang it with a beautiful voice. Late in 67 he capped his triumphal concert tour of Greece by declaring all of Greece free and independent of imperial control (three years later Vespasian rescinded the grant).

The most philhellenic of the Roman emperors was Hadrian (117-138), who in fact served a year as (honorary) archon of Athens. He built for the Athenians a gymnasium, aqueduct, stoa and library, and finished the mammoth temple of Olympian Zeus that the Peisistratid tyrants had begun six hundred years earlier. Hadrian also attempted to revitalize the spirit of the Hellenes by creating the *Panhelleneion*. This was a cultural association, headquartered at Athens, to which were sent delegates from all the old (pre-Alexander) Greek cities, from Cyrene to Trebizond. Evidently one of the main purposes of Hadrian's *Panhelleneion* was the holding of a musical and athletic competition every five years. Even in his personal life Hadrian reflected Classical Greece. He brought beards back into fashion, replacing - after four hundred and fifty years - the clean-shaven look popularized by Alexander the Great. By the second century CE pederasty had become a rare practice among Greek speakers, even in Greece itself; but Hadrian's one and only love was a Hellenic youth named Antinoös.

## **The class society**

The Greco-Roman world within which rabbinic Judaism and New Covenant Christianity emerged was a highly stratified and status-conscious society. People very well knew their place, and were ever mindful of other people's places. The classes were defined in all ways: political, social, cultural and economic.

The most consequential division was between free and slave. In the first century CE slaves seem to have made up somewhere between ten and twenty per cent of the total population

of the Roman empire. Slaves were most numerous in Italy, Sicily and North Africa, but were to be found in every province. The life of a household slave was not so hard as that of a slave on one of the large farms (*latifundia*), where clothes and rations were spare, physical punishment was common, and death usually came at an early age. Even a household slave, however, was entirely at the disposal of his or her master. In Judaea, Ben Sirach counseled his readers that if they owned only a single slave they should treat him well, because one day they will need him, but that they must keep all their slaves constantly at work, lest idleness give them thoughts of liberty.<sup>18</sup>

“Hellene,” as noted above, was a legal status. For almost three centuries it was the highest status available in the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East, but eventually it was surpassed by “Roman.” In Alexandria, for example, the free inhabitants were after 30 BC divided into four classes. At the top were the Romans: those relatively few persons who held Roman citizenship. These were either Roman officials or legionaries stationed in Alexandria, or native Alexandrians who for one reason or another had been given citizenship (veterans of the auxiliary units, for example, were rewarded with citizenship at the end of their twenty-year service). Next after the Romans came the Hellenes - in this case “the Alexandrians” - all registered on the civic rolls of Alexandria. Third were the resident Judaeans: all who were listed on the rolls of Alexandrian synagogues. Fourth were the Egyptians, one notch above the slaves. How this all worked is shown in a series of letters exchanged in 112 CE between the emperor Trajan and Pliny the Younger, who that year was serving as governor of Pontus and Bithynia. Having been helped through a severe illness by the physician Harpokras, who was an Egyptian from Alexandria, Pliny asked Trajan to grant Roman citizenship to Harpokras as well as to two freedwomen. Trajan did so, but reminded Pliny that before Harpokras the Egyptian became a Roman he should have first become a Hellene (an Alexandrian), since the rules were that Egyptians could not become Romans without first having become Hellenes.<sup>19</sup>

Property classes were no less important than “ethnic” labels. A census was periodically taken to determine civic privileges and - in the provinces - tax obligations to Rome. The censor assessed the value of your property and then assigned you to the corresponding property class. In a typical provincial city only the men of the highest property class were eligible to sit on the city council (the *boulē* or the *curia*) and serve as magistrates. Although the *curiales* - the families in the governing class - paid a land tax to Rome, they did not pay a municipal tax. They did, however, make voluntary contributions to their city. The gentry who were elected to the local curia or to the magistracies served without pay, and in recognition of the great honor bestowed upon him by his fellow citizens an elected official normally gave to his city a suitable honorarium. Among the most lavish honoraria were municipal fountains, secondary schools, endowments to support annual festivals or games, and even occasional temples.

The governing class had no difficulty making generous gifts, because in antiquity - as in other periods of history - money drained to the top. Throughout the Roman empire, cities rested on the backs of villages. Since manufacture and industry existed only to a limited degree, production during the Hellenistic and Roman periods remained mostly agricultural. Although there were still many small farmers, each of whom owned a few acres, the economic tendency for Greco-Roman antiquity has been well summed up in three words: “fewer have more.”<sup>20</sup> A wealthy, city-dwelling Roman or Hellene typically owned several plots of productive land, each

of which he rented to a peasant family living in a village near the land. In Syria the villagers - most of whom probably spoke both Aramaic and a low version of koine Greek - spent their lives producing olive oil and wine. In Asia Minor a well-to-do Hellene might depend on a dozen slaves and their dogs to manage a thousand sheep. In a typical Egyptian village, perhaps two thirds of the land was owned by absentee landlords (some of whom lived in Alexandria) and worked by tenants, whose first language was almost always Egyptian (Coptic). The tenants not only paid the landlord a rent for the use of the land, but also were responsible for paying the Roman government the tax on whatever the land produced. As in earlier periods of ancient history, most people assumed that the lower classes - slaves, first of all, and then the free poor, especially those who lived in the country - were ordained by Nature or the gods to enhance the comfort and splendor of their betters.

In this class society, one of the most distinguishing marks of a person's place at the top was Culture. This was manifested first of all in language. In the Latin west, your cultural standing rose the closer your Latin was to the Latin spoken in the Roman senate. The speeches of Cicero were acknowledged as the best Latin ever spoken, although under Claudius, Nero and the Flavian emperors tastes veered toward what Classicists call "silver Latin." In any case, educated people in the Latin west were careful that their language should distinguish them from the *vulgus*, "the common crowd," whose Latin is accordingly called Vulgar Latin. In the Greek east, by the reign of Hadrian the vogue in language was Atticism. This was the attempt of orators and writers to affect the kind of Greek spoken and written by the Athenians five and six hundred years earlier. Such an affectation was hardly less artificial than would be the speaking and writing of Elizabethan English today. The elevated koine had evolved considerably since the beginning of the Hellenistic period. Although the koine was perfectly serviceable, wealthy Hellenes made the effort to speak Attic Greek because Attic differentiated them from *hoi polloi*, stamping them as educated people who either already were in the governing class or aspired to be.<sup>21</sup>

Even more importantly, "proper" language (and a familiarity with the Greek or Latin classics) made it clear that you were not a barbarian. In the second century CE that pejorative was still very much in people's minds. Tatian, a Christian apologist and a Syrian who grew up during the reign of Hadrian, began his *Address to the Hellenes* with a reprimand: "Do not, you Hellenes, be so completely hostile to the barbarians, and do not malign their culture." Tatian himself, in an effort to escape the "barbarian" label, had not only immersed himself in Greek *paideia* but had made a valiant attempt to become fluent in Attic Greek. His attempt met with only limited success, which seems to have encouraged his conversion to Christianity. In a class-conscious society, many ambitious people must have been similarly humiliated. Suppose that you were a Hellene by virtue of citizenship in a Greek city, and that you were a Roman by virtue of some service to Rome, but that you had none of the cultural accomplishments expected of a Hellene or a Roman: not only would others in your class belittle you as a barbarian, but so also would those who readily acknowledged themselves to be barbarians.

The several Greek philosophical schools wrestled with what was perceived as the injustice of the class system. That one person was a slave and another a king was purely an accident, as the Epicureans saw it. The Stoics disagreed, arguing that our lot in life is the result of fate and that we must accept what Providence has assigned to us. Ancient religion did little

to mask the class divisions of the Greco-Roman world. With a few exceptions, the gods presided over the present life, not the Afterlife. They maintained the hierarchical society and stood at its apex. If an aristocrat was descended from a Hero or a god, as many aristocrats claimed that they were, the aristocrat was obviously far closer to the gods than a commoner could ever be. In Rome the Julian *gens* traced its lineage to Iulus, son of Aeneas and grandson of Venus. Alongside birth, wealth was taken as an indication of one's standing with the gods. It was widely assumed that a wealthy family was favored by the gods, and that the poor were not. The "better people" were thus properly in charge while a poor man thanked the gods for providing him with the essentials: bread and circuses. A slave who had been purchased for a hundred drachmas was worth exactly that, not much more than a team of oxen, and he had no reason to believe that the gods placed a higher value on him than did his owner.

Although Christianity abolished none of the classes into which Greco-Roman society was divided, the Christian gospel declared that the class divisions were of no consequence. The Church welcomed everyone - slave and free, male and female, Greek and barbarian, Judaeans and Gentile, rich and poor, educated and illiterate - and promised everyone the same blissful eternity in Heaven. In the seventh century Islam likewise taught that in the eyes of God the only important division was the one between believers and unbelievers.

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1. Peters 1970 is helpful on the entire period and beyond. For the century and a half after Actium see especially Fergus Millar's *The Roman Near East, 31 B.C.-A.D. 337* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993) = Millar 1993.
  2. For an excellent biography of Alexander see Peter Green, *Alexander of Macedon, 356-323 B.C.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
  3. The dividing line was in the southern Balkans. The evidence of inscriptions suggests that Latin was normally the language of government in Upper Moesia, and Greek in Lower Moesia. For a detailed study of Greek as an administrative language in the Roman empire see Jorma Kaimio, *The Romans and the Greek Language* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1979).
  4. Acts 21:37-40. Luke says that to the mob Paul spoke "in Hebrew," but Luke seems to have been unaware that Aramaic and Hebrew were two quite different languages. See Millar 1993, p. 234.
  5. For the few surviving scraps of early Aramaic literature see Brock and Taylor 2001, pp. 161-195. These pages constitute Chapter 8 ("Relics of Aramaic Literature from the First Millennium BC") of this fine volume.
  6. The Qumran caves yielded a complete targum (Aramaic translation from the Hebrew) of the

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Book of Job, along with many Aramaic fragments of canonical books of the Hebrew Bible and of various extra-canonical books (Aramaic texts of the Enoch literature were obviously popular). Yet the Aramaic and Hebrew literary spectrum was still very narrow in the first century CE. What books there were in these languages at that time were written by Judaeans and dealt with nothing outside their religious tradition. Brock and Taylor 2001, p. 161, suggest that “there was once an extensive written literature, inscribed on papyrus and parchment” in Aramaic, but I doubt that such a literature could have existed so early as the first century CE. Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 1.37-42 contrasts the endless writings of the Hellenes with “the 22 books” that provided Judaeans with all the wisdom they needed. Josephus had in mind the five books of Moses, thirteen books of “the Prophets,” and four books of hymns and precepts (Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Qoheleth). The Septuagint offered a Greek translation of all of these plus several others.

7. The building, following the Latin spelling, is usually spelled with an "e" and the god - on the Greek spelling - with an "a".

8. Millar 1993, pp. 233 and 251, observes that from the region of western Syria, dominated by the Greek tetrapolis of Antioch, Seleukeia, Laodicea and Apamea, not a single inscription in Aramaic (or in Palmyrene or any other Semitic language) has yet been discovered. The same area has yielded several hundred Greek inscriptions.

9. Ca. 100 BC the respected grammarian Dionysios of Thrace declared that there were five Greek dialects: Ionian, Attic, Doric, Aeolic, and the “common” (*koinē*) dialect.

10. For an in-depth study see Henri Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956).

11. Kaster 1988 shows very well how the grammarian - the *grammatikos* - served as a gatekeeper for higher Greek society, the mastery of proper language being the key for admission.

12. Marrou 1956, p. 108.

13. Martianus Capella, in Book 8 of his *De nuptiis philologiae et Mercurii* presents a cosmology in which - as usual - the sun orbits around the earth, but remarkably the planets Venus and Mercury orbit around the sun. Where Martianus found this description is disputed (Martianus himself, who wrote in the fifth century CE, was not an original thinker). One candidate is Theon of Smyrna, but perhaps a better one is Herakleides of Heraklea. In any case, that Venus and Mercury orbited the sun was in antiquity a short-lived theory: no later astronomer made use of it until the sixteenth century, when Copernicus cited it in his *De revolutionibus*.

14. Catherine Osborne, “Archimedes on the Dimensions of the Cosmos,” *Isis* 74 (1983), pp. 234-242.

15. Cato, exceptionally, was not a philhellene. He came from a relatively poor plebeian family and was elevated to the Roman senate only because he was the client of a noble who spared no effort to promote him. Because Cato had no Greek education, he had no choice but to write in

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Latin (earlier prose writers in Rome had written in Greek).

16. Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artis  
intulit agresti Latio (*Epistle* 2.1.156-57).

17. In contrast, few Hellenes bothered to learn Latin. Typically, an educated Hellene knew who Vergil was, and commended him for trying to emulate Homer, but had read neither the *Aeneid* nor anything else of Vergil's poetry.

18. Ben Sirach 33:24-31. On the neglected topic of Judaeian slavery see Hezser 2005.

19. For the exchange of letters see Pliny, *Epist.* 10, letters 5-10. The statuses were cumulative: when the transactions were completed, Harpokras was an Egyptian, a Hellene (an Alexandrian), and a Roman.

20. MacMullen 1974, p. 38.

21. On Atticism and the governing class in the early Roman empire see Swain 1996.