

## 7 Alexander and Hellenism

Alexander was born in 356. His father was king Philip II of Macedonia, where old-style kingship had continued untouched by distant Athenian models of aristocracy or democracy. When his son was born, Philip was leading his armies in a policy of expansion that soon brought him control of the whole of Greece. Philip was a brilliant leader and strategist and in 338, at the battle of Chaironeia, he defeated the Greeks who had been encouraged to resist him by the great speeches of Demosthenes at Athens. For Philip, Athens was a very special place and he respected its citizens. He had called Aristotle from studies at Plato's Academy to be Alexander's tutor. He also needed its fleet, for he intended to expand his empire into the Middle East, but in 336 Philip was assassinated and Alexander, who had already led the Macedonian cavalry at Chaironeia, became king at the age of twenty.

Seeing his age, Thebes rebelled while he was up beyond the Danube. He returned south, captured Thebes in 335, and destroyed it, although he ordered the house where Pindar had lived to be spared. Instead of establishing a firm power base in Greece, Alexander at once set out against the Persians who were in confusion after the murder of their king. He first destroyed their naval bases in Phoenicia, then went to Egypt and founded the city of Alexandria. In 331, he was beyond the Tigris and after a great victory against the Persians he captured Babylon. In 330 he was in Persepolis, from where he set off northwards. In western Afghanistan he founded the city Alexandria in Arachosia, better known as Kandahar and in 328 he was in the region of Samarkand, and founded "Alexandria at the World's End" (Khojent). By 327, Alexander was master of the whole area now called Iran, and beyond. He was ruling by now, not like a Macedonian king, but like the Persian Great King, before whom all had to bow low.

By 326, Alexander had led his army down into the Punjab (north-west India) but there they refused to go on. They were so far from home and they dreaded fighting the Indian war-elephants. So after exploring the delta of the Indus he turned towards the west. Driven by strange energies, Alexander set out on an expedition to the mouth of the Euphrates through desert and floods, then returned to Babylon and insisted on marrying all his Greek officers to Persian women. He himself had already married Roxana, up in Turkestan, but now he married Statira, a daughter of the last Persian king Darius, as well.

In the summer of 323 he suddenly fell ill and died, without a son yet born, without a successor. The result of his campaigns was a collapse of the Persian Peace, while his settlements were too scattered to be the basis for any permanent new order.

The most significant result of his new cities was the lasting presence of Greek culture in this part of the world so that, when the first king of all India, Asoka, was converted to Buddhism in 259, he turned to the Greek artists still living in India to create a representative art for this new state religion. In this way, many of the artistic forms of Buddhism throughout the Orient derive directly from those developed in Greece.

### After Alexander

After Alexander's death, the Greeks united in a new anti-Macedonian, Hellenic league but Antipatros, who had been Alexander's governor in Greece, fought back, using soldiers returning from the East, and defeated Athens, destroying its fleet. Democracy was abolished, the great Athenian orator Demosthenes took poison, many emigrated.

The Empire of Alexander broke into three parts, the Macedonian, the Egyptian, and the Asian. Alexander's bodyguard and secretary, Ptolemy ('the warlike') became governor of Egypt, taking back and burying in Alexandria the body of Alexander. He founded there a Hellenistic kingdom that only came to an end in 31 BC, with the deaths of Cleopatra and Mark Antony after the Battle of Actium. He wrote the memoirs of Alexander, using Alexander's own journal, and this became the source for much of what we know.

If Ptolemy planned, his son built; under Ptolemy II were built in Alexandria the Pharos (lighthouse), the Museum (Temple of the Muses) and the Library designed to contain everything important ever written in Greek. He also built a canal linking the Nile to the Red Sea. The rulers of Alexandria celebrated the cult of the deified Alexander. Alexandria became the main intellectual center

of the Hellenistic Age; it was entirely Macedonian in its ruling class, governing the native Egyptians firmly with well-organized bureaucracy.

The commander of Alexander's foot-soldiers, Seleukos, gained the Asian possessions and would have taken Macedonia too, but a son of Ptolemy who was his friend murdered him in 280. His son was called Antiochus, which became the dynastic name and was given to a number of cities of the "Seleucid" empire centered in modern Syria. The history of Palestine (Judea) at this time is that of the power struggle between the Seleucids and the Ptolemies, these latter keeping control until 198, when Antiochus III incorporated it into his Seleucid empire.

Macedonia, having lost its royal line, became weaker, although it kept control of the Greek cities until 229 when Athens sold the official copies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides to Ptolemy III and bought her freedom, proclaiming herself a neutral city, friendly to all powers. This enabled Athens to become the City of Philosophers, the University city.

### The Culture of the Hellenistic Age

Athens was still the philosophical centre of the Greek-speaking world, but Alexandria also attracted many scholars and they were encouraged by the endowments of the Ptolemies. Euclid systematized geometry c. 300 BC in his "Elements" while teaching there.

Around 280-265, Aristarchos of Samos evolved the theory that the sun is at the centre of the universe, with the earth and other planets revolving around it, and he tried to measure the distances of sun and moon from the earth, but failed. The Athenian Stoics were shocked because they thought of the stars as divine powers. Because he taught that the planets revolved in perfect circles the theory of Aristarchos did not correspond to actual observation and was rejected in favor of that formulated later (in the 2nd century A.D.) by the Alexandrian astronomer Ptolemy. The Ptolemaic model of the universe, in which the earth is the fixed center around which the sun and stars turn, continued to be accepted until the 16th century when the Polish astronomer Copernicus returned to the theory of Aristarchos, corrected it by giving the planets elliptical orbits, and provoked the 'Copernican Revolution'.

Eratosthenes, the librarian at Alexandria after 250, calculated the circumference of the earth by comparing the shadows cast at Assuan and Alexandria on midsummer's day. He was only 10 per cent wrong. Other scholars, mathematicians and historians, developed an ever more encyclopedic system of learning. Eratosthenes was the first scholar to call himself a "philologist" (lover of learning). The great library of Alexandria prepared lists of the authors of the various genres whose works they either had or wished to obtain, and this 'Canon' marks the beginnings of literary history and criticism.

The Alexandrian poet and scholar Kallimachos said "A Big Book is a Bad Thing" and divided all the long poems by Homer etc. into "books," parts each able to fit onto one papyrus scroll. Kallimachos wrote long, difficult, clever poems full of allusions to things most people cannot understand. The Roman Propertius liked that, and Propertius was the favorite of Ezra Pound. He is best remembered by the English translation of one simpler elegiac epigram:

They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead;  
They brought me bitter news to hear, and bitter tears to shed.  
I wept, as I remembered, how often you and I  
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.

And now that thou art lying, my dear old Carian guest,  
A handful of grey ashes, long long ago at rest,  
Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake,  
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.

(Translated by William Cory, 1858)

His enemy on the library staff, Apollonios, finally retired to Rhodes, where he wrote his great epic on the Argonauts and Jason's quest of the Golden Fleece, with the modern interest in love-affairs satisfied too.

Theocritus (300-260?) was born in Syracuse but came to live in Alexandria. He wrote his Idylls (little portraits) in hexameters using the Doric dialect, reflecting the love-songs, satires, improvisations, which the shepherds in his native Sicily used to sing up on the hills. "Sweet is the wind in the branches" he sang, and all the homesick Greeks of Alexandria sighed. Pastoral poetry was born and came from here, via Bion and Moschus, to Virgil who gave it its references to current events in the non-pastoral world of the poet. From Virgil it came to the Renaissance, to Spenser (Shepherd's Calendar), Sidney (Arcadia), and Milton (Lycidas).

In Alexandria, too, the Old Testament (the Jewish Bible) became a Greek text, for there were many great Jewish scholars living there. The translation of the original Hebrew texts into Greek was necessary, since even in Jerusalem most people after the return from Exile could not read Hebrew, they only used Aramaic. From about 250 onwards, scholars worked to translate the Jewish Scriptures and this Greek version is called the Septuagint, from a legend that the Pentateuch (the first five books) was translated by 72 scholars in 72 days for Ptolemy II. It includes texts originally written in Aramaic or Greek. The early Christians read this Greek Bible, and it is the source of the Old Testament quotations found in the (Greek) New Testament. The Catholic and Orthodox Churches still accept the entire Septuagint as their Old Testament, while the Jews and Protestants have excluded those texts not originally written in Hebrew, sometimes known as 'Apocrypha'.

### Asia Minor and Israel

In Asia, the diffusion of things Greek was less imposing than in Alexandria. However, Syria was still Greek-speaking when Christianity was born. A Greek king Menandros, marched far down the Ganges in 175-140, and his coins show him still wearing the Macedonian style of diadem, although he figures in a Buddhist classic The Questions of King Milinda where he is called "king of the fierce Ionians" and is finally converted to Buddhism.

In Asia Minor (now Turkey), the town of Pergamum rose in importance at this time, after defeating the invasion of a band of Gauls whose entry had again stressed the difference between the Greeks and the Barbarians. Pergamum became the capital of a kingdom, and when the king went to Athens on a visit in 200, he brought back some famous bronzes of which marble copies can still be seen in Rome, such as the "Dying Gaul". A huge altar, full of sculptures, once in Pergamum, is now in Berlin. The Attalid kings of Pergamum built great colonnades in Athens, which have recently been restored.

Pergamum also had its library and when the Ptolemies in Egypt refused to supply papyrus (made from reeds), its scribes began to write on the skins of calves and sheep, finely prepared. This material is called vellum or parchment (in German Pergament) from the name of the city. In the early Christian centuries, the modern book was invented, when folded sheets of vellum bound together in codex form took the place of papyrus rolls. Almost every book in Europe until the Renaissance was written on vellum. It is much less fragile than papyrus or paper.

Greek was the administrative and intellectual language of all Asia Minor, even when it ceased to be a political unit, through the time of the Roman Empire and on into the time of the Muslim conquests in the 7th century AD. Only the peasants, speaking various Semitic tongues, as in Palestine, and Syria, did not learn Greek and their language reasserted itself later.

The ultimate failure of the Hellenizing tendency came in Judea, when Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164) tried to impose Greek customs on the pious Jews. In 167 he went so far as to dedicate the Jerusalem Temple to Olympian Zeus. To impose his will, he built a great fortress (the Acra) beside it. The result was the revolt of the Maccabees and a series of bitter wars. The Jerusalem temple was rededicated to Israel's God in 164. The Jewish rebels aimed at complete independence and this was finally achieved in 142, with the destruction of the Acra.

This was followed by the rise of John Hyrcanus, the first Hasmonean ruler in a line that continued until Herod the Great became king with Roman backing in 37 BC. Herod, who had lived in Rome for a time, rebuilt Jerusalem and some of his buildings survive (in ruins). He rebuilt the Temple in a magnificent, more modern style, the New Testament refers to this Temple. He died in 4 B.C. and is the Herod who figures in the stories about the birth of Jesus at the beginning of Matthew's and Luke's Gospels.

## The Greek Novel

A final important event in Hellenic culture came with the creation, in the first and second centuries A.D., of what is known as the Greek Novel, although many prefer to use the word "Romance" in view of the fantastic nature of the contents and the lack of psychological depth usually held to be an essential feature of the "Novel".

These works, by a number of authors, were written for a literate, sophisticated audience, at a time when many in the middle classes and even "lower" could read. They are stories told in an exciting, breathtaking way, of couples of lovers who are separated by chance, who each undergo innumerable adventures in their quest of each other, shipwrecks, pirates, kidnappings, false deaths, battles, attempted rape, etc. In the end they are reunited and live happily ever afterwards.

The main authors are Achilles Tatius, Chariton, Heliodorus, Longus, Xenophon Ephesius, but nothing is known of them apart from their names. Among the most significant works is Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* (the story of Charicleia and Theagenes), the longest and best-constructed, with the usual adventures and also digressions on various topics, on science, nature, letters, but above all a marvellous narrative structure that begins in medias res and never slows down, with "flash-back", "concatenation", *deus ex machina* solutions. The Renaissance was deeply impressed by it, Tasso used it for his main heroine, it was translated into French by Amyot (1547) and from there into all European languages.

The most admired of all these novels is *Daphnis and Chloe*, by Longus. It is the model for the bucolic (pastoral) romances which inspired Sidney's *Arcadia*. The basic plot tells of two children found abandoned, brought up by shepherds, who fall in love and at last marry. Here, the main interest is the development of the emotional relationship, the psychology of love from childhood to maturity. It is the first *Entwicklungsroman*. For once, the Greek novel is not busy telling adventures, the feelings are real and skillfully portrayed. The rural life is described with much sweetness, and this made the work most popular in the 18th century, Goethe said it should be read once a year. Amyot first translated it in 1559.

Related to these works, but only known in Latin, is the romance called *Apollonius of Tyre*, known in 100 medieval manuscripts, quoted by Chaucer, and underlying Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, used by Shakespeare as the source for *Pericles*.

These novels have been rediscovered through the theoretical writings of the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, who wrote in the late 1920s, but whose works have had a great impact in recent years. His "Aesthetics and Theory of the Novel" analyses the narrative techniques of the Greek novels in his exploration of the poetics of the novel. He finds in them the perfect synthesis of all other literary forms, and claims that in the portrayal of time and space no improvement has ever been made.