

The Hellenistic Period

The Political Situation

The Peloponnesian war destroyed the two major powers in the ancient Greek world, Athens and Sparta. In the wake of their demise, other powers such as Thebes rose alongside Sparta and Athens. The constant warfare and lack of one overriding power weakened all cities equally, paving the way for the expansion of Macedonia under the Macedonian king Philip II (assassinated in 336).

His son Alexander was clearly one of the world's great military strategists; he never lost a battle. His campaigns were his attempt to have revenge on Persia for their invasions of Greece in 490 and 480 BCE. By 333, Alexander had won back the Greek coast of western Asia Minor from Persia, as well as Tyre and Egypt. He went East as far as Khyber Pass (into Pakistan, see map).

Upon his untimely death in 323, at the age of 33, his various generals fought each other until in 306-5. The winners split Alexander's territory into three empires, which lasted until the Roman conquest:

Ptolemy I: Egypt

Antigonos I: Greece and Macedonia

Seleucus I: Asia Minor

But the most lasting thing he did was to found cities, some 70 of them, which were outposts of Greek culture all over the known world. This is the beginning of the mass dissemination of Greek culture known as the **Hellenistic age** (mid-third century BCE until mid-first century BCE).

Culturally, the Hellenistic age represents the spread of Greek language, literature, and education in the characteristic institution of the *gymnasium*, the athletic facility with attached classrooms (*gymnos* means "nude" in Greek, since exercise was done in the nude). Literacy was on the rise; this is one of the few periods in which there was basic public schooling in literacy for girls. Hellenistic scholars made advances in the natural sciences, in geometry and geography (see the map of the world produced by the Hellenistic scholar Eratosthenes), and in the study of literature and history. Hellenistic fine art, especially sculpture, achieved great sophistication in natural representation.

By ca. 146 (Corinth), all of the Greek East save Egypt was conquered by Rome. Yet, it had been formed finally into one unit, in language and culture.

Religion in the Hellenistic Period

Religion: Although the traditional religions flourished, **voluntary associations** marked by initiation or conversion were very prevalent. One of the great developments of this period was the emergence of **philosophical schools** (see below) as religious groups treating metaphysical

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and ethical issues, with clear identification of their members by dress and behavior. Voluntary associations also functioned on a cultic level, in the mystery religions and other associations devoted to a particular g-d.

Another feature of this period was **syncretism**, the identification of the symbols and powers of one g-d with another. The Roman g-ds were identified with the Greek g-ds, for example: Jupiter took on the features and myths of Zeus. Increased contact with varying cultures demanded some attempt to compare and contrast their religions.

Syncretism can be the religious expression of rational monotheism. Cleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus* is an example, which invokes "Zeus the many-named," meaning that Zeus is ultimately the being who is worshipped, even when the gods worshipped have a different identity (Hermes, Asklepios, etc.). Zeus is the expression of divine reason, the *logos*, and unites the features of many g-ds. The *Aretalogy of Isis* is another example, in which Isis takes responsibility for nearly every force in the universe, and is identified with every g-d and g-ddess. Apuleius writes that Isis, "in whose features are combined those of all gods and goddesses," is the "sole deity of the whole world under various forms," "she that enlightens the other gods." Both in religion and philosophy in this period, the g-ds become more transcendent: either over other g-ds (Isis), or as the principle of the universe (Cleanthes' Zeus).

Another important feature of this period, which is related to the emergence of voluntary associations, is **monolatry**: this is not a denial of the ontological importance of other g-ds (which is henotheism), or a denial of the existence of other g-ds (which is monotheism). It is a preferred worship of one g-d, in whom one accesses all the other divinities. Isis attracted warm devotion and often monolatry, in which she often took on the characteristics of a personal savior.

From least exclusive to most exclusive: **polytheism** (many g-ds), **monolatry** (worship of one g-d, others are equally real and important), **henotheism** (preference of one g-d as more real than the others), and **monotheism** (denial of the existence of all g-ds except one).

Philosophical Schools in the Hellenistic Period

1. The Stoics were followers of Zeno of Citium (who taught in Athens in the *Stoa Poikile* [painted colonnade], hence the name "Stoic," early 3d c. BCE). Zeno's student was Cleanthes.

Theologically, they taught that the world is ruled by wise legislation, a principle of reason (*logos*) that involves the entire universe, identified with Zeus. All g-ds are aspects of this principle of reason, divided according to areas of jurisdiction: Poseidon has dominion over the sea. The Stoics thus had reverence for traditional religion. They allegorized Greek myth and Homer to relate them to the insights of philosophy.

Their greatest influence was in the realm of ethics. They taught that humans should live in agreement with reason/nature: this is possible because humans have the *logos spermatikos*, the

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"seed-like reason" that is a part of the divine principle of reason within humans, which is identical with the rational principle that governs the universe.

Virtue and *apatheia* ("without passions," being without bad or disturbing emotions) are the prime goal. Good and evil are not matters of external circumstances such as wealth or poverty, freedom or slavery, but are internal matters of the orientation to the soul. External circumstances are indifferent, and bring neither happiness nor misery. Everyone has a role in life, whether slave or king: the important thing is to play it well.

But if circumstances began to make a person unduly miserable, they should commit suicide to maintain their freedom (Seneca, *de Ira* 3.15):

If the soul is sick and because of its own imperfection unhappy, a man may end its sorrows and at the same time himself. In whatever direction you may turn your eye, there lies the means to end your woes. You see that precipice? Down that is the way to freedom. You see that sea, that river, that well? Freedom sits at the bottom. You see that tree, stunted, blighted and barren? Yet from it hangs freedom. You ask the route to freedom? Any vein in your body.

2. The Epicureans were founded by Epicurus (early 3d c. BCE, Athens): The ethical goal of the wise man was *ataraxia*, imperturbability. The message was to have no fear of the gods or of death. The gods existed, and were good, blessed and happy, but were unconcerned with humans and needed nothing from them. The body, like all matter, was made of atoms that would dissolve upon death; even the soul was composed of atoms, so there was no afterlife.

Epicureans valued friendship and enjoying the pleasures of life ("Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die."). This was a philosophy that appealed mostly to the upper classes, who had the means to do so. The Roman Lucretius (who wrote the book *de rerum natura*, 1st c. BCE) was an Epicurean.

3. Cynics were followers of Diogenes of Sinope (4th c. BCE, Athens), who considered himself a follower of Socrates (not Plato), and used diatribe (intense questioning based on the Socratic teaching method of dialogue) to expose ignorance: people often don't have good reasons for knowing what they think they know, and rely stupidly on conventions and customs. Many of Diogenes' sayings openly flout common morality.

4. The Peripatetics were followers of Aristotle, the student of Plato. They concentrated their efforts on biology, natural science, and logic.

Source:

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