The Hellenistic World

The term Hellenistic was coined in the 19th century to describe the period in Greek history that began with the Macedonian conquest of Greece and the Persian Empire

This development brought Greek and eastern civilizations together, thus contributing to a greater heterogeneity in the development of Western Civilization

Hellenistic essentially means Greek-influenced

The Macedonian Conquest

The competition between the Greek poleis made them vulnerable to outsiders like the Persians

However, even backwards, almost barbarian places (by Greek standards) like Macedonia also represented a threat to Greek civilization

In the 4th century BCE Macedonia was ruled by the king Phillip II and the aristocratic families associated with the foundational ancestral lineage

Phillip has spent several years of his youth as a hostage in Thebes under the tutelage of Epaminondas, the general who defeated Sparta

While in Thebes, Phillip learned much about Greek politics and warfare

Learning and copying

When Phillip returned to Macedonia, he solidified his claim to the throne and pacified the tribes on the Macedonian frontiers and threatened Athens’ dominance of the northern Aegean

His conquest of Amphipolis (356 BCE) gave him control of gold and silver mines in the area, and he used the wealth to increase the standard of living of the Macedonians

He founded cities, made new alliances, and formed and trained a large and highly disciplined army that became the finest fighting force of its time

Philip’s army was not a force of citizen-soldiers like in Greece

His army was a professional force recruited from the farming and frontier populations

Phillip’s military innovations included supplying his infantrymen with 15- to 20-foot pikes instead of the 9-foot weapons wielded by the Greek hoplites

This enabled the Macedonians to deploy a more spread out and open phalanx than was deployed by the Greeks

Phillip also utilized cavalry forces recruited from the aristocracy

He also employed mercenaries who had expertise in the latest tactics and siege machinery

Phillip could field about 40,000 men

Invasion of Greece

The Greek polis of Thessaly invited Phillip to assist them in their war against Phocia (352 BCE)

Phillip helped Thessaly win the war, but he occupied Thessaly and then marched on Thrace to take control of the northern Aegean and the strategic Hellespont (343-342 BCE)

This act threatened Athens, but they had been severely weakened by this time and they were uncertain how they should respond to Phillip

The Athenians debated the issue

Eubulus, a financial official and political leader argued for a cautious policy of cooperation in order to appease Phillip

Isocrates, the head of an important school of rhetoric, saw Phillip as the savior of the Greeks and could help them reverse the decline in their society after the Peloponnesian Wars

Demosthenes, a great orator, was convinced that Phillip was a danger to Greece and persuaded Athens to join Thebes in opposing Macedonian expansion

Unfortunately for the Greeks, this was the wrong decision

In 338 BCE at Chaeronea the Greek allies were defeated by Phillip

The coup de grace was inflicted by Phillips 18 year old son Alexander when he led a cavalry charge against the Greeks

Macedonian Greece

Macedonian control over Greece was not as harsh as was feared

For example, Athens was spared destruction on the condition that it accept Macedonian leadership

Phillip constructed garrisons around Greece to protect against rebellions

In 338 BCE Phillip called for the creation of the League of Corinth which called for autonomy, freedom from tribute and garrisons in exchange for cooperation in suppressing piracy, rebellions, and civil war

Phillip chose Corinth because 150 years earlier it was the site where the Greeks planned their strategy for the Persian Wars

And in 337 BCE, it was in Corinth where Phillip announced that he intended to renew the war against Persia

Phillip was assassinated at a play in 336 BCE by a young Macedonian named Pausanias who had been mortally offended by the king

A complex story of wives and competition for royal succession

Alexander the Great

Alexander was only 20 when he ascended to the throne

He was determined to carry out his father’s plans against Persia

The Persian Empire was led by Darius III

They had a large army, a powerful navy, and great wealth

In 334 BCE Alexander crossed the Hellespont

30,000 infantry, 5,000 cavalry

The Persian naval leader proposed that the Persians employ a strategy of retreat, scorched earth, and avoiding all by guerilla engagements

Overextend and pressure logistics and supply

The Persian leadership rejected this strategy

The Persians stood for battle at the Granicus River and Alexander was victorious

Alexander’s daring and sacrifice at this battle inspired his soldiers to victory

This victory opened all of Asia Minor to conquest by the Greeks

In 333 BCE Alexander marched into Syria to meet Darius’ army

Darius retreated and Alexander moved south seizing Persian naval bases along the eastern Mediterranean coast and marched into Egypt where he was welcomed as a liberator

He was proclaimed a son of Re, the head of the Egyptian pantheon

In 331 Alexander marched into Mesopotamia and defeated Persian forces at Gaugamela and occupied Babylon

In 330 BCE Alexander occupied Persepolis, the Persian capital, where he acquired Persia’s treasures

He showered this wealth on his troops and the effect of the distribution of wealth was felt for centuries

Alexander set out to capture Darius, but the Persians had lost faith in him and killed him and elevated Bessus, a close relative, as the emperor

Alexander pursued Bessus to the east and captured him on the frontiers of India

Alexander founded many cities and planned to populate his empire with Greeks and integrating them with the diverse populations of the region

To set an example Alexander married a princess from Bactria named Roxane and he added countrymen from these foreign lands into his army

In 327 as Alexander pushed his men farther east, they mutinied and demanded that Alexander take them home

While in Babylon on the way back home Alexander contracted a fever and died in 323 BCE

The Macedonian Dynasties

Since nobody was prepared for Alexander’s sudden death, there were no plans for a successor

His nearest male relative was a weak leader

His wife Roxane gave birth to a son shortly after Alexander’s death, but the infant could not administer his legacy

The Macedonian generals simply divided up responsibility for ruling the empire, allegedly until the boy came of age

Of course, conflicting ambitions among the generals led to conflict and the ensuing battles led to the deaths of all the direct members of the Macedonian royal house or family

Roxane and her son were killed in 310 thereby removing the restraints on the generals from declaring their lands as independent kingdoms (306 and 305 BCE)

Three Macedonian dynasties divided up Alexander’s empire

Ptolemy I claimed Egypt

Cleopatra (died in 30 BCE) was the last descendant of the Ptolemies

Seleucus I created the Seleucid dynasty that ruled Mesopotamia

Antigonus established the Antigonid dynasty that reigned over Asia Minor and Macedonia

Alexander’s activity had a huge impact of the civilized world

The money confiscated from the Persians contributed to the increase of economic activity

The empire opened vast new areas to Greek trade and expanded the availability of goods available to Greeks back home

Problems of overpopulation in Greece were alleviated as Greeks emigrated to the new cities of the east

The quality of life and standard of living was elevated for urban Greeks, Macedonians, and Hellenized (assimilated) natives

The standard of living for rural laborers declined and the independent free farmer disappeared

Arable land was consolidated into large plantations or estates which were worked by peasants

An early model of feudalism?

As peasants suffered from the toil and hardship of their lives, calls for the end of debt and the redistribution of land became louder

These developments created the conditions for strife, conflict, and civil war

Internal tensions and the strain of continuous warfare made the Hellenistic kingdoms susceptible to invasion

By the middle of the 2nd BCE all of the Macedonian dynasties, with the exception of Egypt had succumbed to conquest by Rome

Alexander’s empire and the Macedonian dynasties brought about a new phase in Greek civilization

The polis stopped being the main social foundation of Greek society

Hellenistic cities were municipal towns within great military empires

The Greeks lost interest in finding political solutions to problems, and they abandoned participation in public affairs

The Hellenistic age contributed to philosophical movements in the Greek world

The Skeptics and the Cynics concluded that nothing could be known

Skeptics encouraged the acceptance of conventional morality and not to try to change the world

Cynics denounced convention and advocated life in accordance to nature

The Epicurians doubted that humans could obtain knowledge

They argued that philosophers should seek insights that promote human happiness

The Stoics, named for the portico where Zeno of Citium taught his students, sought happiness by living in harmony with nature

They claimed that nature was a manifestation of divine logos, or an eternal principle of reason

Humans experienced happiness when they lived virtuous lives

Alexandria, in Ptolemeic Egypt became a center of literature in the 3rd and 2nd BCE

The Ptolemies supported a museum or library which was a research institute that collected Greek literature of all kinds

The Macedonian kings also promoted the arts and sciences

Art and sculpture developed where it expressed sentimental and emotional realism

The Macedonians made a great contribution to the sciences by amassing the scientific knowledge of the eastern and western worlds

Euclid’s geometry, Archimedes principles of mechanics and hydrostatics, Heraclides of Pontus’ heliocentric theory of the universe was fully developed by Aristarchus of Samos

A geocentric model advanced by Hipparchus of Nicea was refined by Ptolemy of Alexandria

Scholars know the earth was round and Eratosthenes of Cyrene calculated the circumference within 200 miles