STORY LINES

■ In the wake of the Peloponnesian War, divisions within and among the Greek states eventually made them vulnerable to the imperial ambitions of King Philip II of Macedonia and his son, Alexander the Great.

■ Alexander’s conquest of the Persian Empire and Egypt united the major civilizations of antiquity under Greco-Macedonian rule. Even after his untimely death, a shared language and culture continued to bind these civilizations together in a new Hellenistic (“Greek-like”) world.

■ Ease of travel, trade, and communication in this Hellenistic world fostered urbanization on an unprecedented scale. The resulting cosmopolitan culture challenged traditional social, economic, and political norms, giving rise to new social classes, forms of wealth, and technological innovations.

■ The unique art forms and intellectual inquiries of Greece were thus disseminated throughout this world, and transformed by it.

CHRONOLOGY

404 B.C.E.  Sparta defeats Athens in the Peloponnesian War
401 B.C.E.  Xenophon and the Ten Thousand begin their Persian expedition
395–338 B.C.E.  The struggle for Greek hegemony (Thebes, Athens, Sparta)
371 B.C.E.  Epaminondas of Thebes defeats the Spartans at Leuctra
356 B.C.E.  Philip II becomes king of Macedonia
338 B.C.E.  Macedonia defeats Thebes and Athens at Chaeronea
336–323 B.C.E.  Reign and campaigns of Alexander
323–c. 275 B.C.E.  Formation of the Hellenistic kingdoms
323–c. 225 B.C.E.  The Greek diaspora
C. 300 B.C.E.  Formation of the Aetolian and Achaean Leagues
300–270 B.C.E.  Rise of Stoicism and Epicureanism
C. 300–200 B.C.E.  The Hellenistic scientific revolution
203–120 B.C.E.  Lifetime of Polybius
When the young Alexander of Macedonia set out for Persia in 334 B.C.E., he brought along two favorite books. The first was a copy of the *Iliad*, which his teacher Aristotle had given him. The second was the *Anabasis*, “The Inland Expedition,” by an Athenian called Xenophon (Ze-noh-fon, 430–354 B.C.E.). Both choices are significant. The *Iliad* recounts the story of a much earlier Greek assault on Asia, and its protagonist is the hero Achilles—a figure with whom Alexander identified: consummate warrior, favorite of the gods, a man who inspired passionate loyalty. It is also full of information useful to someone planning a long campaign in foreign lands against a formidable enemy, with a fractious army drawn from all parts of Greece and little prospect of bringing them home safely or soon. The *Anabasis* was an even more practical choice. Its author had been one of 10,000 Greek mercenaries hired by a Persian prince to overthrow his older brother, the Great King. The attempted coup failed, but Xenophon’s book made the prince, Cyrus, another role model for Alexander. It also told, in detail, how Persians fought, how they lived, how they were governed, and what the terrain of their vast empire...
was like. Moreover, it showed what a dedicated army of hoplites could accomplish on Persian soil. This book would be Alexander’s bible for the next ten years.

By the time of Alexander the Great’s early death, a united Greek and Macedonian army had extended Greek culture and Greek governance from Egypt to the frontiers of India. This personal empire, the empire of Alexander, could not last. But the cultural empire built upon it did. This Hellenistic (“Greek-like”) civilization joined disparate lands and peoples, forming the basis of the Roman Empire and mirroring the cosmopolitan world of our own time. How this happened is the subject of Chapter 4.

The Downfall of the Greek Polis

The Peloponnesian War had left Sparta the dominant power in the Greek world. But by 395, a significant number of poleis were aligned against Sparta in the so-called Corinthian War (395–387 B.C.E.). To quell this rebellion, the Spartans turned once again to Persia, as they had done in the final stages of the Peloponnesian War. This pattern of violence, temporarily halted by the intervention of Persia, would be repeated time and again over the next fifty years.

The Struggle for Hegemony

After the Corinthian War, the Spartans punished the most dangerous of their rivals, Thebes, by occupying the city for four years. But when the Thebans regained their autonomy they elected as their leader a fierce patriot who was also a military genius, Epaminondas (é-pa-min-ÖHN-das, c. 410–362 B.C.E.). In imitation of the Spartan system, he formed an elite hoplite unit known as the Theban Sacred Band, made up of 150 couples: sworn lovers who pledged to fight to the death for their polis and for each other’s honor.

When the Theban and Spartan armies met at Leuctra in 371 B.C.E., the Sacred Band helped carry the Thebans to victory. Epaminondas then marched through the Spartan territory of Messenia and freed the helots. Spartan power—and the unique social system that had supported it—was thereby brought to an end. But as Theban power grew, so did the animosity of the other Greek poleis. In 362, when Epaminondas fell in battle, Athens attempted—and failed—to fill the vacuum by establishing a naval confederacy. Greece thus remained a constellation of petty warring states.

Social and Economic Crises

Meanwhile, the poleis were also riven by internal turmoil. Incessant warfare and political struggles profoundly affected their economic and social infrastructures. Many people were driven from their homes or reduced to slavery. Country towns had been ravaged, as had farmlands throughout Greece. Prices rose while standards of living declined. Taxes increased.

Unemployment was also widespread, and many men turned to mercenary service. Cyrus, brother of the Persian emperor Artaxerxes II, even hired a Greek mercenary force of 10,000 men in an attempt to seize the throne in 401 B.C.E. But when Cyrus was killed in battle, the army—marooned in a hostile country—had to fight its way out under elected leaders. One of these was Xenophon, a former pupil of Socrates, and it was his account of this expedition that would become Alexander the Great’s guidebook.

Re-Imagining the Polis: The Artistic and Intellectual Response

399 B.C.E., the year of Socrates’ execution, marks the end of an era—that of the polis. This basic engine of Greek life had continued to drive innovation and cultural production even during the Peloponnesian War. But now, the failure of democracy had a profound impact on the arts, philosophy, and especially political thought.

The Arts of the Fourth Century

As we observed in Chapter 3, the painters and sculptors of the fifth century B.C.E. were already working to achieve a heightened appearance of realism in their works. This experimentation continued in the fourth century, especially in the relatively new art of portraiture. Artists also grew bolder in their use of tricky techniques, like the casting of full-size statues in bronze. This was a medium in which the era’s most famous sculptor, Praxiteles, excelled. Praxiteles was bold, too, in his choice of subjects, and is widely regarded as the first artist to create full-size female nudes (see Interpreting Visual Evidence).

In contrast to the visual arts, the forms and functions of drama changed considerably. Tragedy and comedy were no longer mounted as part of publicly funded festivals, but were instead financed by private individuals who could exercise greater control over the content of performances.
Xenophon Describes an Ideal Leader

In his history of “The Inland Expedition” undertaken by the Ten Thousand, Xenophon (430–354 B.C.E.) mourns the death of Cyrus the Younger, whom he believes would have made a better Great King of Persia than the brother he challenged, Artaxerxes II. The following description of the prince’s character and leadership became very famous in its time, often circulating as a separate booklet. It is likely to have influenced the young Alexander.

Thus died Cyrus, a man who, of all the Persians since Cyrus the elder [the Great], was the most princely and the most worthy of rule, as is agreed by all who appear to have had personal knowledge of him. In the first place, while he was yet a boy, and when he was receiving his education with his brother and other youths, he was thought to surpass them all in everything. For all the sons of the Persian nobles are educated at the gates of the king, where they may learn many a lesson of virtuous conduct, but can see or hear nothing disgraceful. Here the boys see some honored by the king, and others disgraced, and hear of them, so that in their very childhood they learn to govern and to obey.

Here Cyrus, first of all, showed himself most remarkable for modesty among those of his own age, and for paying more ready obedience to his elders than even those who were inferior to him in station; and next, he was noted for his fondness for horses, and for managing them in a superior manner. They found him, too, very desirous of learning, and most assiduous in practicing, the warlike exercises of archery and hurling the javelin. When it suited his age, he grew extremely fond of the chase and of braving dangers in encounters with wild beasts. On one occasion he did not shrink from a she-bear that attacked him, but, in grappling with her, was dragged from off his horse, and received some wounds, the scars of which were visible on his body, but at last killed her. The person who first came to his assistance he made a happy man in the eyes of many.

When he was sent down by his father, as satrap of Lydia and Great Phrygia and Cappadocia, and was also appointed commander of all the troops whose duty it is to muster in the plain of Castolus, he soon showed that if he made a league or compact with anyone, or gave a promise, he deemed it of the utmost importance not to break his word. Accordingly the states that were committed to his charge, as well as individuals, had the greatest confidence in him; and if anyone had been his enemy, he felt secure that if Cyrus entered into a treaty with him, he should suffer no infraction of the stipulations. When, therefore, he waged war against Tissaphernes, all the cities, of their own accord, chose to adhere to Cyrus in preference to Tissaphernes, except the Milesians; but they feared him, because he would not abandon the cause of the exiles; for he both showed by his deeds and declared in words that he would never desert them, since he had once become a friend to them, not even though they should grow still fewer in number, and be in a worse condition than they were.

Whenever anyone did him a kindness or an injury, he showed himself anxious to go beyond him in those respects; and some used to mention a wish of his that he desired to live long enough to outdo both those who had done him good, and those who had done him ill, in the requital that he should make. Accordingly to him alone of the men of our days were so great a number of people desirous of committing the disposal of their property, their cities, and their own persons.


Questions for Analysis

1. According to Xenophon, what are the attributes of a great leader? How would Alexander have applied these to his own situation?

2. What seems to be Xenophon’s attitude toward the Persians? How might his portrayal of them have been influenced by his travels among them? How might it have been colored by his attitude toward his own countrymen?

3. In what ways does Cyrus the Younger appear to have followed the example of his ancestor, Cyrus the Great (Chapter 2, page 47)?
As a result, fourth-century playwrights did not have the freedom to use drama as a vehicle for political and social critique, as earlier dramatists had done. Instead, the “New Comedy” of this era relied more and more on mistaken identities, tangled familial relationships, and breaches of etiquette. Similar trends toward escapism are also apparent in a new literary genre: the prose novel. These pleasant fictions targeted an increasingly literate audience, including (as with many modern romance novels) an audience of women.

Philosophy after Socrates: The Schools of Plato and Aristotle

The intellectual and political legacy of Socrates was carried forward by Plato (429–349 B.C.E.), who as a young man witnessed the trial and death of his mentor. Plato strove to vindicate Socrates by constructing a philosophical system based on his precepts. He did this by founding an informal school called the Academy and by writing a series of dialogues that feature Socrates as the central character.

The longest and most famous of these dialogues is now known by its Latin title, the Republic. In it, Plato argues that social harmony and order are more important than individual liberty or equality. He imagines an ideal polis governed by a superior group of “guardians” chosen in their youth for natural attributes of intelligence and character. Those found to be the wisest would ultimately become “philosopher-kings.” This imaginary system is clearly a response to the failures of Athenian democracy. But whether Plato himself believed in it is open to question. For such a system presumes that properly educated rulers will never be corrupted by power, a proposition that has yet to be sustained in practice.

The practical application of philosophy would be the preoccupation of Plato’s own student, Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.). The son of a physician, Aristotle learned from...
Reconstructing an Ideal of Female Beauty

The lost statue known as the Aphrodite of Knidos was considered the most beautiful in the ancient world, but we can only study it by looking at later copies. It was the work of the fourth century’s most renowned sculptor, Praxiteles (prak-SIT-el-eez), who was reputed to have modeled it after the Athenian courtesan known as Phryne, a renowned beauty who inspired several contemporary artists and many apocryphal stories. The most reliable of these concerns the riches she accrued: apparently she became so wealthy that she offered to finance the rebuilding of Thebes in 336—on the condition that the slogan “destroyed by Alexander, restored by Phryne the Courtesan” be prominently displayed on the new walls. (Her offer was rejected.)

Praxiteles’ original statue is thought to have been the first monumental female nude fashioned in antiquity. According to one authority, he had initially received a commission from the island of Kos, for which he made both clothed and naked versions of Aphrodite. Apparently, the scandalized citizens approved only the draped version and refused to pay for the nude. It was purchased instead by the city of Knidos on Cyprus, where it was displayed in an open-air temple so that it could be seen from all sides. It quickly became a tourist attraction and was widely copied and emulated. Two of the more faithful replicas, made by artists working in Rome, are pictured here.

Questions for Analysis

1. As we have seen, the male nude was a favorite subject of Greek artists from the Archaic Period onward. Based on your knowledge of contemporary Greek culture and society, why was it only in the fourth century B.C.E. that a life-size female nude could be publicly displayed? Are there any precedents for statues like this?

2. Compare and contrast the ideal of female beauty suggested by the Knidian Aphrodite with the male ideals discussed in Chapter 3. What can you conclude about the relationship between these ideals and the different expectations of male and female behavior in Greek society? Why, for example, would ancient sources insist that the model for the original statue was a courtesan?

3. Among the Romans, a statue like the Knidian Aphrodite was called a Venus pudica, a “modest Venus” (image A). Yet the citizens of Kos were allegedly shocked by its indecency, while old photographs of the copy in the Vatican Museum (image B) show that it was displayed until 1932 with additional draperies made of tin. How do you account for these very different standards of decency? To what degree do they suggest that concepts of “beauty” or “modesty” are historically constructed?
his father the importance of observing natural phenomena. His own philosophical system was geared toward understanding the workings of the world through empirical knowledge—that is, information gained through sensory experience. In contrast to Plato, who taught that everything we see and touch is an untrustworthy reflection of some intangible ideal, Aristotle advocated the rigorous investigation of real phenomena. His method of instruction was also different. Unlike Socrates and Plato, whose dialogues were witty and often playful, Aristotle delivered lectures on which his students took detailed notes, and which eventually became the basis of treatises on politics, ethics, logic, metaphysics, and poetics.

Aristotle taught that the highest good consists in the harmonious functioning of the individual human mind and body. Good conduct is therefore rational conduct, and consists in acting moderately. And whereas Plato conceived of politics as a means to an end which could never be achieved in this life, Aristotle thought of politics as an end in itself: the collective exercise of moderation.

Aristotle also took it for granted that some people—like barbarians—are not fully human, and so are intended by nature to be slaves. He also believed that women are not endowed with a full measure of humanity. So when Aristotle asserted that “man is by nature a political animal” (or, to be more faithful to the Greek, “a creature of the polis”), he meant only Greek males of privileged status. Nor did he believe that the best form of government is a democracy. Like Plato, he saw that as a “debased” form of government.

**Men of Thought, Men of Action**

Despite these philosophical breakthroughs, Plato and Aristotle offered few prescriptions for reforming their own societies. But there were other intellectuals who were considering more radical alternatives. The Athenian Xenophon, a veteran of the Ten Thousand and another product of the Socratic tradition, spent much of his adult life in Sparta, and it is thanks to his admiring account that we know anything about the Spartiate system described in Chapter 3. He intended his description to be a rebuke to democratic Athens and a model for a different kind of ideal society.

The Athenian orator Isocrates (436–338 B.C.E.) was another direct contemporary of Plato. But rather than imagining an ideal polis, he proposed instead that the Greeks stage a massive invasion of Persia. This assault, he prophesied, should be led by a man of vision and ability who could unite the Greek world behind his cause. Isocrates spent most of his life casting about to find such a leader.

Finally, he began to think that the man for the job was someone most Greeks considered no Greek at all: the king of Macedonia, Philip II.

**THE RISE OF MACEDONIA**

Until the fourth century, Macedonia (or Macedon) had been a weak kingdom, regarded by most Greeks as a throwback to the “dark ages” before the emergence of enlightened poleis. As recently as the 360s, it had nearly succumbed to the even smaller kingdoms and predatory tribes that surrounded it. No one knows whether the ancient Macedonians were Greek-speaking during this period, but the royal family and nobility would at least have spoken Greek as a second language. Still, they were definitely outsiders. So when a young and energetic king consolidated the southern Balkans under his rule, many Greeks saw it as an alarming development.

**PHILIP II OF MACEDONIA.** This tiny ivory head was discovered in a royal tomb at Vergina and is almost certainly a bust of the king himself. Contemporary sources report that Philip the Great had his right eye blinded by a catapult bolt, a deformity visible here—and testimony to the unflinching realism of Greek portraiture in the fourth century B.C.E.
The Reign of Philip II (359–336 B.C.E.)

Philip II of Macedonia was not supposed to be its ruler. Born in 382, he was the third and youngest son of King Amyntas III, and was considered so dispensable that he was sent to Thebes as hostage when he was fourteen. This turns out to have been the making of him: he become the protégé of the brilliant Epaminondas and may even have trained in the Theban Sacred Band. By the time he returned to the Macedonian capital of Pella, he had received a more thorough education than any Macedonian before him. He was also ambitious. So when both of his older brothers died in battle, Philip was not content with the role of regent for an infant nephew. By 356, he was reigning as king, the same year that his queen, Olympias, bore him an heir. The boy was given the dynastic name Alexandros, “leader of men.”

The first problem of Philip's reign was the fragility of Macedonia’s northern borders. Through a combination of warfare and diplomacy, he subdued the tribes of the southern Balkans and incorporated their territory into his kingdom. His success had much to do with his reorganization of Macedonian warriors into a hoplite infantry along Theban lines, as well as access to mineral resources that he used to pay and equip a standing professional army. Philip also organized an elite cavalry squad—the Companions—who fought with and beside the king, perhaps in emulation of the Sacred Band. These young men were drawn exclusively from the nobility, and Philip thereby gained valuable young hostages to ensure the good conduct of fractious men. Their sons were now being brought up alongside Alexander and sharing his lessons with Aristotle, who had arrived at the Macedonian court in 343 B.C.E.

Isocrates saw in Philip a potential savior of Greece, but many Athenians believed that his ultimate aim was to conquer them. In actuality, he was probably trying to forge an alliance with Athens, whose fleet could facilitate an invasion of Persia by sea; in return, Philip promised to support Athens’ old claim to hegemony over Greece. But the Athenians refused to cooperate. This miscalculation ultimately led to war, which sent the Athenians scrambling to ally with Thebes. At the battle of Chaeronea in 338 B.C.E., an army led jointly by Philip and Alexander (aged 18) won a narrow victory, decimating the Athenian forces and destroying the Theban Sacred Band. In the aftermath, Philip called delegates from around mainland Greece to Corinth, where he established a new league whose main purpose was to provide forces for the planned invasion of Persia and maintain peace among the rival poleis.

But Philip never realized his dream of Persian conquest. Two years later, in 336 B.C.E., he was assassinated during a festival at Pella. The kingship now fell to Alexander. Among the Greeks, he would be known as Alexander, the Sacker of Cities. To the Romans, he was Alexander the Great.

The Conquests of Alexander, 336–323 B.C.E.

By the time of Alexander's early death at the age of 32, a monumental legend had already built up around him. This makes it all the more ironic that no contemporary account of his life and achievements survives. The great library assembled in his capital of Alexandria in Egypt—the repository of all Greek learning and literature—was destroyed centuries later, and with it a great portion of assembled knowledge. So when we try to reconstruct the history of Alexander, we are depending on the writings of men who lived and worked under the Roman Empire, notably Plutarch (46–120 C.E.) and Arrian (c. 86–160 C.E.), both of whom were separated from their subject by a distance of four hundred years. Luckily, they were basing their histories on sources derived from two first-hand accounts, one written by Alexander's general (and purported half-brother) Ptolemy (c. 367–c. 284 B.C.E.), who founded a new dynasty of Egyptian pharaohs, and another by Æschines Socraticus (c. 387–322 B.C.E.), an Athenian statesman.

It is a salutary reminder of how fragile the historical record of antiquity is, that the sources for the life of the era's most famous man are so hard to come by.
The Conquest of Persia

When Alexander succeeded his father in 336 B.C.E., he had to put down the revolts that erupted immediately after Philip's death—notably at Thebes, which he punished by destroying its famous walls. Two years later, he was crossing the Hellespont to challenge the Great King of Persia, Darius III.

Darius was a minor member of the royal family who had been placed on the throne after a palace coup, at the relatively old age of 45—in the same year that Alexander himself became king at 20. Darius and his advisors failed to take the Macedonian threat seriously, despite the Persians' past history of defeat at the hands of Greek armies. Perhaps they assumed that the enormous forces they could rally in defense of their empire would easily overwhelm a comparatively small army of 42,000; perhaps they misunderstood Alexander's aims.

In any event, Alexander soon achieved a series of extraordinary victories, beginning in northwest Anatolia, near the site of the epic field of Troy, and continuing down the Ionian coastline. A year later, in 333 B.C.E. Darius was persuaded to engage Alexander personally. But the chosen site, on the banks of a river near Issus, favored Alexander's fast-moving infantry, not the heavy cavalry and chariots of the Persians. No warrior himself, Darius disgraced himself by fleeing the battlefield, abandoning not only his army but his entire household, which included his wife and his mother. (They were captured by Alexander and treated with great respect.) Darius spent the remainder of his life running from Alexander's advancing forces, until his decisive defeat at Gaugamela (near Mosul in modern Iraq) in 331, when he was killed by a local chieftain who hoped to win Alexander's favor. Instead, Alexander—acting as the new Great King—had the chieftain executed for treason. The next spring, Alexander destroyed the royal capital of Persepolis, lest it serve as a rallying point for Persian resistance.

Meanwhile, in the two years that had passed since Darius' humiliation at Issus, Alexander had completed his conquest of Asia Minor. One by one, the cities of Syria and Palestine surrendered. Following the example of Cyrus the Great, Alexander had developed a policy of offering amnesty to cities that submitted peacefully—but dealing mercilessly with those that resisted. The fortified city of Gaza, the last Persian stronghold on the Egyptian border, provides an example: when the fortress was finally taken, Alexander's troops slew all the adult males and enslaved the women and children. According to a later Roman historian, Alexander also dragged the body of the commander around the city's walls behind his chariot, imitating Achilles' legendary treatment of Hector.

Alexander in Egypt

After this, Alexander marched into Egypt unopposed. In fact, he was welcomed as a liberator: Egypt had been governed as a Persian satrapy since 525 B.C.E. Now Alexander himself was hailed as pharaoh and given the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt, becoming the latest in a succession of rulers reaching back three thousand years to the time of King Narmer (Chapter 1). The “barbarian” chieftain of a backwater kingdom had become pharaoh of the oldest civilization on earth and heir to its immense riches and extraordinary history.

While the Persians had long been the Greeks' traditional enemies, the Egyptians had always been too far away to pose a threat; indeed, they were an object of awe. This may help to explain Alexander's response to the oracle of Ammon, the name the Greeks gave to the Egyptian sun god Amun-Ra, whom they identified with Zeus. At the oracle's desert oasis of Siwa, Alexander was reportedly told that he was “son of Ammon” and a god himself. Ever mindful of historical precedent, Alexander seems to have decided at this point that Egypt should be the capital of his new empire: it was in Egypt that he would build his shining new...
city of Alexandria. In the end, he just had time to lay out a plan for the streets. When he finally returned, he was in his sarcophagus.

**Alexander’s Final Campaigns**

Over the ensuing five years, Alexander campaigned in the far reaches of the Persian Empire, in the mountainous regions that had been only loosely yoked with the more settled lands of Mesopotamia. This is the region encompassed today by Afghanistan, and a terrain famous for defeating every attempt at conquest. Here, Alexander and his army experienced the hardest fighting of their long campaign. Indeed, they never succeeded in getting more than a tenuous hold on the territory, despite Alexander’s marriage to Roxane, daughter of a local chieftain. Thereafter, Alexander moved down through what is now Pakistan to the Indus Valley, meeting stiff resistance from its warlords but eventually defeating their leader, Porus, at the Battle of Hydaspes in 326 B.C.E.

This was to be the last major battle of his career, and the one in which his famous warhorse, Bucephalus, was killed. And it was here that Alexander’s exhausted army refused to go on, thousands of miles and eight years from home. He was forced to turn back, and rather than attempting to recross the mountains, he pressed southward to the shores of the Arabian Sea—what was then the end of the world. The ensuing march through the Gedrosian Desert, combined with a decade of continuous fighting, weakened him and his army considerably.

When Alexander reached the royal palace of Susa he took steps that indicate how he would have tried to combine his Greco-Macedonian Empire with that of Persia, had he lived. He announced that he would begin training Persian youths to fight alongside Greeks and Macedonians in hoplite formation. He arranged a mass marriage between hundreds of his officers and a corresponding number of Persian youth
noblewomen. Most controversially, he showed respect for his Persian subjects by adopting Persian dress—considered by Greeks to be effeminate and barbaric—and by encouraging those around him to perform the ritual of proskynesis (pros-kin-EE-sis). This was a gesture of bodily submission performed by those of lesser social standing when they met their superiors, and by all Persians—even those of royal rank—to honor the Great King. The person paying homage would bow deeply, in some cases prostrating himself entirely. To the Greeks, this practice suggested that the Persians worshiped their king as a god. To Alexander and his close advisors, it was more likely intended to level cultural differences. In any case, it was not a success, and it fueled a mutiny among the Macedonians, which Alexander himself had to quell.

**Alexander’s Death**

Apart from these attempts to create cohesion, Alexander took no realistic steps to create an administration for his vast empire. He seems to have fixed his sights more clearly on further conquests, perhaps in Arabia, perhaps toward “Greater Greece”—Italy and Sicily. But in late May of 323 B.C.E., he began to show signs of what may have been malarial fever. Some ancient sources even suggest that he was poisoned; his closest companion, Hephaestion, had died the year before at Ecbatana, leaving Alexander without his most vigilant bodyguard. In any case, Alexander ignored the advice of his doctors. His condition worsened, and he died on June 10 or 11, 323 B.C.E., in the palace built by the Chaldean king Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, the ancient capital of Hammurabi. He was not yet thirty-three years old.

**THE HELLENISTIC KINGDOMS**

According to one account—by a later Roman historian—Alexander’s officers gathered around his bed as he lay dying and asked to whom he wished to leave his empire. He had replied, “To the strongest.” According to other sources, he was actually incapable of speech. According to still other sources, he silently gave his signet ring to a Macedonian called Perdiccas, the leader of his cavalry.

It was certainly Perdiccas who attempted to arrange a settlement among all the possible claimants for power, albeit unsuccessfully. It was eventually decided that the infant Alexander IV, his son by Roxane, should rule jointly with Alexander’s half-brother, Philip, the son of Philip II by one of his lesser wives. But this solution was never put into effect, because both the child and his uncle were soon murdered, as was Perdiccas. Meanwhile, the satrapies that had been allotted to various leaders of Alexander’s armies became the bases from which these men attempted to seize control.

The turmoil lasted for two generations. By about 275 B.C.E., however, three separate axes of military and political power had emerged, each headed by a Greco-Macedonian ruling class but with a distinctive character. Indeed, a striking feature of this period is the renewal of ancient political patterns within the common culture that continued to unite Alexander’s fragmented empire. This is why the world created by his conquests is called Hellenistic, “Greek-like.”

**Ptolemaic Egypt**

By far the most stable of these three Hellenistic states was Egypt, thanks in large part to the canny governance of Alexander’s former general Ptolemy (TOHL-eh-mee), who was possibly an illegitimate son of Philip II. Ptolemy decided to
Analyzing Primary Sources

Alexander Puts Down a Mutiny

The following account comes from the history of Alexander’s campaigns by the Greek-speaking Roman historian Arrian (c. 86–160 C.E.), who lived in the Roman province of Bythinia in northern Anatolia. This is the closest thing we have to a primary source, since histories written by Alexander’s own contemporaries have not survived. The following passage describes Alexander’s response to a mutiny among his troops after his return from India in 324 B.C.E.

“[M]arching out from a country too poor to maintain you decently, I laid open for you at a blow, and in spite of Persia’s naval supremacy, the gates of the Hellespont. My cavalry crushed the satraps of Darius, and I added all Ionia and Aeolia, the two Phrygias and Lydia to your empire. . . . I took them and gave them to you for your profit and enjoyment. The wealth of Egypt and Cyrene, which I shed no blood to win, now flows in your hands; Palestine and the plains of Syria and Mesopotamia are now your property; Babylon and Bactria and Susa are yours; you are the masters of the gold of Lydia, the treasures of Persia, the wealth of India—yes, and the seas beyond India, too. You are my captains, my generals, my governors of provinces.

“From all this that I have labored to win for you, what is left for me myself except the purple and the crown? I keep nothing for my own. . . . Perhaps you will say that, in my position as your commander, I had none of the labors and distress which you had to endure to win me what I have won. . . . Come now—if you are wounded, strip and show your wounds, and I will show mine. There is no part of my body but my back which does not have a scar; not a weapon a man may grasp or fling, the mark of which I do not carry on me. . . . and all for your sakes: for your glory and your gain. Over every land and sea, across river, mountain, and plain, I led you to the world’s end, a victorious army. I marry as you marry, and many of you will have children related by blood to my own. . . . But you all wish to leave me. Go then! And when you reach home, tell them that Alexander your king, who vanquished the Persians and Medes and Bactrians. . . . tell them, I say, that you deserted him and left him to the mercy of barbarian men, whom you yourselves conquered.”

On the Macedonians, the immediate effect of Alexander’s speech was profound. . . . But when they were told [three days later that] . . . command was being given to Persian officers, foreign troops drafted into Macedonian units, a Persian corps of Guards called by a Macedonian name, Persian infantry units given the coveted title of Companions, . . . every man of them hurried to the palace . . . and [they] swore they would not stir from the spot until Alexander took pity on them.


Questions for Analysis

1. What qualities of leadership does Alexander display in this speech? How do these qualities compare to those of Cyrus the Younger, in Xenophon’s description of him (page 85)?

2. Given the circumstances that precipitated this mutiny, why does Alexander use the term barbarians to describe the Persians and other conquered peoples? What does he hope to convey by using this word, and then by reorganizing his forces to replace Macedonians with Persians?

3. Histories written well into the nineteenth century of our era feature speeches that were allegedly spoken by historical characters on momentous occasions. How closely do you think Arrian’s reconstruction of this speech reflects historical reality? How might you go about arguing that it is, in fact, an accurate reflection of what Alexander actually said?
withdraw from the contest over the larger empire and asked only to be given Egypt as his satrapy. Clearly, he recognized Egypt’s virtual invulnerability to attack. He also seems to have appreciated, as had Alexander, its historical cachet. And he may already have been planning to make Egypt an independent monarchy and a shrine to Alexander’s memory. It was thanks to Ptolemy, in fact, that Alexander’s embalmed body was brought to Egypt in 323 B.C.E. It was supposed to have gone to the royal burial ground in Macedonia, but Ptolemy hijacked the funeral cortege and brought it to Memphis. Later, his son Ptolemy II moved the sarcophagus to a tomb in Alexandria, where it became a pilgrimage site and an object of veneration.

The Ptolemies ruled for 300 years, until Egypt became a Roman province in 30 B.C.E. (see Chapter 5). This dynasty, the thirty-second since the fourth millennium B.C.E., would be the last. The male heirs of the line all took the name Ptolemy (hence the term “Ptolemaic Egypt”). Many of their sisters were called Cleopatra, the name of Alexander’s own sister and a dynastic name among Macedonian royal women. Beginning in the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (“sibling-lover”), the Ptolemies even began to follow ancient Egyptian custom by marrying their sisters. And in many other ways, they showed reverence for the culture of their kingdom while bringing it within the ambit of the wider Hellenistic world.

They achieved this, in part, by ruling from the new city of Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast. In Alexandria, they acted as Macedonian kings toward their Greek and Macedonian citizens; outside of Alexandria, they played the role of pharaohs, surrounding themselves with the trappings and symbols of Egypt’s heritage. But until the last Ptolemaic ruler, Cleopatra VII (69–30 B.C.E.), none of them bothered to learn the Egyptian language—although, as the Rosetta Stone attests (Chapter 1), they surrounded themselves with able administrators who could communicate effectively with their multilingual and multicultural subjects.

For the Ptolemies, as for the ancient pharaohs, all of Egypt was land to be exploited for the benefit of the royal house. Supporting this tradition was the Macedonian idea that conquered land was plunder, to be used for personal enrichment and glorification. Accordingly, the Ptolemies exploited the wealth of the Egyptian countryside to the fullest. Most of this wealth ended up in Alexandria, which became the brilliant hub of the Hellenistic world. But there was little interest in improving the lives of the Egyptian...
peasantry, whose bread-winning labors made their rulers rich. So although the third century was a prosperous and relatively peaceful one in Egypt, future pharaohs would face regular and dangerous revolts.

Nevertheless, Ptolemaic Egypt was the most successful of the Hellenistic kingdoms. It was also the most influential, because of its key role in preserving and transmitting the accumulated heritage of the civilizations that had preceded it: Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Greek. The Ptolemies used much of their wealth to patronize science and the arts, and they established a great Museum (“home of the Muses”) and a library which attracted the greatest minds of the Hellenistic world. Many breakthroughs in astronomy, mechanical engineering, and physics occurred in Alexandria. In particular, the study of medicine advanced greatly: freed from the taboos of their homeland, Greek researchers were permitted to perform autopsies, making it possible for anatomy to become a scientific discipline in its own right. It was also in Alexandria that the texts of Greek poetry, drama, history, and philosophy were copied and preserved in the forms in which we know them, and here that the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek for a wider audience. Any history of western civilizations would be impossible without these initiatives.

**Seleucid Asia**

The vast possessions that Alexander had accumulated in Asia—both within the Persian Empire and outside of it—eventually fell to another Macedonian, Seleucus (seh-LOO-kus). Seleucus had navigated the turmoil after Alexander’s death successfully and exploited the connections he made through his Persian wife. At his death in 281 B.C.E., his half-Persian son Antiochus inherited an expansive realm whose capital was the city named after him, Antioch.

Throughout its history, the dynasty founded by Seleucus (known as the Seleucids) struggled with the problem of holding the disparate parts of this realm together. Seleucus himself solved part of this problem by ceding much of the Indus Valley to the great warrior-king Chandragupta in exchange for a squad of war elephants. By the middle of the third century B.C.E., the Seleucids had also lost control of Bactria, where a series of Indo-Greek states were emerging with a uniquely complex culture of their own. The Seleucid heartland now became northern Syria, parts of Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and the western half of Persia: still a great, wealthy kingdom, but far less than what Alexander had left.

Like the Ptolemies, the Seleucids presented two faces to their subjects, one looking to ancient Mesopotamian tradition, another looking to Greece. In his proclamations, Antiochus used terms reminiscent of Sargon, Hammurabi, and Cyrus: “I am Antiochus, Great King, legitimate king . . . king of Babylon, king of all countries.” But on his coins, he wore his hair short in the fashion of the Greeks and styled himself basileus, the Greek word for “king.” Although the Seleucids’ bureaucracy was less organized than that of the Ptolemies, even haphazard tax collection could reap huge rewards in an empire of 30 million inhabitants. They had more than enough cash to defend their borders through the third century, a period of regular warfare with Egypt. It was not until the second century, when Antiochus III lost a costly war with the Romans, that he had to plunder temples and private wealth to pay off the indemnity imposed on him.

**Antigonid Macedon and Greece**

The Macedonian homeland did not possess the vast wealth of the new kingdoms carved from Alexander’s conquests. It also remained highly unstable from the time of Alexander’s death until 276 B.C.E., when a general named Antigonus finally established his own dynasty (known as the Antigonids). Thereafter, Macedonia drew its strength from its considerable natural resources and from its influence over Aegean trade, as well as its status as overlord of Greece. Moreover, the Macedonians continued to field the most effective army in the Hellenistic world.

Antigonus himself was influenced by a philosophical outlook called Stoicism (discussed later in this chapter) and viewed kingship as a form of noble servitude, to be endured rather than enjoyed. This perspective, combined with his
modest resources, convinced him not to compete with the Seleucids and Ptolemies for dominance. Instead, Antigonid policy was to keep these other two powers at war with one another and away from the Macedonian sphere of influence. Antigonus and his successors thus pursued a strategy more reminiscent of Philip II than of his son. They secured the northern frontiers, maintained a strong, standing army, and kept the fractious Greeks at heel.

The Greeks, however, were restive under the Antigonids, and two emergent powers served as rallying points for those who resented “barbarian” rule. These two forces, the Aetolian League and the Achaean League, were a departure in Greek political organization. Unlike the defensive alliances of the classical period, each represented a real political unification, with some centralization of governance. Citizens of the leagues’ member poleis participated in councils of state that dealt with foreign policy and military affairs. New members were admitted on an equal footing with existing members, and all citizens of the various poleis enjoyed joint citizenship throughout the league. The same laws, weights and measures, coinage, and judicial procedures also applied throughout each federation. So effective was this mode of cooperation that James Madison, John Jay, and Alexander Hamilton employed it as one of their models for federalism in the United States.

FROM POLIS TO COSMOPOLIS

So what became of the polis, that building-block of classical Greece? As we have seen, the changes of the fourth century B.C.E. were already disrupting patterns of social and political life. Alexander’s conquests hastened this process of transformation, and they also opened up a wider world—a world that came to admire all things Greek. By 300 B.C.E., a common Hellenistic culture was transcending political and geographical boundaries. It was fueled by the hundreds of thousands of adventurers who joined the Greek diaspora (“dispersion”), and whose emigration reduced the population of the Greek mainland by as much as fifty percent in the century after 325 B.C.E.

This exciting, urbane world was made up of interconnected cities whose scale dwarfed anything imaginable in Periclean Athens. In the fifth century B.C.E., direct participation in government had meant that every male citizen had some share in his society, its institutions, its gods, its army, and its cultural life. In the huge and cosmopolitan Hellenistic city, by contrast, all these ways of defining oneself were no longer relevant. The individual male’s intimate connection with the state was broken, as was his nexus of social relationships. An average Greek in one of the Hellenistic kingdoms might have only his immediate family to rely on, if that. Very often, he was alone. What resulted was a traumatic disjunction between the traditional values and assumptions of Greek life and these new realities—and a host of entirely new opportunities.

Commerce and Urbanization

The Hellenistic world was prosperous. Alexander’s conquests had opened up a vast trading area stretching from Egypt to the Persian Gulf, dominated by Greek-speaking rulers and well-established merchant communities. These conquests also stimulated the economy by putting into circulation hoards of Persian gold and silver coins, jewelry, and other commodities acquired through plunder. Industries benefited too, because autocratic rulers found manufacturing to be a further means of increasing their revenues.

Every facility was provided by the Ptolemies and the Seleucids for the encouragement of commerce. Harbors were improved, warships were sent out to police the seas, roads and canals were built. The Ptolemies even employed geographers to discover new routes to distant lands. As a result of such methods, Egypt developed a flourishing commerce in the widest variety of products obtainable. Into the port of Alexandria came spices from Arabia, gold from Ethiopia and India, tin from Britain, elephants and ivory from Nubia, silver from Spain, fine carpets from Asia Minor, and even silk from China.

The rapid growth of cities had both political and economic ramifications. Greek rulers imported Greek officials and especially Greek soldiers to maintain their control over non-Greek populations, making many new settlements necessary. Alexander himself had founded some 70 cities as outposts of domination; in the next two centuries, his successors founded about 200 more. Urbanization also increased due to the expansion of commerce and industry, but the most significant factors were the Greek diaspora and the migration of workers from rural areas. Population growth in some centers was explosive. At Antioch, the population quadrupled during a single century. Seleucia on the Tigris grew from nothing to a metropolis of several hundred thousand in less than two centuries. Alexandria in Egypt had half a million inhabitants; only imperial Rome would have surpassed it in size, and it would not be until the eighteenth century of our era that European cities like London and Paris were as large. Alexandria was not only populous, it was magnificent and spacious—which Rome never was. Its wide streets were paved and laid out in an orderly grid. It had splendid public buildings and parks, the great
Museum, and the famous library containing half a million books. It was the storehouse and showcase of Greek culture.

Not everyone enjoyed prosperity. Agriculture remained the major occupation, and small farmers in particular suffered severely from exploitative taxation. Although industrial production increased, it continued to be based on manual labor by individual artisans, most of whom lived in poverty. Among the teeming populations of Hellenistic cities, unemployment was a constant concern. Even those who prospered in the new economy were subject to drastic fluctuations in their fortunes, owing to the precarious nature of mercantile endeavors. Merchants were also vulnerable to the boom-and-bust syndrome: an investor, thinking he could make a fortune during an upward price spiral, might go into debt to take advantage of the trend, only to find that supply exceeded demand, leaving him nothing with which to pay his creditors. The economic landscape of the Hellenistic world was therefore one of contrasting extremes. In many ways, this was also the case with respect to its culture.

HELLENISTIC WORLDVIEWS

Life in the Hellenistic boomtowns produced new worldviews and new philosophies that differed significantly from those of Plato and Aristotle. Another major departure was the separation of philosophy from scientific inquiry, which now became its own field of study. Despite these differences, however, scientists, philosophers, and religious teachers were all motivated by the same thing: the need to make human existence meaningful in a new age that lacked traditional civic structures and social values.

Two Paths to Tranquility: Stoicism and Epicureanism

The two strains of philosophy that dominated the Hellenistic world both originated in Athens around 300 B.C.E.: Stoicism and Epicureanism. Their teachings had several features in common. Both were concerned with the well-being of the individual, not with the welfare of society as a whole. Both were firmly rooted in the material world; even the soul was considered to be part of the mortal body. Both responded to the new cosmopolitan age by promoting universal values: they taught that people are the same the world over, and recognized no distinctions between Greeks and the peoples hitherto known as “barbarians.”

But in other ways the two systems were radically different. The Stoics who followed Zeno of Citium (c. 335–c. 263 B.C.E.)—they took their name from the stoa (“colonnade”) in which he regularly taught—believed that the cosmos is an ordered whole in which all contradictions are resolved for ultimate good. Evil is only relative; the particular misfortunes that befall human beings are merely incidents that will lead to the final perfection of the universe. Everything that happens is therefore predetermined. People are free only in the sense that they can accept fate or rebel against it. By freely submitting to the workings of the universe, and by acknowledging that whatever happens must be for the best, one can attain true happiness: tranquility of mind.

The Stoics’ theory of ethics and social responsibility grew out of this personal philosophy. Believing that the highest good is serenity of mind, they emphasized self-discipline and the fulfillment of one’s duties. They taught tolerance and forgiveness, and they also urged participation in public affairs as a special responsibility for those with able minds. They condemned slavery and violence, although they took no real actions against these evils because they saw them as inevitable—and because extreme social change might be worse.

With some some later modifications, Stoic philosophy became the driving force behind the values of the Roman Republic and of early Christianity, and can be considered one of the most important products of the Hellenistic world. Even those who do not embrace its tenets or its perspective may recognize that they have been influenced by it.

The teachings of Epicurus (341–270 B.C.E.) were based on the atomic theory of an earlier Greek philosopher called Democritus, who lived in the latter part of the fifth century B.C.E. According to his central thesis, the universe is made up entirely of atoms, and every individual object or organism is therefore the product of a combination of atoms. Studying Democritus’ writings, Epicurus reached a conclusion exactly opposite to that of the Stoics: he interpreted the atomic theory to mean that there is no ultimate purpose in the workings of the universe. So the highest good cannot come of submitting oneself stoically to the endurance of hardship, because suffering is not part of a larger plan: it is merely the chance by-product of random atomic actions. The highest good, then, must be pleasure: the moderate satisfaction of bodily appetites, the intellectual pleasure of contemplating excellence and remembering past enjoyments, and serenity in the face of death. Indeed, an individual who understands that the soul itself is material, that the universe operates at random, and that no gods intervene in human affairs will have no fear of death or any other supernatural phenomena.

The Epicureans thus came by a very different route to the same general conclusion as the Stoics: nothing is better than tranquility of mind. In contrast to the Stoics, however,
Debating the Education and Role of Women

The drastic political, social, and economic changes of the fourth century led philosophers to re-imagine the traditional structures of the polis, and to debate the proper role of women within these structures. Meanwhile, the cosmopolitan culture of the expanding Hellenistic world made it increasingly difficult to limit women’s access to public spaces. The following excerpts represent two philosophical responses to these problems. The first comes from Plato’s treatise on “Polismatters” (Politeia), known to us as The Republic, the longest of his philosophical dialogues and the most influential work of political thought in history. Its conceptual narrator and protagonist is Socrates, who engages in a series of debates with his pupils. The second excerpt is taken from a philosophical treatise attributed to a female follower of Pythagoras (see Chapter 3), but it was really written around 200 B.C.E. in Hellenistic Italy, and by a man.

Plato, The Republic, c. 380 B.C.E.

**Socrates**: For men born and educated like our citizens, the only way, in my opinion, of arriving at a right conclusion about the possession and use of women and children is to follow the path on which we originally started, when we said that the men were to be the guardians and watchdogs of the herd.

**Glaucon**: True.

**Socrates**: Let us further suppose the birth and education of our women to be subject to similar or nearly similar regulations; then we shall see whether the result accords with our design.

**Glaucon**: What do you mean?

**Socrates**: . . . The education which was assigned to the men was music and gymnastic[s].

**Glaucon**: Yes.

**Socrates**: Then women must be taught music and gymnastic[s] and also the art of war, which they must practice like the men?

**Glaucon**: That is the inference, I suppose.

**Socrates**: I should rather expect . . . that several of our proposals, if they are carried out, being unusual, may appear ridiculous.

**Glaucon**: No doubt of it.

**Socrates**: Yes, and the most ridiculous thing of all will be the sight of women naked in the palaestra, exercising with the men, especially when they are no longer young; they certainly will not be a vision of beauty, any more than the enthusiastic old men who in spite of wrinkles and ugliness continue to frequent the gymnasia . . . [Yet] not long ago, as we shall remind them, the Hellenes were of the opinion, which is still generally received among the barbarians, that the sight of a naked man was ridiculous and improper; and when first the Cretans and then the Lacedaemonians [Spartans] introduced the custom, the wits of that day might equally have ridiculed the innovation.

**Glaucon**: No doubt . . .

**Socrates**: First, then, whether the question is to be put in jest or in earnest, let us come to an understanding about the nature of woman: Is she capable of sharing either wholly or partially in the actions of men, or not at all? And is the art of war one of those arts in which she can or cannot share? That will be the best way of commencing the enquiry, and will probably lead to the fairest conclusion . . .

**Glaucon**: I suppose so . . .

**Socrates**: And if . . . the male and female sex appear to differ in their fitness for any art or pursuit, we should say that such pursuit or art ought to be assigned to one or the other of them; but if the difference consists only in women bearing and men begetting children, this does not amount to a proof that a woman differs from a man in respect of the sort of education she should receive; and we shall therefore continue to maintain that our guardians and their wives ought to have the same pursuits.

**Glaucon**: Very true.

**Socrates**: Next, we shall ask . . . how, in reference to any of the pursuits or arts of civic life, the nature of a woman differs from that of a man? . . .

**Glaucon**: By all means.

**Socrates**: . . . [W]hen you spoke of a nature gifted or not gifted in any respect, did you mean to say that one man will acquire a thing easily, another with difficulty; a little learning will lead the one to discover a great deal; whereas the other, after much study and application, no sooner learns than he forgets? Or again, did you mean, that the one has a body which is a good servant to his mind, while the body of the other is a hindrance to him? Would not these be the sort of differences which distinguish the man gifted by nature from the one who is ungifted?

**Glaucon**: No one will deny that.
SOCRATES: And can you mention any pursuit of mankind in which the male sex has not all these gifts and qualities in a higher degree than the female? Need I waste time in speaking of the art of weaving, and the management of pancakes and preserves, in which woman-kind does really appear to be great, and in which for her to be beaten by a man is of all things the most absurd?

GLAUCON: You are quite right... in maintaining the general inferiority of the female sex: although many women are in many things superior to many men, yet on the whole what you say is true.


Treatise Attributed to Phintys, Third/Second Century B.C.E.

Now some people think that it is not appropriate for a woman to be a philosopher, just as a woman should not be a cavalry officer or a politician. ... I agree that men should be generals and city officials and politicians, and women should keep house and stay inside and receive and take care of their husbands. But I believe that courage, justice, and intelligence are qualities that men and women have in common. ... Courage and intelligence are more appropriately male qualities because of the strength of men's bodies and the power of their minds. Chastity is more appropriately female.

Accordingly, a woman must learn about chastity and realize what she must do quantitatively and qualitatively to be able to obtain this womanly virtue. I believe that there are five qualifications: (1) the sanctity of her marriage bed, (2) the cleanliness of her body, (3) the manner in which she chooses to leave her house, (4) her refusal to participate in secret cults... (5) her readiness and moderation in sacrificing to the gods.

Of these, the most important quality for chastity is to be pure in respect of the marriage bed, and for her not to have affairs with men from other households. If she breaks the law in this way she wrongs the gods of her family and provides her family and home not with its own offspring but with bastards. ... She should also consider the following: that there is no means of atoning for this sin; no way she can approach the shrines or the altars of the gods as a pure woman. ... The greatest glory a freeborn woman can have—her foremost honor—is the witness her own children will give to her chastity toward her husband, the stamp of the likeness they bear to the father whose seed produced them. ...

As far as adornment of her body is concerned... [h]er clothes should not be transparent or ornate. She should not put on silken material, but moderate, white-colored clothes. In this way, she will avoid being overdressed or luxurious or made-up, and not give other women cause to be uncomfortably envious. ... She should not apply imported or artificial coloring to her face—with her own natural coloring, by washing only with water, she can ornament herself with modesty. ...

Women of importance leave the house to sacrifice to the leading divinity of the community on behalf of their husbands and their households. They do not leave home at night nor in the evening, but at midday, to attend a religious festival or to make some purchase, accompanied by a single female servant or decorously escorted by two servants at most. ... They keep away from secret cults ... particularly because these forms of worship encourage drunkenness and ecstasy. The mistress of the house and head of the household should be chaste and untouched in all respects.


Questions for Analysis

1. Follow the steps of the argument made by Socrates. How does he go about proving that women and men are different, and should have different roles in society? Are there flaws in this argument? What are they?

2. How does the author of the treatise seem to define “chastity,” and why does “she” (actually he) say that it corresponds to more masculine qualities of courage and intelligence? Why would this author have wanted to attribute these reflections to female members of the community founded by the philosopher Pythagoras (c. 570–c. 495), three centuries earlier? How might this treatise be responding to the changes brought about by the expansion of the Greek world in the fourth and third centuries B.C.E.?

3. What are main points on which these two perspectives agree? How might ideas like those expressed here have influenced contemporary ideas of female beauty and modesty (see Interpreting Visual Evidence, page 87)?

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they did not insist on virtue as an end in itself, or on the fulfillment of one’s duties. For an Epicurean, the only duty a person has is to the self, and the only reason to act virtuously is to increase one’s own happiness. Similarly, Epicureans denied that there is any such thing as justice; laws and political institutions are “just” only insofar as they contribute to the welfare of the individual. Yes, certain rules have been found necessary for the maintenance of order, but these rules should be obeyed solely because that is to one’s advantage. The state is, at best, a mere convenience, and the wise man should take no active part in politics. Instead, he should withdraw to study philosophy and enjoy the fellowship of a few congenial friends. Modern libertarian and anarchic movements share many characteristics with Epicureanism.

Extreme Doubt: Skepticism

The most pessimistic philosophy generated by the Hellenistic era was propounded by the Skeptics, whose name means “those on the lookout” or “the spies.” Skepticism reached the zenith of its popularity in the second century under the influence of Carneades (kar-NAY-deez, c. 214–129 B.C.E.), a man born in the Greek city of Cyrene, in North Africa, who spent his youth in Athens. His chief teaching (filtered through Aristotle) was that all knowledge is based on sense perception and is therefore limited and relative. From this, the Skeptics concluded that no one can prove anything. Moreover, because our senses can deceive us, we cannot even be certain about the truth we think we have gained by observation of the world. All we can say is that things appear to be such and such; we do not know that they really are that way. It follows, furthermore, that we can have no definite knowledge of the supernatural, of the meaning of life, or of right and wrong.

The only sensible course for the Skeptic is therefore to suspend judgment. If we abandon the fruitless quest for truth and cease to worry about good conduct and the existence of evil, we can at least attain a certain peace of mind, the highest satisfaction that an uncertain life affords. Needless to say, the Skeptics were even less concerned than the Epicureans with political and social problems, from which they felt wholly alienated. Their ideal was one of escape from an incomprehensible world. In some key respects they anticipated modern existentialism and nihilism.

Varieties of Religion

Like Epicureanism and Skepticism, Hellenistic religion tended to offer vehicles of escape from political commitments. When we think back to how close was the link between Greek selfhood and politics down to the middle of the fourth century B.C.E.—“man is a creature of the polis”—we can begin to appreciate what a radical change had occurred in just a few generations. In all the societies we have studied so far, religion was wholly interconnected with politics. Divine worship centered on the gods who protected a community and furthered its interests. Hence, the most serious of the charges brought against Socrates was that he had “denied the gods of the polis” and thus committed treason. Religious crimes were political crimes, and piety was the same as patriotism.

Although this sense of a vital connection between a place and its gods persisted to a certain extent during the Hellenistic period, civic-oriented worship was compromised by rootless multiculturalism. In its place, some elite members of society gravitated toward one of the philosophies discussed above. Ordinary people, though, were more likely to embrace religious cults that offered emotional gratification or the diversion of colorful rituals, as well as some assurance of an afterlife.

Cults that stressed extreme methods of atonement, mystical union with the divine, or contact with supernatural forces accordingly attracted many followers. Among these so-called mystery religions was the cult of Dionysus, which celebrated the cyclical death and resurrection of that Greek god. The Egyptian cult of Isis (Chapter 1) also revolved around rituals of death and rebirth. So too did Zoroastrianism (Chapter 2), which became increasingly dualistic: its magi now taught that the material world was entirely evil and urged believers to adopt ascetic practices that would purify their souls and prepare them for ethereal joy in the afterlife.

Like the peoples who worshiped them, the gods of the Hellenistic world were often immigrants from other lands. Temples to Greek gods and goddesses were dedicated throughout the Near East and Egypt; conversely, temples to Near Eastern divinities were constructed in the cities of the Greek homeland. In Alexandria, scholars of religion collected Egyptian and Near Eastern mythologies, which were recorded and reformulated for Greek-speaking audiences.

Even among the Jews of Palestine, who resisted assimilation and the adoption of foreign customs, Hellenistic culture put down deep roots. This was especially true among elite Jews living outside Palestine, who outnumbered the Palestinian population by a considerable margin. To meet the needs of these Greek-speaking Jews, and to satisfy the curiosity of Gentiles interested in Jewish beliefs, scholars working in Alexandria produced a Greek version of the Hebrew scriptures. It is known as the Septuagint (sep-TOO-ah-gent), from the Greek word meaning “the seventy”: legend has it that seventy scribes, each working independently, produced individual translations from Hebrew to Greek that were iden-
tical in every respect. This meant that the Septuagint could be regarded as no less a product of divine inspiration than the original books that made up the Hebrew Bible, and could be treated as an authoritative text in its own right. For Jews concerned about their social and cultural standing vis-à-vis their Greek neighbors, the Septuagint was proof of their Hellenistic values—although, ironically, some of the very portions of scripture that were now written in Greek disapproved strongly of those values.

THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION OF ANTIQUITY

The Hellenistic period was the most brilliant age in the history of science before the seventeenth century of our era. There are three major reasons for this. First, there was the stimulus to intellectual inquiry caused by the fusion of Mesopotamian and Egyptian science with the philosophical methods of the Greeks. Second, as in the more famous scientific revolution, the use of a common language (in the seventeenth century it was Latin) and the ease of communication facilitated by affordable travel made the circulation of knowledge and sharing of ideas easier (in the seventeenth century, communication was increased by the printing press). Finally, as in the seventeenth century, the competition among patrons of science was intense: every autocrat wanted to be thought enlightened and to be associated with new discoveries. Even purely theoretical advances were so much admired that a Hellenistic prince who had bankrolled such a breakthrough would share the glory of it. It was especially profitable to subsidize research that led to the development of new technologies, because they might have military applications.

The arts were also transformed by the economic and political conditions of the Hellenistic world. Artists working in various media strove to demonstrate their mastery of difficult techniques and so to attract the notice of potential patrons. New markets for art also changed what was being made, how, and for whom. In all of the civilizations we have studied so far, artists worked directly for royal or civic patrons. In the Hellenistic world, art became commodified. Sometimes a work would be made expressly for a particular patron, but many works of art were fashioned for the open market. They were also designed to suit the tastes and lifestyles of those merchant classes who had disposable income and wanted to increase their social standing through conspicuous consumption. This was as true of literature as of sculpture or the decorative arts: we know the names of over a thousand Hellenistic authors. Indeed, the number of texts and objets d’art that exist from this period is huge when compared to earlier eras.

Measuring and Mapping: Astronomy, Geography, and Mathematics

Hellenistic scientists took a major interest in measurements and mapmaking, whether of the heavens (astronomy), the earth (geography), or the forms occurring in nature (geometry). The most renowned—and most wronged—of the Hellenistic astronomers was Aristarchus of Samos (310–230 B.C.E.), whose major discovery anticipated that of Copernicus by 1,700 years: he deduced that the earth and other planets revolve around the sun. Unfortunately,
however, this view was not accepted by many of his con-
temporaries or successors because it conflicted with the
teachings of Aristotle, which in turn reflected the Greek
conviction that humanity, and therefore the earth, must be
at the center of the universe. The sad fate of his discovery
was sealed in the second century C.E., when the Alexandrian
scholar Claudius Ptolemaeus (known as Ptolemy) unequiv-

cally argued that Aristotle was correct, and that all heav-

enly bodies revolve around the earth. This misinformative
view would not be overturned until the much later sci-

centific revolution occurred (see Chapter 16).

Closely allied with astronomy were geography
and mathematics. The most influential Hellenistic mathemati-
cian was Euclid, whose Elements of Geometry (c. 300 B.C.E.)
remained the basic textbook of that subject until the twen-
tieth century of our era. In the field of geography—and in a
host of other pursuits, too—the most original thinker was
Eratosthenes of Alexandria (air-ah-TOS-then-ees, c. 276–
c. 196 B.C.E.). Not only did he accurately calculate the cir-

cumference of the earth (within a tiny margin of error, less
than 200 miles), he was the first to suggest the possibility
of reaching eastern Asia by sailing west. In addition, he
founded the science of chronology by attempting to estab-
lish the dates of major events reaching back to the siege of
Troy. Students of history are forever in his debt.

**Medicine and Mechanics:**

**The Sciences of Physiology and Physics**

Before the third century B.C.E., physics had been a branch
of philosophy. Now it became a separate, experimental
science thanks to the genius of one man, Archimedes of
Syracuse (c. 287–212 B.C.E.). It was he who discovered the
law of floating bodies, or specific gravity, now known as
‘Archimedes’ principle.’ According to legend, the idea came
to him when he was in his bath, and the stunning insight
so excited him that he leapt from the water and dashed out
naked into the street, shouting “Eureka!” (“I have found it!’’).
Archimedes also established the principles of the lever, the
pulley, and the screw, and he invented both a compound
pulley and a propeller. All of these discoveries had numer-

ous practical uses in the construction of buildings, ships,
and military machinery.

Other extraordinary advances were made in the field of
medicine. Especially significant was the work of Herophilus
of Chalcedon (c. 335–c. 280 B.C.E.), the greatest anatomist of
antiquity and probably the first to practice human dissec-
tion. Herophilus’ achievements included a detailed descrip-
tion of the brain, which allowed him to prove that it was
the engine of human intellect (Aristotle thought that it was
the heart), as well as the discovery that the arteries contain
blood alone (not a mixture of blood and air, as Aristotle
had taught), and that their function is to carry blood from
the heart to all parts of the body. His colleague Erasistratus
(air-ah-sis-STRAH-tus) made allied discoveries, establishing
that the heart was a pump and not an organ of emotion.
Erasistratus also rejected the widely held theory of the phy-
sician Hippocrates (c. 460–c. 370), who had posited that
the body consists of four “humors” which need to be kept in
balance through bloodletting and other invasive practices.
Unfortunately, this discovery went the way of the heliocen-
tric universe posited by Aristarchus: another encyclopedist
of the second century C.E., Galen, preferred the erroneous
theory of Hippocrates. The practice of bloodletting thus
persisted into the nineteenth century of our era.

**Urban Architecture and Sculpture**

Hellenistic architecture drew on Greek models, but it was
also influenced by tastes more characteristic of Egypt and
Persia. The best surviving example comes from Pergamon,
a city on the coast of Anatolia that became the capital of a
new kingdom wrested from the control of the Seleucids in

![DYING GAUL.](image)
the second century B.C.E. It boasted an enormous altar dedicated to Zeus that crowned the heights of the city, below which an open-air theater was built into the steep slope of the hill. In Ephesus, not far away, the streets were not only paved, they were paved with marble.

But the most influential of all Hellenistic arts was sculpture, which placed even more emphasis on realism than the fourth-century sculptures discussed earlier in this chapter. And because awkward human postures offered the greatest technical challenges, sculptors often preferred to show people stretching themselves or balancing on one leg or performing other unusual feats. It is clear that the goal was to create something unique in both conception and craftsmanship—something a collector could show off as the only one of its type. It is not surprising, therefore, that complexity came to be admired for its own sake, and extreme naturalism sometimes teetered on the brink of absurdity. Yet to our eyes, such works appear familiar because of the influence they exerted on later sculptors like Michelangelo (see Chapter 12) and Auguste Rodin. Three of the most famous examples are pictured here, each exhibiting different aesthetic qualities and artistic techniques: the Dying Gaul, made in Pergamon around 220 B.C.E.; the Winged Victory of Samothrace, dating from around 200 B.C.E.; and the Laocoön group, from the first century B.C.E.

**Literary Fantasy and Historical Reality**

In the sixth century B.C.E. it was the lyric, in the fifth century it was tragedy, and in the fourth century it was the novel; but in the Hellenistic era, the new literary genre was pastoral verse. These poems tapped into a strong vein of nostalgia for rural pastimes and simple pleasures, a make-believe world of shepherds and wood nymphs. The most important pastoral poet of the age was Theocritus, who flourished around 270 B.C.E. in the big-city environment of Alexandria. In the midst of urban bustle and within sight...
of overcrowded slums, he celebrated the charms of country life and lazy summer afternoons. He thereby founded an enduring tradition that would be taken up by poets from the Roman Virgil to the Englishman (and classical scholar) A. E. Houseman, which has provided a wealth of themes for the visual arts. Even composers like Beethoven and Debussy owe a debt to Theocritus.

By contrast, Hellenistic prose literature was dominated by historians who modeled their work on earlier pioneers, especially Thucydides. By far the most important was Polybius (c. 203 – 120 B.C.E.), a well-born Greek whose father was a prominent politician in the Achaean League. Polybius himself was trained as a cavalry officer at a time when the Achaean League was trying to position itself favorably in ongoing wars between the rising republic of Rome and the various kingdoms of northern Greece. In 168 B.C.E., the Romans became suspicious of the Achaeans’ declared neutrality and demanded that a thousand noble hostages be sent to Rome as a guarantee of the League’s good behavior. Polybius was one of those hostages, and he spent the next seventeen years living in Rome, where he became a fervent admirer of its unique form of government (see Chapter 5).

The result was a series of histories that glorified the achievements of Rome and its political system. Polybius also attempted to account for the patterns that he discerned in the history of Greece since the Peloponnesian War. He argued that historical developments follow regular cycles, and that nations pass inevitably through stages of growth and decay. Hence, it should be possible to predict exactly where a given state is heading if one knows what has happened to it in the past. Yet Polybius also argued that the special character of Rome’s constitution would allow it to break the cycle, because it combined all of the different forms of government that Aristotle had outlined in his Politics. This view of history galvanized the framers of the United States Constitution, directly influencing their conception of our own political institutions.

CONCLUSION

Judged from the perspective of classical Greece, Hellenistic civilization seems strange. The autocratic governments of the age that followed Alexander’s conquests would probably appear repugnant to a staunch proponent of Athenian democracy, and the Hellenistic love of extravagance can contrast strikingly with the tastes of the fifth century B.C.E.

After You Read This Chapter

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REVIEWING THE OBJECTIVES

■ Macedonia’s successful conquest of the Greek poleis can be attributed to several factors. What are they?
■ Alexander the Great’s imperial policies were influenced by his own upbringing, the different cultures he encountered, and some key historical precedents. Give at least one example of each type of influence.
■ Explain how the three Hellenistic kingdoms reflect the differences among the three main civilizations we have studied so far.
■ Why is the Hellenistic world described as “cosmopolitan”? How did this urban culture differ from that of the Greek poleis?
■ The philosophies of Plato and Aristotle both derive from the teachings of Socrates, but they diverge in some important ways. What are those main differences?
Yet Hellenistic civilization had its own achievements that the classical age could not match. Most Hellenistic cities offered a greater range of public facilities than any Greek cities of the previous period, and the numerous advances in science and technology are astonishing when compared to anything that came before, or even after.

But the most important contribution of the Hellenistic era to subsequent historical developments was its role as intermediary between the nascent empire of Rome and the older civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece. The economic and political infrastructures that were put in place after Alexander’s conquests would form the framework of Roman imperial government. The Romans would also take advantage of the common language and cultural expectations that bound the far reaches of the Greek-speaking world together. Their own Latin language would never supplant Greek as the preeminent language of scholarship and administration in the eastern portions of their empire.

The Hellenistic era must also be recognized as the bridge that connects us to the earlier ages of antiquity: most of what is contained in the first four chapters of this book is known to us because older texts and artifacts were copied and collected by the scholars of Alexandria and other Hellenistic cities. And it was Hellenistic art and architecture, Hellenistic city planning and civic culture, that the Romans strove to emulate—not those of Periclean Athens. The same can be said of drama and poetry.

For us, two further aspects of Hellenistic culture deserve special mention: its cosmopolitanism and its modernity. The word cosmopolitan means “universal city,” and it was the Hellenistic period that came closest to turning this ideal of globalization into reality. Around 250 B.C.E. a Greek tourist could have traveled from Sicily to the borders of India—the two ends of the earth—and never have found himself among people who did not speak his language or share his basic outlook. Nor would this tourist have identified himself in ethnic or nationalist terms, or felt any exclusive loyalty to a city-state or kingdom. He would have considered himself a citizen of the world. He would also have considered himself a modern man, not bound by the old prejudices and superstitions of the past. It is for these reasons that Hellenistic civilization seems so closely related to our own. It was a world of stark contrasts and infinite possibilities, where economic instability, extremism, and authoritarian regimes existed side by side with unprecedented prosperity, rational inquiry, and extraordinary freedoms. In Chapter 5, we will see how this world adapted itself to the dominion of a single Italian city.

### People, Ideas, Events in Context
- In what ways were the military strategies of Philip II of Macedon variations on older forms of hoplite warfare? How did the rise of mercenary armies and of Thebes further change military strategies in the fourth century?
- How did the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle respond to the crisis of the polis?
- To what degree did the conquests of Alexander the Great unite Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Greece?
- Why and how did the three Hellenistic kingdoms emerge? How were the Aetolian and Achaean Leagues new models for governance and cooperation in Greece?
- In what ways were Stoicism, Epicureanism, and other new philosophies a response to Cosmopolitanism and the breakdown of traditional societies and values?
- What were the driving forces behind the Scientific Revolution of Antiquity? What were its main achievements?
- What are some essential characteristics of Hellenistic art?
- In what ways did it differ from that of the fifth century B.C.E. (Chapter 3)?

### Consequences
- “The history of the world is but the biography of great men”—so the Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) summarized the impact of figures like Alexander the Great. How would you construct an argument in support of this proposition, using what you’ve learned in this chapter? How would you refute it?
- In what ways do Alexander’s actions demonstrate his own knowledge of history, as well as a capacity to apply that knowledge to his own circumstances? Can you identify leaders of our own day who have mobilized their understanding of history in similar ways?
- In your view, which civilization more resembles our own: classical Athens or the Hellenistic world? Why? What characteristics make an era seem “modern”??