



10-1-2011

# Glenn R. Bugh, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Hellenistic World*.

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### Recommended Citation

Halvorsen, Taylor (2011) "Glenn R. Bugh, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Hellenistic World*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 65 : No. 65 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol65/iss65/11>

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## Book Reviews

**Glenn R. Bugh, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Hellenistic World*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.**

### Introduction

*The Cambridge Companion to the Hellenistic World* is a valuable recent compendium that provides fifteen up-to-date survey articles on major topics of academic interest in the Hellenistic era.

Among other things, the book seeks to answer three questions.

- First, to what extent were Alexander’s conquests responsible for the creation of this new “Hellenistic age”?
- Second, what is the essence of this world and how does it differ from its Classical predecessor?
- And third, what continuities and discontinuities can be identified between the Greek Classical and Hellenistic eras?

After reviewing some of the technical features of the book, this review will explore, to different levels of depth, each chapter, highlighting some key ideas and potential answers to this volume’s overarching questions. (Note: I’ve used the traditional, Latinized naming conventions in this article, though, appropriately, the book itself is more consistent to ancient Greek naming conventions.)

### General features and observations

As befitting an academic volume like this, the book provides an introductory page that places this edited work in context of other “Cambridge Companions” projects, a list of illustrations (including a center section with photographs and images of Hellenistic art and architecture), a short academic biography for each contributing author, an abbreviations list for primary and secondary sources, a timeline of major events during the Hellenistic era, several maps, helpful endnotes and bibliographic notes after each chapter, a chronological list of Hellenistic kings, a thorough “works cited” section, and a comprehensive, yet accessible index.

Edited volumes can suffer from unevenness in tone and academic quality. This book does not.

Though each author's voice is clearly detected, there is a general evenness in treatment and style. Given the broad range of topics, this book does very well in presenting a coherent picture of the Hellenistic era. The separate topics discussed must of necessity reference other topics. However, this does not lead to any major overlap of discussion. Rather, topics are complimentary in providing a valuable, contextualized, interlocking overview of the Hellenistic era. Except in rare, inconsequential instances, spelling or grammatical errors do not mar the quality of this book.

In sum, this book has been carefully and professional produced.

### **Chapter-by-Chapter Review**

#### **Introduction (Glenn R. Bugh)**

In the introductory chapter, Bugh (who is also the overall editor for the volume) sets the basic foundations for the book describing the key terms and definitions, time periods, and the current state of knowledge. He identifies the Hellenistic age as the time period from the death of Alexander in 323 BC to the death of Cleopatra in 30 BC.

He defines the term "Hellenistic," which means (Greek-like). This is in contrast to the term "Hellenic" which means "of or relating to Greece/Greek."

Bugh suggests several reasons why the Hellenistic period is not as well regarded as the periods of Classical Greece or the Roman Empire.

- First, there is no overarching narrative or key historian for the Hellenistic period as there was for the Classical Greek world and the Roman Empire (we have to deal with more disparate evidence from a variety of texts, inscriptions, archaeological finds, etc.).
- Second, the influential historians, scholars and librarians of the Hellenistic age, especially those at the library of ancient Alexandria, primarily identified as "great works" those that belonged to the era of Classical Greece and not the Hellenistic time period.

However, Bugh notes that scholarship on the Hellenistic period has begun to flourish more fully since the 1980s. And hence, popular interest is beginning to also increase, which was one of the prompts for the production of this book, “The goal was to add to the growing body of knowledge of the Hellenistic world and to communicate it to an audience that thirsts for more substance than a Hollywood movie on Alexander the Great” (p. 6).

### **Chapter 1: Alexander the Great and the Creation of the Hellenistic World (A. B. Bosworth)**

In chapter 1, Bosworth seeks to account for the emergence of the Hellenistic age. He argues that the Hellenistic age is precipitated by Alexander who was bent on conquest and the acquisition of power. His domain was meant to support these aims.

Though many scholars have seen the development of more than seventy cities by Alexander as part of his mission and campaign to infuse Greek culture throughout the east, Bosworth argues that there is little in the primary sources to support that claim. Rather, these cities were conceived as military outposts to protect gains and to be a base for further conquest.

These bases were then supported by the local agrarian societies. Alexander populated these cities with Greek settlers, though many of them pined for the Greek way of life. Hence, the Hellenization that occurred after Alexander was not so much an explicit and conscious mission to spread Greek culture but rather the result of Greek settlers, placed throughout the conquered territories, desiring their familiar and comfortable homeland culture in their foreign settings (gymnasium, theater, etc.).

Over time, the Greeks intermingled their culture with local cultures (though usually the two groups were not closely linked) which led to a hybridization of Grecian culture, what is now known as Hellenistic culture.

### **Chapter 2: The Hellenistic Kingdoms (Winthrop Lindsay Adams)**

This chapter discusses the origins and characteristics of the three major Hellenistic kingdoms: the Antigonids in Macedonia, the Ptolemies in Egypt, and the Seleucids in the heartland of the former Persian Empire.

Alexander had provided no instructions for the transfer of power upon his death. Hence, several of his most prominent generals fought for supremacy soon after Alexander’s death. Each of them believed that he was the legitimate successor to Alexander and that he could fulfill Alexander’s dream of empire. This generation of warfare was known as the “Wars of the Diadochoi” or “The Wars of the Successors.” After nearly fifty years of fighting, three kingdoms emerged.

The Antigonids in Macedonia focused their strength on defending their kingdom and ruling via a mix of autocratic kingship with constitutional trappings. They also promoted extensive trade and production.

This required the protection of the homeland and so considerable resources were spent on defensive fortifications. Key defenses included Acrocorinth, the naval base at Demetrias, and the strategically located fortress city at Chalkis on the island of Euboia.

The Ptolemies were based in Egypt in their newly designed capital city, Alexandria. Because of their geographically defensible position, the Ptolemies did not need to expend as many military resources on defenses as other Hellenistic kingdoms. They also had an easier time controlling the population (the Nile River was primarily the only corridor for travel and movement). Furthermore, and distinct from the Seleucid kingdom, their native population was far more homogenous and localized, which helped to minimize competing cultural or ethnic factions (though not entirely). The Ptolemies also had the advantage of being the bread-basket of the Mediterranean region.

This created enormous wealth for the Ptolemies.

With this newfound wealth, the Ptolemies poured considerable resources into developing vast maritime trade networks and a strong navy to protect those networks. The Ptolemaic sponsorship of culture, scholarship and learning, embodied by the Alexandrian library, museum, and temple of Serapis, are some of the reasons that make the Ptolemies so famous. In these institutions they housed hundreds of thousands of scrolls and paid the salaries of dozen scholars to gather, copy, and annotate the greatest literature from the around the world, create new works, and teach their knowledge to others.

The Ptolemies saw themselves as the legitimate preservers and conveyers of Greek culture. The Ptolemaic kingdom was the longest lasting of the Hellenistic kingdoms, though it was nominally a client state to the expanding Roman Empire by the 170s BC.

Their last and one of the most famous rulers was Cleopatra VII (died August, 30 BC).

The Seleucid kingdom, with its capital city Seleucia on the Tigris, about 15 miles southeast from modern Baghdad, was the largest of the Hellenistic kingdoms. The Seleucids inherited the largest portion of Alexander's conquests.

It was a kingdom of vast wealth with more than eighty cities inhabited by Greek settlers and a very diverse native population of millions of people. Despite the extensive wealth and control of key trade routes, the imperial infrastructure and the large, land-based standing army (necessary to protect the kingdom from invasion or internal revolts) required significant resources for regular maintenance. To increase the size and loyalty of the army, the Seleucid Empire encouraged Greek immigration.

On the other hand, the Seleucids were also more willing than the Ptolemaic kingdom to involve the native populations in governing. Thus, the Seleucid Empire probably saw more diverse hybridization of Greek culture than the other two Hellenistic kingdoms.

### **Chapter 3: The Polis and Federalism (D. Graham J. Shipley with Mogens H. Hansen)**

Just as it was during the Classical age, the quintessential characteristic of the Hellenistic world was the *polis* or city. During the Hellenistic age, cities continued to be a defining feature of culture and civilization, though modifications were made to it as model of social organization.

What constituted a Greek *polis*? A definitive urban core, a certain social political model (usually composed of citizens who had a say in the keeping and formation of laws), and a source of protection. This latter feature changed over time as peace prevailed and fewer city walls were built -- and living within the city proper was not necessary.

Predominate Hellenistic urban features include the agora (the open market), the council-house, and the gymnasium (based on the Greek word "gymnós" which means naked—the gymnasium was the location where one would exercise in the buff). Indeed, a well regulated gymnasium helped assure a highly reputed Hellenistic *polis*.

Other features of the new Hellenistic urban environment were associations that were based on religious or work affiliations (see Chapter 10). The two largest and most important Hellenistic cities were Alexandria in Egypt and Athens in Greece.

## **Chapter 4: Hellenistic Economies (John K. Davies)**

This chapter focuses on the economic picture of the Hellenistic era. Methodologically, there are difficulties in defining Hellenistic economies.

- First, economy is regional, changing, and fluid.
- Second, the state of Hellenistic economic studies is currently in flux because there have been many recent discoveries.
- Third, and most importantly, there is a lack of evidence. We have no “statistical” reports from which we can recreate ancient economies.

This chapter highlights a few economic continuities and discontinuities between the Classical world and the Hellenistic age.

Features of the economy that remained relatively continuous include the landscape and environment and hence the use of complimentary habitats and resources for producing products and goods that drove the economy. Communication modes and means (such as the use of waterways) were already well established before the Hellenistic era as were land uses and the laws governing land ownership. These did not change drastically.

However, other features of the economy did change during the Hellenistic period.

The economy became more monetized with the standardization of coinage (or at least the attempt to standardize). Paying soldiers and others with coin for their services was far more efficient than trading in commodities or other goods. Royal economies dominated some of the kingdoms, especially in Egypt where the centuries-long tradition was that the king/pharaoh was god incarnate who owned all the land. This is distinct from Classical Greece where the populace (at least landed aristocracy with voting rights) had much more freedom and say over their private property. It was theirs to control; the king did not own it.

The Seleucid desire to populate its kingdom with new Greek cities that could control surrounding areas of agricultural land had a discernible effect in the Greek homeland.

As evidence from surface surveys of Greece, it is clear that the Grecian rural population decreased at this time as many people sought greater fortunes in the lands opened to them by Alexander's conquests. Though seaborne transport was used before this time, we see a massive increase in sea trade during the Hellenistic period, if the number of Mediterranean shipwrecks is an indirect indicator. Mediterranean shipwrecks sharply increase starting near 400 BC and peak in the first century BC.

The increasing wealth of some private citizens (beyond what was known during the Greek Classical period) created new opportunities for patronage or charity. In some instances a wealthy citizen was known to have paid off the debt of a city, thereby winning the praise and honor of the citizens attached to that city.

Over the years, the various Hellenistic kingdoms, and we must also put the rising Roman Empire into this mix, drifted towards integrated economies. To have such vast regions sharing a common economy (however loosely) was new to the Hellenistic age and helped set the stage for the emergence of the Roman Empire.

### **Chapter 5: The Hellenistic Family (Dorothy J. Thompson)**

This chapter considers four questions:

First, how does the post-Alexander world affect family units and the individuals within them? With the rise of kings and kingdoms private, common families sink to the background. Nevertheless, there were more options for family arrangements available to Greeks in the Hellenistic world than what they had in the Classical world. In some regards, the Greek family experience of the Hellenistic world was far more multicultural.

Second, how did Greeks adapt to their new role in a world that was now far extended and one in which overall they formed a minority, even though they represented the ruling class? Some immigrant Greeks did intermingle and marry with the native populations. Evidence from citizenship grants suggest that such rights were granted primarily to those who were free *and* Greek. Hence, the ruling class of Greeks was able to reassert its standing through such policies over against any native populations or intermixed populations resulting from the mixed marriages.

Third, what, in contrast, do we know of the majority populations of the different Hellenistic kingdoms? At least in Egypt where we have better records, native households tend to be smaller with fewer adults living under one roof. Perhaps the Greeks were wealthier and thus could afford to have slaves or other servants constitute the household. The Egyptians did not own slaves, unless in the rare instances that they were urban, wealthy and seeking to be more Hellenistic.

And fourth, what can we find of the “Hellenistic family,” and how useful can such a concept ever be? Unsurprisingly, Thompson argues that there is no single conceptual model of the “Hellenistic family” that would be useful and appropriate for all situations.

## **Chapter 6: History and Rhetoric (Graham J. Oliver)**

Oliver focuses on several important questions related to history and rhetoric. Is there something different about how history was written in the years after the death of Alexander up to the first century? What similarities or continuities characterize writers of history in the Hellenistic era compared with their predecessors?

How does history writing relate to the development of other aspects of literary and intellectual culture – philosophy, oratory, literature, and education – in general? How does history writing fit in its own political and historical environment when the territorial kingdoms that were established after the reign of Alexander and that characterize the Hellenistic era gradually succumb to the power of the Roman Empire?

Oliver turns to the life and thought of one of the most famous Hellenistic historians, Polybius, as emblematic of how these questions might be answered. Though Polybius primarily focused on the rise of Rome instead of writing a narrative history about the origins and development of the different Hellenistic kingdoms, his philosophy of history writing helps us to see how Hellenistic history writing had developed since the time of the Classical period.

For Polybius, and like many other historical writers, history writing had a purpose, “The truest education and training for political achievements is an understanding from history, and...the surest and only way to teach the capacity to support with nobility changes in fortune is the recollection of the calamities of others (Polyb. I.I.I.)” (p. 117).

Polybius is different from other Hellenistic historians in that he didn’t use foundation stories, legends, or an excessive amount of entertaining stories to construct his narrative of history. More than anything, he wanted his history to be useful rather than enjoyable. Polybius had criticism for other historical writers who depended upon rhetoric alone to capture attention. But rhetoric was important, as was oratory, as we learn from honorific inscriptions and documents relating the successes of various orators as successful diplomat

## **Chapter 7: Material Culture (Susan I. Rotroff)**

Rotroff focuses her article on the pedestrian and utilitarian material culture of the Hellenistic age, especially items that we may not regularly think much about: door handles, roof tiles, cooking utensils, tokens, public buildings, clothing, and many other mundane items.

Though the Hellenistic era material culture demonstrates continuities with the preceding Classical age, there are examples that demonstrate change.

One key example is the after dinner drinking party bowl. This bowl, known as a *krater*, was for centuries a centerpiece of symposia. Drinkers would gather in a special room to recline, drink water mixed with wine from a common bowl, and then, ostensibly discuss philosophical topics.

During the Hellenistic age, the material cultural remains indicate that individuals at symposia now brought their own cups with them and perhaps their own wine, thus drinking wine at strengths to their particular tastes. Furthermore, fewer and fewer locally produced *kraters* are evident.

At first glance, this may not appear to be a major change. Yet, this points to a change in a long-standing Grecian social institution. Instead of private drinking parties we see more evidence of tavern or public drinking, perhaps influenced by Romans.

Incidentally, one of the reasons that the Hellenistic period is sometimes passed over in favor of Classical Greek or the Roman Empire is that some writers and thinkers during and after the Hellenistic age labeled it as decadent, and thus not as worthy of attention. Perhaps the changing social norms of drinking publicly, instead of in private surrounded with philosophical discussion, contributed to this perception of the Hellenistic age.

### **Chapter 8: Hellenistic Art: Two Dozen Innovations (Andrew Stewart)**

Chapter seven and eight both deal with material culture. However, Stewart's article focuses on "high" material culture – art. He describes how innovative artistically the Hellenistic period was.

The two dozen innovative art practices that he shares are (1) art used to demonstrate power of the ruler, (2) palace and court art, (3) art for "pomp and circumstance" in political/religious rituals and celebrations, (4) city planning and rationally planned urban environments, (5) Greek sanctuaries, (6) houses, (7) libraries, (8) clubhouses, (9) the two-storied, colonnaded façade, (10) the exterior Corinthian order, (11) vaults, (12) Baroque, (13) Rococo, (14) Realism, (15) the Grotesque, (16) the Hermaphrodite, (17) Neoclassicism, (18) continuous narrative in art, (19) tessellated mosaics, (20) polychrome jewelry, (21) the cameo, (22) open hoop earrings, (23) art collecting, and (24) the writing of art history.

## **Chapter 9: Language and Literature (Nita Krevans and Alexander Sens)**

Krevans and Sens discuss the rise of *koine*, otherwise known as common Greek. Several key factors led to the rise of *koine* Greek. Beginning with the reign of Philip II (the father of Alexander the Great) Attic Greek was adopted as the standard form of Greek. Then with the spread and rise of Hellenistic kingdoms, immigration, and military service, greater Attic became homogenized.

Furthermore, the Ptolemaic establishment of the Alexandrian library and museum served as a place to preserve the cultural past and produce new works and genres. This further enshrined the use of common Greek as a common binding agent in the great Greek cultural heritage.

In addition to *koine* becoming the standard form of Greek, the number of literary artists proliferated as did the genres they worked in. Indeed, the Hellenistic age was a time of sweeping innovation and experimentation in many areas (chapter 12 reviews innovation in technology and science). Literary innovation was also widespread.

Three of the most influential literary artists of this period are Callimachus, Apollonius of Rhodes, and Theocritus.

## **Chapter 10: Greek Religion: Continuity and Change in the Hellenistic Period (Jon D. Mikalson)**

Alexander's conquests brought change and variety to Greek religion. However, Greek religion did not change significantly in the Greek city-states during the three-hundred year period of the Hellenistic era. On the other hand, in the cities of the Hellenistic east, with Alexandria, Egypt being the best example, religious expression was very diverse and quite different from the Classical Greek model.

By design, many different ethnicities (Greeks, Egyptians, Jews, Macedonians, and others) constituted Alexandria. There was no official city-state religion and no expectation that everyone participate in public forms of state sponsored religion and worship, sacrifice, and festivities.

The major cause of change in Greek religion was the intermixing of so many groups, ethnicities and various religious expressions. Now that many Greeks were separated from their home cities and traditions, they had far more choice and opportunity to try different religions to meet their needs.

This led to the rise and popularity of elective religions and associations, especially for non-elite Greeks. Besides the social and potentially religious role associations filled,

they also could provide to members of the association financial support in times of crisis, proper burial services at the time of death, and maintenance of tombs.

The changing economy impacted another area of Hellenistic religion. In many instances, state sponsored religion (the cost of sanctuary maintenance, sacrifices, festivals, priestly pay) was no longer paid for by the state, but by wealthy benefactors. Thus during the Hellenistic period we see far more honorifics to regular human beings instead of gods and legendary heroes.

### **Chapter 11: Philosophy for Life (Robert W. Sharples)**

One of the reasons why the Hellenistic period is so important for understanding later history of the ancient world is that a variety of long lasting philosophical systems had their origins or rebirths during the Hellenistic period.

The Hellenistic philosophers were deeply interested in exploring philosophy as a way of life, that is, philosophy as a way of answering life's questions and giving guidance on how to live. Some of the philosophical systems that were laid down during this time period and offered as guidance on how people should order their lives are the following: Skepticism, Hedonism, Cynicism, and Stoicism. Unfortunately, we cannot pause here to repeat in this book review each of the significant details that underpin the variety of nuanced philosophical positions that developed over three hundred years.

### **Chapter 12: Science, Medicine, and Technology (Paul T. Keyser and Georgia Irby-Massie)**

The authors of this chapter provide an overwhelming number of examples of innovations that took place during the Hellenistic period in the fields of science, medicine, and technology.

The authors claim that the three hundred year period of the Hellenistic age may have seen more scientific advancements than any other three hundred year time period in ancient history. These innovations, discoveries, and scientific approaches helped to pave the way for enlightened thinking during subsequent generations and had a major impact on the zenith of Islamic civilization and deeply influenced the Western transition from the Middle Ages to the periods of the Renaissance and Scientific Revolution.

### **Chapter 13: Hellenistic Military Developments (Glenn R. Bugh)**

In this article, Bugh focuses on the question “How was warfare different in the Hellenistic era versus the Classical era?” Bugh explains that most of the key military developments happened in the fourth century, before the time of Alexander. These developments included gigantism (make everything bigger and larger), the dissolution of citizen armies and the subsequent widespread use of professional armies (often mercenaries), and the emergence of technical experts.

Warfare still remained the business of kings, however. In the Classical period, the clash of heavily armed infantry men, hoplites, and phalanx formations decided battles.

But in the Hellenistic period important changes arrived: Smaller, lighter shields; longer, thrusting spears; peltasts; greater use of cavalry (primarily in the Seleucid kingdom which was so massively land-based); and huge ships. In fact, due to gigantism and innovation the three level trireme ships so common in the Classical period become during the Hellenistic age four level, five level and then ten level, fifteen level, twenty and even forty level ships!

Military technology also saw a number of important innovations with more sophisticated, larger, and more mobile siege machines (artillery also saw a dramatic increase in size and volume), the development and deployment of the catapult, and the production of military manuals.

One novel element of the Hellenistic era was the introduction of war elephants (primarily from the region of India). Bugh concludes by saying “In the end, the military developments of the Hellenistic period were extensions and expansions of the great age of military innovation in the fourth century. Gigantism and specialization were but stages in a process that defies sharp historical periodization” (p. 288).

### **Chapter 14: Greeks and non-Greeks (Erich S. Gruen)**

Gruen deals with the question of how Greeks perceived non-Greeks and vice-versa. Interestingly, there was an intermixing of stories and traditions with both groups appropriating the best of each other’s cultures to demonstrate the greatness or superiority of their own or to more closely align themselves with the culture of the rulers.

As Gruen so aptly expresses it, “The whole matrix of legends underscores a complicated but interdependent process. Greek authors spun diverse stories that set Roman success in the context of Hellenic traditions. And Romans appropriated those

traditions to spin them to their own purposes. This was no linear development but an intricate by-play in which the lines repeatedly crossed and turned back on themselves. The connections multiplied. And the Greek/non-Greek distinction dissolved” (p. 302).

### **Chapter 15: Recent Trends and New Directions (D. Graham J. Shipley)**

Shipley’s chapter provides an appropriate conclusion to the volume. Indeed, the following quote neatly encapsulates why the Hellenistic period is so important for understanding civilization and I will conclude with it:

It is extraordinary that the study of the Hellenistic period appears to need justification. To focus for a moment on origins and pick a few random examples: We have Theophrastos’ pioneering work in natural science, the beginning of pastoral poetry, and the invention of Epicurean, Stoic, and utopian philosophies. The advances in mathematics, astronomy, physics, and engineering that were made in this period still underlie modern science. It brought into being the first real scholarship and the Western world’s first important libraries. Changes in polytheism and Judaism prepared the ground for Christianity. The art and architecture of the Hellenistic period were explicitly taken as models until the twentieth century.

From the point of view of geographical dissemination, this was a more important period for Greek culture than any hitherto. It was the bridge between Greece and Rome, and its presence can still be felt. Some of the most spectacular monuments of Greece, western Asia, and Egypt date from these centuries. The cultural interactions set in place by Alexander and his successors, who grafted Hellenic culture onto the Near East – centuries before the Romans introduced “civilization” to western Europe – is one historical factor behind the problems of the Middle East today. Conversely, the impact of Near Eastern cultures on Greek lands, and ultimately the Roman empire, is a legacy that must not be minimized (p. 318).

Taylor Halvorsen