

CHAPTER 26

“ ALTAR OF ZEUS
AT PERGAMUM AND
HERODOTUS

BUT IS IT STILL GREEK? THE HELLENISTIC WORLD

The emperor and conqueror Alexander left things in a mess by not making a clear statement about who should take over after his death. War broke out among several of his generals, each insisting that he was the one that Alexander meant by “the strongest” who should inherit his throne. These ambitious men eventually carved the empire into different parts, each setting himself up as an independent king. A general named Ptolemy had been the governor of Egypt. After Alexander’s death, he had to struggle against his rivals to become the undisputed ruler of the region. He was extremely successful: his family ruled Egypt for three centuries (the last Ptolemaic ruler was Cleopatra).

After a while, the Mediterranean area became very different from the one Alexander knew. So many different civilizations were merged that the region was not Hellenic (Greek) anymore. It makes more sense to call it Hellenistic (Greek-like). Even Alexander himself was not what a purist would call “Greek.” He was half Macedonian (on his father’s side) and

Until Alexander proclaimed that a narrow strip of land would be his new capital, which he named Alexandria, nothing existed on that spot but a small fishing village. Today it is the second-largest city in Egypt. This 15th-century painting shows an imaginary scene of its construction.



people disagreed over whether or not Macedon was part of Greece. His mother was from Epirus, a settlement so far out on the edge of the Greek world that the historian Thucydides called its inhabitants “barbarians.” And after his death, the different cultures merged and combined to such an extent that Alexander wouldn’t have recognized his former empire.

This made for a change in politics. Men who used to be passionately involved in the governance of their *poleis* couldn’t work up the same enthusiasm for this empire in which the individual *poleis* were no longer independent. Many people lost interest in politics and became much more involved in their families and their businesses.

Egypt’s beautiful and fascinating capital, Alexandria, was home to some of the most highly-developed art, science, philosophy, and trade—everything the Hellenistic Greeks thought was important. Alexandria was a port city with two main streets, each more than 100 feet wide. They were lined with statues, colonnades, temples, and monuments. The first thing a visitor would see coming into the harbor was the palace—a whole complex of residences and offices. This huge structure reminded newcomers that government in the Hellenistic world had moved away from ordinary people and into the hands of a few powerful rulers.

Another striking Alexandrian monument was the lighthouse on the island of Pharos, which stood over 300 feet

NO RESPECT FOR THE DEAD

Alexander was only 25 years old when he founded his great city, named after himself. But he never lived long enough to see it flourish. He died eight years later, and his body was originally going to be buried in Memphis in Egypt. But the priest at the temple objected, saying, “Do not settle him here, but at the city he has built at Rhakotis, for wherever this body must lie the city will be uneasy, disturbed with wars and battles.” So the gold and glass coffin was buried in a huge mausoleum in Alexandria. Supposedly, Ptolemy’s descendant Cleopatra VII looted the gold.



THE SEVEN WONDERS OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

Ancient people loved making lists. Somebody came up with a list of the seven most amazing human-made monuments known to them (so structures like the Great Wall of China and the pyramids of Mexico are obviously not on it). The list varied somewhat, but this one is pretty standard:

- The Pyramids of Egypt
- The Hanging Gardens of Babylon
- The Mausoleum
- The Temple of Artemis at Ephesus
- The Colossus of Rhodes
- The Statue of Zeus by Pheidias
- The Pharos of Alexandria

astro + *nomos* = “star” + “arranging” Astronomy is the study of the arrangement, motion, and makeup of heavenly bodies. Greek astronomers named their arrangements of stars after mythological figures.

tall. It guided ships into the harbor. And ships came from all over the then-known world. The different groups of people contributed their languages, customs, religions, dress, food, architecture, music, philosophy—every aspect of life. Alexandria was very different from anything the world had seen before. It was home to a dazzling mixture of people: Egyptians, Greeks, Arabs, Mesopotamians, Jews—people from all around the Mediterranean, and even further.

They mixed with one another in some parts of their lives, but not in all. At first, the Greeks discouraged marriage with the local Egyptians. The Jews lived in a separate quarter, supervised by their own magistrate. But some areas of the lives of the different groups overlapped. They traded with each other, for example. Marriage restrictions gradually relaxed, people learned each other’s languages, they became interested in each other’s religions. In the third century BCE, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible was made in Egypt.

Aside from transporting people, ships brought in books. In about 290 BCE, Ptolemy I ordered a great research institute to be built. It was named the *Mouseion* in honor of the nine Muses, the mythical patrons of art and wisdom.

The government paid for about 100 scholars to work and study there. Ptolemy I also built a great library. At its height, it contained over 500,000 manuscript rolls. Travelers had to be careful if it became known that they were carrying expensive books with them. The librarian would borrow them. Then the library would keep the book and give a cheap copy to the original owner. With all these great books, Alexandria became an important center for the study of anatomy and astronomy.

This miniature version of the lighthouse, called the Pharos, at Alexandria is the only known representation. The lighthouse is one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.





The Egyptian pharaoh at center is Ptolemy I, who was a Macedonian general. His family ruled Egypt for 300 years.

Poets, too, flourished in the Hellenistic world. Literature had declined, with no more writers like Homer or the earlier playwrights. Still, some great poets wrote works that have come down to us. Some of the most important were Callimachus and Theocritus. Theocritus was a keen observer of daily life and wrote a poem about two women, Gorgo and Praxinoa, who have moved to the city. They wander through the streets and chat about what they see. This kind of freedom for women would have been impossible in earlier days, but one of the big changes in the Hellenistic world was the living condition for women.

Gradually the restrictions on women's lives loosened. Women appeared in public and some were encouraged to write poetry and philosophy. A few women even achieved political power. Alexandria's Queen Arsinoë II appeared on coins with her husband Ptolemy II. The next queen, Berenice II, corresponded with Callimachus, and another, Stratonice, helped build the art collection on the island of Delos.

Other women were encouraged to write and even to publish their writings and appear in public. We know of

some of them, including Hestiaea, a well-respected scholar. Another woman, the poet Aristodama of Smyrna, traveled through Greece giving recitals of her work.

Two schools of philosophy that didn't see any real difference between men and women, the Stoics and the Epicureans, encouraged women to attend their meetings. The two groups had the same goal: peace of mind. They reasoned that since you can't control the world around you, you might as well just not get excited about it. Then you won't wind up frustrated or disappointed. The Epicureans even thought that you shouldn't fall in love—that way you won't risk a broken heart. You shouldn't get involved in politics, either.

The Stoics also believed in staying calm, but they had a strong sense of social responsibility, so they encouraged holding public office. Although they thought that slaves and free people were equal, they never pushed for the abolition of slavery.

Science also made big leaps in this time period. Along with the mathematicians Archimedes and Euclid (whose geometrical principles are still studied today), other great scientists of the Hellenistic period included the astronomers Heraclides (who discovered that the earth revolved on its axis once a day), Aristarchus (who figured out that the earth rotated around the sun), and Hipparchus (who measured the months and seasons with amazing accuracy).

Alexandria, with its great think tank of scholars at the library, attracted many scientists. The philosopher Hypatia worked and studied there. The Alexandrian anatomist Herophilus discovered that the brain is the center of the nervous system and that the arteries carry blood. No one had ever noticed this before; if someone is cut deeply enough to open an artery, it's hard to tell him to sit still while you see where the blood is coming from! He also studied blood pressure and figured out that taking someone's pulse often gives some clues as to disease.

Probably the most important scientist of the Hellenistic period was Eratosthenes. He was the chief librarian at Alexandria and the tutor of Ptolemy IV. He studied under Callimachus and is a good example of a philosopher-

ana + tom = "up" + "cut"
 Scientists learn anatomy, the
 structure of humans and
 animals, by cutting them up.

scientist. His philosophy included the then-revolutionary idea that people shouldn't be classified as either Greek or barbarian, but as either good or bad. He also wrote about Greek comedy, about how theaters worked, and about the history of philosophy.

In science, Eratosthenes was the first to use lines of latitude and longitude and proposed that if sailors went west they would eventually reach India (nobody in Europe knew that they would bump into the Americas on the way).

Greek art broke away from its traditions in this time period. Instead of depicting the "ideal" human being—the young, heroic, athletic, beautiful Greek man—artists began sculpting a greater variety of people: Africans, women, people with handicaps, old people. They showed humor: fat little children cuddling farm animals that are desperately trying to escape their attention, people getting drunk (over the last 2,000 years, some ideas about what's funny have changed), horrendously ugly people. And instead of the detached serenity of the classical statues, expressions and emotions became important.

Painted pottery became less fashionable in the Hellenistic period and wall painting was very popular. Unfortunately, hardly any of it has survived except in tiny fragments. We can get an idea of their beauty, though, from some magnificent Hellenistic mosaics that have recently been discovered.

Architecture also flourished in the Hellenistic period. Much of its popularity was due to the influence of the other cultures that were absorbed into the Greek world at this time. With a decrease in wars in the Mediterranean and with advances in navigation, people were traveling more and seeing more of the world's wonders. Ptolemy and the other Hellenistic leaders had to do something spectacular if they wanted to impress people who were used to walking next to the pyramids and other wonders of the rest of the known world. So they poured a lot of money into architecture and city planning.

Cities showed rivalry in the size of temples, a kind of "my god's better than your god" attitude. The altar of Zeus at Pergamum, in what is now Turkey, is a perfect example of this

The statue known as the Winged Victory was made around 190 BCE and found on the island of Samothrace. It is one of the most well-known Hellenistic sculptures.





Altar of Zeus at Pergamum,
early second century BCE

German engineers moved the Altar of Zeus to Berlin in 1871.

desire to show off, and of the blending of East and West. There was no temple there, but an altar standing alone. The lack of a temple might derive from Persian influence. The historian Herodotus (who referred to the supreme god as Zeus, despite the fact that the Persians used a different name) points out in his *Histories* that the Persians

Herodotus, *Histories*, mid-fifth
century BCE

are not allowed to build statues, temples, and altars, and in fact they accuse those who do of silliness, in my opinion because unlike the Greeks, they don't think of the gods as having human form. It is their custom to climb to the mountaintops and sacrifice to Zeus, which is the name they give to the full circle of the sky.

The sculptures on the sides of the altar showed battles between gods and giants and were supposed to represent the battles of King Attalus I. So Attalus was linking himself with the gods.

Asia, Persia, Turkey, and Greece were all represented on this huge and imposing structure. The altar of Zeus pulled much of the Hellenistic world together into one awesome monument.