Recent work in Hellenistic history

Review Article

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The publication of Michael Rostovtzeff's masterly *Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World* in 1941 was a landmark in Hellenistic studies.[1] Its combination of archaeological and literary evidence, its full exploitation of coins and inscriptions, its impressive range of illustrations, all integrated into the text, together with its lively argument, proved a stimulus to further specialized work as well as a delight to a wider, war-weary public. The concept of a Hellenistic world – in German *Hellenismos*, though that never quite took off in English – goes back to Droysen, who viewed it apocalyptically as a period of transition – from Alexander to Jesus Christ – in which Greek civilization was blended with that of 'the East' to produce the rich soil in which Christianity was later to take root.[2] This notion of a cultural mix persisted for many years and served to bolster the belief that the Hellenistic age was somehow inferior to the pure Hellenism of the fifth and fourth centuries – a view already prevalent at the time of the so-called Second Sophistic under the early Roman empire. Among other objects, Rostovtzeff's *History* was intended as a rebuttal of that view. For him the Hellenistic age represented a high point in Greek culture, in which 'secular rationalism', was successfully applied to a whole range of practical problems arising in an extended Near East setting; and the architect of this great achievement was the Greek *bourgeoisie*, as he termed it, the governing class within the network of Greek cities, new and old, which in the wake of Alexander and his successors came to cover much of the Near East.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of work on the Hellenistic age since Rostovtzeff is that virtually everywhere that model has been rejected or at the very least qualified. Basically Rostovtzeff – and also W. W. Tarn, another giant of the early twentieth century – had presented the Hellenistic age as one in which culturally superior Greeks had brought civilization, a more advanced technology and higher learning to the inferior races of the areas they had colonized.[3] Today such a polarization of the elements in Hellenistic culture has come to seem both 'racist' (or at the least colonial) and false. In the footsteps of Claire Préaux, most scholars

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today see the Hellenistic world not indeed, like Droysen, as a mix, nor yet in the colonial terms of Tarn and Rostovtzeff, but rather as one in which people of different races and religions and different social and political traditions and aspirations lived side by side, intermingling but ultimately separate.[4] But even that is no longer the full story. As we shall see shortly, when we come to consider the latest work on Egypt, the picture of two separate cultures, for that country at least, needs some modification, and that in a rather surprising direction.

Much recent research has been devoted to exploring the concept of a multicultural society in the fields of art, architecture and literature, and to a lesser extent those of philosophy, science and technology. That the main emphasis still rests on the Greek element is of course inevitable, and that for several reasons. First, almost everywhere the dominant class was (or strove to become) Greco-Macedonian. The great centres of the new culture – Alexandria, Rhodes, Pergamum, Antioch and Tarsus – were Greek. The same is also true of our written evidence. For whether we turn to works of literature and philosophy, to inscriptions on stone containing official documents from royal courts and city authorities, or to the papyrus fragments which reveal everyday bureaucratic transactions in villages and small towns, the published record is predominantly Greek. Often non-Greek evidence exists; but it still lags behind in publication – a situation which is now being increasingly ameliorated. Meanwhile, as the available evidence is examined with the non-Greek population in mind, as is increasingly the case, a modified picture with some nuances is apt to emerge. This may be illustrated from two major Hellenistic states, Ptolemaic Egypt and the Seleucid kingdom in Asia.

Our changing image of Ptolemaic Egypt is exemplified by Eric Turner's provocative chapter in the new edition of the *Cambridge Ancient History* VII.1 (1984). Hitherto the rich harvest of third-century papyri had been supposed to reveal a brilliant planned economy, set up by Ptolemy II Philadelphus, though building it is true on the experience of earlier Pharaonic governments. Turner depicts a ramshackle set-up, in which Alexandria simply reacts with *ad hoc* decisions to problems as they arise; far from being the instrument of far-sighted state planning, the bureaucracy is an unwieldy monster with a self-protective life of its own. And Philadelphus is portrayed as a king who progressively increased the exploitation of the people and drove Egypt towards bankruptcy.

This changed picture is partly the result of the increased attention now being paid to demotic evidence and the role of the Egyptians. Some striking facts have

emerged. It is for instance now clear that even in the early years of the new régime a Greek name is no proof that a man or woman is Greek. Many individuals have been shown to possess both a Greek and an Egyptian name, making use of the one or the other in different contexts; and that was probably true on a larger scale than our present evidence shows. Furthermore the term 'Hellene' appears from the tax-rolls to be used as an official tax category rather than to identify nationality.[5] The picture is still somewhat muddy. But it now seems certain that many families in Egypt had both a Greek and an Egyptian face and could switch with ease from one to the other. Ptolemaic society was not a mix as Droysen thought; it was a twofold culture, but families could and did belong to both. (It is not without interest that much of the work leading to these conclusions comes from Belgium – a country which is no stranger to problems arising out of the co-existence of two differing cultures.)

The picture of Ptolemaic Egypt is also being revised at another level. It has recently been shown how both Alexandrian literature and religion reveal a significant degree of overlap between what is Greco-Macedonian and what is Egyptian. To take one example, in a far-ranging study of 'the Ptolemaic king as a religious figure',[6] Ludwig Koenen has argued not only that many works of Alexandrian literature by such authors as Callimachus had an Egyptian as well as a Greek resonance but that the cult titles of the Ptolemies – who themselves possessed an Egyptian as well as a Greek *persona* – were carefully chosen for their relationship to traditional Pharaonic concepts. Politically the Ptolemies always had to take account of the powerful Egyptian priesthood; here cultural *apartheid* never existed.

Similar issues have also arisen in relation to Seleucid Asia, which Arnaldo Momigliano once claimed to be 'the field in which the pearl of great price awaits the historical explorer'. Here, no less than in Egypt, startling new evidence has recently emerged. Besides a growing bulk of inscriptions from Asia Minor, many of which have now been republished in separate works allotted to their cities of origin, we have now begun to get documents from further east, from Babylonia, Iran and even Afghanistan, where a handful of inscriptions from Ai Khanum on the Oxus can be supplemented by the moralizing edicts of Mauryan king Asoka, conveying the thoughts of the royal convert to Buddhism in the language of Greek philosophy.[7] Valuable material, including inscriptions, has also turned up on the island of Failaka near Kuwait.[8] The disturbed political conditions in the whole of this area have, however, temporarily put a stop to archaeological work there.

Along with this new material have come new interpretations, with the thrust of research directed increasingly towards the non-Greek populations and the contribution made from the eastern fringes of the Seleucid dominions by the Parthian and Mauryan states and at the centre from the Achaemenid legacy. Babylonia has produced a treasure-house of unpublished documents, which may eventually shift the balance of judgement in a way comparable to what is happening in Egypt. Especially important here are the works of Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White, who argue that the Seleucid kingdom is best understood as the successor of Assyria, Babylonia and the Achaemenids, looking forward to the Parthians and the Mauryans rather than to Rome.[9] Their views are controversial. Unless soberly controlled, emphasis on the non-Greek element and the Babylonian sympathies of the Seleucids can easily be exaggerated. It is significant that once Seleucus I gained access to the Mediterranean, he set about sprinkling the area around the mouth of the Orontes with Greco-Macedonian foundations. Nevertheless it remains true that the epigraphical and archaeological material which we hope to see emerging from areas further east, if and when peace there is restored and passions subside, is likely to change radically our picture of Seleucid Asia.

Meanwhile Fergus Millar has recently enriched our knowledge of that whole area in the Hellenistic as well as the Roman period in his masterly study of *The Roman Near East 31 B.C.- A.D. 337* (Cambridge, Mass. 1993). In this work he shows Greek civilization spreading at different rates in different areas; but the Hellenization of the Near East, though uneven, is a continuous process, in which the change from the monarchies to the rule of Rome represents little more than a hiccup. This is especially important for the Syro-Judaean area, which engenders more questions than answers. To trace the advance of Hellenization here is still difficult, since, outside Israel, adequate archaeological information is lacking. In an earlier study,[10] Millar has shown that in this area, with the exception of Samaria and Dura – both of which may be Macedonian military settlements rather than Greek colonies – there is no firm evidence for the kind of Greek influence which is the hallmark of Hellenistic civilization. The Phoenician coastal cities show a gradual fusion of indigenous with Greek ways of life and thought; but elsewhere, apart from Judaea, the evidence is still too scanty to allow a clear cultural picture to emerge. Some cities received Greek names; but we do not know what that implies in terms of ethnic population and the pattern of life. Nor can we yet make any general statements about the economic structure or details of land tenure either under the Achaemenids or in the Hellenistic period itself.

A radical change in attitudes towards the Hellenistic age has thus occurred concerning the weight to be attached to 'the other', the non-Greek element in the equation. But there has also been noteworthy progress in the analysis and understanding of several of the basic institutions characteristic of the period. Two which occupy centre stage are the still all-important city and the new monarchies. Partly a hang-over from the old view that Greek history ended at Chaeronea was the belief that the fourth century was a time of crisis for the *polis*. Yet it was obvious that the Greek city played a central role in the Hellenistic kingdoms and that the *polis* still seemed to many (as it did to Aristotle) to be the only place where a Greek could live a civilized life. Not only the old cities, some of which maintained their independence, Rhodes for instance or Athens after 228, but also those situated within the monarchies, still had a role to play central to the development of Greek culture. It is significant that in his chapter in the new *Cambridge Ancient History* VII.1, John Davies now writes of the '*polis* transformed and revitalized'.

Much recent work has gone into analysing and defining *polis*-based institutions and distinguishing the various kinds of *polis* within the older and newer areas of the Hellenistic kingdoms, ranging from ancient cities with long histories (or pseudo-histories) and cultural traditions, treated with respect (up to a point) by the kings who might control them, to the new foundations in the Middle and far East, which probably served mainly as centres for royal administration. But what of a city such as Ai Khanum with its passionate concern to demonstrate its Hellenic character? Ai Khanum still presents many questions. For cities nearer the Mediterranean, however, inscriptions offer plenty of evidence concerning institutions which dominated their citizens' lives – religious, social and indeed, with the growth in shared citizenship (*isopoliteia*) or membership of federal bodies, political. The federal state raises special problems because of its virtual absence from ancient political theorizing; it barely appears in Aristotle, and one eminent scholar has gone so far as to deny its existence in the Hellenistic world.[11] But the fact seems to be that, as is so often the case, the institution itself grew out of the circumstances and needs of the times before the theorists got round to assessing and defining it within the body of political theory. Both the Achaean and Aetolian leagues have attracted considerable attention in recent years.

Existence in, or on the fringes of, a great monarchy was bound to affect the life of the *polis* and the political compromises forced on its citizens. But this was nothing new. For most Greeks, domination – either by Persia or Carthage or by

some hegemonic power like Sparta, Athens, Thebes or Syracuse – had always been a potential threat to city life, which detracted neither from its reality nor its intensity. Freedom, *eleutheria*, was important, yet it had never been universally enjoyed nor had it been the *only* 'good' within a Greek city. Now, if only a few cities were wholly independent, many were without garrisons and their citizens could go about their private business while enjoying peace and the appearance of freedom. As Davies has shown, the Hellenistic cities devised new forms of self-definition – competitive sport, closely linked with religious cult and the great Panhellenic festivals, and life centring on the gymnasium, the cultural institution which served as a focus for Hellenic self-assertion, especially in cities situated amidst non-Greek populations. (In Egypt, where cities were rare, many of these activities are to be found, exceptionally, in the towns throughout the countryside.) Much attention has been given to life within the cities. Paul Zanker has shown how the furnishings and fittings of Hellenistic homes or the reliefs on gravestones can be used to illustrate the values of the rich citizens who created and exhibited them. And Klaus Bringmann has analysed the background of benefactions, given by kings to cities, smoothing relations between them, yet attended by tensions and constantly in danger of arousing resentment.[12]

The novel feature of the Hellenistic age was of course the appearance of large territorial states under kings, who owed their position ultimately to military prowess. Much recent work has centred on the ideology of monarchy and the structures set up to administer and control the kingdoms and ensure popular support. In particular, the religious aspects of monarchy and the adoption of ruler cults have received sympathetic attention.[13] It is no longer judged appropriate to dismiss these institutions as a sham or to pour scorn, for example, on the Athenians for saluting Demetrius Poliorcetes as a manifest god, contrasting him with the Olympians, who 'either do not exist or pay no attention' (Duris in Athen.6.253 D-F). Ruler cult is now recognised as an important link between Greek cities and royal dynasties, with mutual advantages. Indeed, the impetus for such cults often came from the world of the *polis*. They had their own history in the Greek cities of the fourth century and cult made it easier for would-be free communities to adjust to a ruler whom they saw as a 'god' than to a mere king or tyrant.

Another link between the king and his subjects was the council of the king's Friends, originally personal to him and recruited from anywhere in the Greek world; they formed a reservoir of talent, on which he could draw for military officers, provincial governors, ministers of state, ambassadors and priests of

dynastic cults. The development of this institution has attracted recent attention, especially in Egypt where it gradually crystallized into a bureaucracy with well-defined subdivisions, Friends, First Friends, Honoured Friends and First and Honoured Friends. With some local variations, such Friends were common to all the kingdoms and support the view that in Hellenistic monarchy we are dealing with a single institution – though this has been queried.[14] In this context – the question of what constitutes a Hellenistic monarchy – mention should be made of the controversy over the Macedonian monarchy out of which it arose. Clearly monarchy remained something a little different in Macedonia from elsewhere, since there it more directly continued the traditions of the Argeads. There has been, and still is, strong disagreement between those who regard the Macedonian kings as constitutionally limited by traditional powers exercised by the people or the army and those for whom such powers appear negligible and the king's authority virtually absolute. Taking the second line, Alan Samuel has recently compared the Macedonian kings to Viking chieftains rather than constitutional monarchs operating within a framework of defined laws and agreed traditions.[15] The truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. Firm customs and some constitutional structures certainly governed the relations between king and people, but the extent to which these were observed on any particular occasion will have depended on the forcefulness of the king and the severity of any crisis confronting him.

Recent decades have also seen a general widening of interest in a range of topics, some of them already familiar from Rostovtzeff's work. Partly springing from the evidence of new inscriptions from Asia Minor, there has been increased attention to land tenure and the relations between the city and its territory, including the status of peasants and the extent of slave-labour; also in the balance between agriculture and pastoralism and the importance to be accorded to trade. The special role of temple-states in the Seleucid kingdom has been studied. Brigandage and piracy have been related to the widely attested grants of asylum, first to sanctuaries and then to cities. Perhaps reflecting issues which exercise our attention today, there has been a marked concern with social problems and revolution. Three subjects in particular have aroused recent interest: problems of ethnicity, the role of women, and the prevalence and significance of literacy; and all three of these have been examined with the Hellenistic age as well as other times in antiquity in mind. Literacy (and its definition) is now seen to be of prime importance in any society, not least because it affects *in toto* the historian's

perceptions of contemporary evidence in writing, including inscriptions, papyri, ostraca and the like.[16] Nor have the usual topics, common to the times, been neglected: there have been detailed studies of military and political history, of advances in technology, including artillery, and of the role of mercenary troops.

In almost every sphere of study, scholars have benefited from new methods. These range from fresh concepts, such as the interpretation of a culture in terms of centre and periphery, to new approaches towards available material, exemplified by the growth of regional archaeological surveys (without excavation). Above all, work has been immeasurably helped by the computer, which can provide almost instantaneous answers to a whole range of problems formerly insoluble or only to be solved after months of toil. Yet another new perspective is opened up by the carefully controlled use of comparative material from other cultures, either contemporary or even derived from distant periods and places.

There has in recent years been a great increase in the number of conferences and colloquia devoted to the study of the Hellenistic age; their *Proceedings* often record the first publication of striking new material or approaches.[17] In this connection special mention should be made of an important five-year research project on the Hellenistic period, launched in 1988-89 by the Danish Research Council for the Humanities. For those interested in a more general survey there have also been several useful collections of sources in translation and popular interpretations of the whole field.[18]

If one attempts a broad characterization of all this new work on the Hellenistic age, it must be to point out that the last fifty years have brought new uncertainties. Increasingly we see that evidence can only be used safely for the time and place from which it arises. The centuries after Alexander can no longer be glibly interpreted as an expansion of Greek civilization. The Hellenistic world forms rather an intricate mosaic of separate and not always easily distinguishable societies all juxtaposed, Greeks, Jews, Egyptians, Babylonians, Parthians – and, of course, increasingly Romans. Any diachronic treatment of the period has to take into constant account the advance of Rome, which absorbed the kingdoms one by one, until the years 31-30 B.C. saw both the end of the Ptolemies and, with a certain irony, the transformation of the Roman republic into a state ruled by an emperor. This process resulted in a basic change in the political structure of the Near East, but culturally, as we have seen above, the change was far less striking. Greek culture, inherited from the Macedonian dynasties and reinforced throughout the East by the influx of Greeks, Hellenized Carians and the like, was to play

a yet more central role under Rome, in a long process culminating in the Byzantine Empire, Rome in a Greek dress. In that process the Hellenistic age represented one stage, but a vital one.[19]

NOTES

1 There is a good recent assessment of Rostovtzeff's work by B.D. Shaw in *Journal of Roman Studies* 82 (1992) 216-28.
2 On Droysen and his interpretation, springing from Hegel, see C. Préaux, *Le Monde hellénistique: la Grèce et l'Orient (323-146 av.J.-C.)* (Paris 1978) i.6-9 and, for direct criticism of the theory of a 'mix', ii.545-683.
3 Especially W. W. Tarn, *Hellenistic Civilisation* (London 1927; ed.3 with G. T. Griffith, 1952).
4 Préaux, *Le Monde hellénistique.*
5 For some of the evidence see W. Clarysse, 'Some Greeks in Egypt'. *Life in a Multi-cultural Society* ed. J. H. Johnson (Chicago 1992) 51-6; he will publish a fuller account in a forthcoming article, 'Ptolemaic Egypt: a double-faced society'.
6 In *Images and Ideologies: Self-Definition in the Hellenistic World,* ed. Bulloch, Gruen, Long and Stewart (Berkeley 1993) 25-115.
7 See the works cited in *Cambridge Ancient History* VII.1, 553-4.
8 On the Persian Gulf and Failaka see J.-F. Salles, 'The Arab-Persian Gulf under the Seleucids' in A. Kuhrt and S. Sherwin-White (eds.), *Hellenism in the East: the Interaction of Greek and Non-Greek Civilisations from Syria to Central Asia after Alexander* (London 1987) 75-109.
9 Kuhrt and Sherwin-White, *Hellenism in the East,* and *From Samarkhand to Sardis: a New Approach to the Seleucid Empire* (London 1993).
10 'The problem of Hellenistic Syria' in Kuhrt and Sherwin-White, *Hellenism in the East,* 110-33.
11 A. Giovannini, *Untersuchungen über die Anfänge der bundesstaatlichen Sympolitie in Griechenland* (Göttingen 1971); *contra* F. W. Walbank, 'Were there Greek federal states?' in *Selected Papers; Studies in Greek and Roman History and Historiography* (Cambridge 1985) 20-57.
12 See Bulloch *et al.*, *Images and Ideologies,* 7-24 (Bringmann), 212-30 (Zanker).
13 I have discussed this in a paper 'Könige als Götter: Überlegungen zum Herrscherkult von Alexander bis Augustus', *Chiron* 17 (1987) 365-82; see also A.E. Samuel, *The Shifting Sands of History: Interpretations of Ptolemaic Egypt* (Lanham, MD 1989) 19.
14 By Samuel, *The Shifting Sands of History,* 22.
15 For the 'constitutional' view see N.G.L. Hammond, vols II and III of his *History of Macedonia* (Oxford 1979 and 1988) and *The Macedonian State: the Origins, Institutions and History* (Oxford 1989); against this see R.M. Errington, 'The nature of the Macedonian state under the monarchy' *Chiron* 8 (1978) 77-134; Samuel, *Shifting Sands of History,* 21-4.
16 See W. V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass. 1989); R. Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge 1992); *Ethnicity in Ancient Egypt,* ed. Bilde, Engberg-Pedersen, Hannestad and Zahle (Aarhus 1992); A.K. Bowman and G. Woolf (eds.), *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World* (Cambridge 1994).
17 Two recent examples are Bulloch *et al.*, *Images and Ideologies,* and P. Green (ed.), *Hellenistic History and Culture* (Berkeley 1993).
18 Special mention is merited by Peter Green's impressive survey, *Alexander to Actium: the Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age* (Berkeley 1990, rev.ed. 1993: 970 pp.).
19 For fuller references to recent publications than was possible here see the bibliographies in works quoted; also my longer survey in *Scripta Classica Israelica* 11 (1991/2) 90-113.