

# HELLENISTIC EMPIRES: A CULTURAL CONFLUENCE

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Following the Great Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens (431-404 BCE), the Greek subcontinent saw a vacuum in imperial power for the first time in three centuries.<sup>1</sup> As Sparta and Athens began recuperating from the costly war, Thebes revealed its quietly cultivated military prowess. Yet the Thebans made the mistake of freeing a young war hostage who would rise and turn on them in 359 BCE as King Philip II of Macedon. King Philip's conquests of mainland Greece eventually included his teenage son Alexander (b. 356 BCE). It was Alexander who expanded the Greek empire as far as the borders of India by his death in 323 BCE. He adopted a policy of marital alliances wherever he went, creating a new power balance in his territories.<sup>2</sup> His empire, fragmented after his death, continued his legacy of bringing together his Greek roots with the cultures he took over. This "Hellenization" (323-30 BCE) of the Mediterranean and Middle East changed not only the culture of the Hellenistic peoples, but of their Greek rulers as well. Through this essay, the impact of Alexander's conquests and the Hellenistic culture it spread is analyzed. The Hellenistic period resulted in the adoption of Greek customs and language by the conquered peoples, with which many aspects of culture and religion were merged. This confluence of cultures extended to the Hellenistic rulers as well. There is evidence for this in the religious practices, developments in science and imperial customs of the time. Since Greek culture remained an influence in the periods immediately after it across a huge

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Berger et al, World History: Cultures, States and Societies, Chapter 5.

<sup>2</sup> John J. Popovic. "Alexander the Great of Macedon: from history to eternity." Accessed 5 July, 2019.

geographic area, its cultural development is essential to understanding Eurasian history. Further, Greek philosophy shaped the European Renaissance (14<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century BCE)<sup>3</sup>, so the Hellenistic period of immense philosophical development has great impact on modern history.

Based largely on “World History: Cultures, States and Societies to 1500”, this essay uses religious and intellectual developments shown by written sources of the time to demonstrate the confluence of cultures in the Hellenistic kingdoms.

Old religions took new forms in the Greek empire. Alexander’s campaigns shook the political world from his ascension in 336 BCE, but he did not change local beliefs. Rather, he allowed them to continue their worship, meticulously documenting them as he went.<sup>4</sup> Yet the growing use of Greek had its own religious consequences. For instance, although Jews still retained belief in Old Testament, they no longer spoke Hebrew – it was instead translated to Greek as the *Septuagint*. Greek was the *lingua franca* of the time, allowing easy trade and flow of goods across Alexander’s vast empire. Even after his death, his four generals (the *Diadochi*) continued to rule in this culture-embracing model. Ptolemy I, his successor in Egypt, created a new god Serapis who blended Egyptian and Greek gods. The worship of Serapis was included as a state religion- he even built the Alexandria Library to serve his temple of the Serapeum. But at the same time local beliefs and practices enjoyed continued popularity.<sup>5</sup>

Alexander’s unification from West Europe to the Punjab produced a cohesive economic and trade network across which ideas traveled fast, causing the prominent thinkers of the time to become very influential. The Hellenistic period hence saw medicine and physical sciences

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<sup>3</sup> Greenblatt, Stephen. *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began*.

<sup>4</sup> Mark, Joshua J. “The Hellenistic World: The World of Alexander the Great.” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, 01 Nov 2018. Accessed 07 Jul 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Berger, Chapter 5.

develop in a way that is relevant to date. Thinkers such as Aristotle worked to link the world as they saw it empirically with a theoretical understanding. Aristotle's writings in *Physics* still have meaning in the twenty-first century college physics class, because of the wide spread of ideas across the vast Hellenistic territories. Archimedes's Principle, used to understand flotation even now, was developed by a scholar from Syracuse who studied in Alexandria.<sup>6</sup> This spread of ideas across territories made the scientific developments of the Hellenistic age consequential and far-reaching.

Some Hellenistic monarchs, in an attempt to reconcile with their non-Greek subjects, picked up new ruling customs. Over time, these became the norm and a new image emerged for a monarch. This royal merging often happened through marriage between a Greek military official and a local ruler. Alexander himself followed this pattern in his lands, and his generals continued its use. For instance, the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt initially married Egyptians, then went on to adopt the Egyptian idea of royalty. They began to associate themselves with the divine power imbued in pharaohs and picked up brother-sister marriages<sup>7</sup>, amongst other royal rites. The new image of the ruler allowed Hellenistic kingdoms to balance the Greek culture they saw as superior civilization, with their new subjects' way of life.

Following Alexander's conquests, the cultures of Eurasia became more and more hybrid, joining their traditional practices with those of their Greek conquerors. This created new science, royal customs and religious practices. The scientific spirit born in this period percolated through history, birthing inventions, shaping the technologies of the Roman empire<sup>7</sup> and influencing

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<sup>6</sup> BBC History. "Archimedes (c.287 - c.212 BC)". [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/archimedes.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/archimedes.shtml)

<sup>7</sup> Berger, Chapter 5.

<sup>7</sup> Berger, Chapter 6.

Eurasia through rule or trade. Rebirthed in the Renaissance, it is this very spirit that shaped the way this paper was written.

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