Hellenistic Period Overview:

Hellenistic civilization represents the zenith of Greek influence in the ancient world from 323BC to about 146BC. Hellenistic civilization was preceded by the Classical Hellenic period, and followed by Roman rule over areas. Greece had earlier dominated – even though much of Greek culture, religion, art and literature still permeated Rome’s rule, whose elite spoke and read Greek as well as Latin. The spread of Hellenistic culture was sparked by the conquests of Alexander the Great. After his ventures of the Persian Empire, Hellenistic kingdoms were established throughout southwest Asia and north-east Africa. This resulted in the export of Greek culture and language to these new realms, and moreover Greek colorists themselves. Equally, however, these new kingdoms were influenced by the indigenous cultures, adopting local practices where beneficial, necessary or convenient. Hellenistic civilization thus represents a fusion of the Ancient Greek world with that of the Near East, Middle East and Southwest Asia, and a departure from earlier Greek attitudes towards barbarian cultures. The extent to which genuinely hybrid Greco-Asian cultures emerged is contentious; consensus tends to point towards pragmatic cultural adaptation by the elites of society, but for much of the populations, life would probably have continued much as it had before.

Alexander and ‘Hellenization’

The first of Alexander's policies was the founding (or re-founding) of cities across the empire. This has been interpreted as part of Alexander's desire to spread Greek culture throughout the empire. These cities were presumably intended to be administrative headquarters in the regions, and to have been settled by Greeks; many were settled by veterans of Alexander's campaigns. Undoubtedly, this would have resulted in the spread of Greek influence across the empire; however, the primary purpose could have been to control his new subjects, rather than specifically to spread Greek culture. Secondly, Alexander attempted to create a unified ruling class of Persians and Greeks, bound by marriage ties. He used both Greeks and Persians in positions of power, although he depended more on Greeks in unstable positions, and replaced many Persian satraps in a purge after his return from India. He also tried to mix the two cultures, adopting elements of the Persian court such as a version of the royal robes and some of the court ceremony and attendants. This is probably an attempt to equalize the two races in their behavior towards Alexander as 'Great King,' but it was bitterly resented by the Macedonians, as the Greek custom was reserved solely for the gods. This policy can be interpreted as an attempt to spread Greek culture, or to create a hybrid culture. However, again, it is probably better seen as an attempt to help control the unwieldy empire. Alexander also unified the army, placing Persian soldiers in the Macedonian ranks. However, again, this can simply be seen as a pragmatic solution to chronic manpower problems. Alexander's increasing megalomania can be seen in his plan to completely homogenize the populations of Europe and Asia by mass re-settlement. Whilst this thoroughly impractical plan could be interpreted as an attempt to create a new hybrid culture, the sheer ambitiousness of the plan suggests some other process at work. In short, Alexander's policies did undoubtedly result in the spread of Greek culture, but whether this was their primary aim must remain doubtful. They probably represent, instead, pragmatic attempts by Alexander to control his extensive new territories, in part by presenting himself as the heir to both Greek and Asian legacies, rather than an outsider.

Hellenistic Culture

Many 19th century scholars contended that the Hellenistic period represented a cultural decline from the brilliance of classical Greece. Though this comparison is now seen as unfair and meaningless, it has been noted that even commentators of the time saw the end of a cultural era which could not be matched again. This may be inextricably linked with the nature of government. The spread of Greek culture throughout the Near East and Asia owed much to the development of cities. Settlements situated on trade routes allowed cultures to mix and spread. The identification of local gods with similar Greek deities facilitated the building of Greek-style temples, and the Greek culture in the cities also meant that buildings such as gymnasia became common. Many cities maintained their autonomy while under the nominal rule of the local king, and often had Greek-style institutions. Greek dedications, statues, architecture and inscriptions have all been found. However, local cultures were not replaced, and often mixed to create a new culture. Greek language and literature spread throughout the former Persian Empire. The development of the Alexander Romance owes much to Greek theater as well as other styles of story. The Library at Alexandria became a center for learning and was copied by various other monarchs. The spread of Greek influence and language is also shown through Ancient Greek coinage. Portraits became more realistic, and the reverse of the coin was often used to display a propaganda image, commemorating an event or displaying the image of a favored god. The use of Greek-style portraits and Greek language continued into the Parthian period, even as the use of Greek was in decline.

Religion

Hellenistic religion is any of the various systems of beliefs and practices of the people who lived under the influence of ancient Greek culture during the Hellenistic period and the Roman Empire (c. 300 BCE to 300 CE). There was much continuity in Hellenistic religion, the Greek Gods continued to be worshiped, and the same rites were practiced as before. Change came from the addition of new religions from other countries, such as including the Egyptian gods and goddesses, which provided a new outlet for people seeking fulfillment in both the present life and the afterlife. The worship of Hellenistic rulers was also a feature of this period, most notably in Egypt, where the Ptolemies adopted earlier pharaonic practice, and established themselves as god-kings. Elsewhere rulers might receive divine status without the full status of a god. Magic was practiced widely, and these too, were a continuation from earlier times. Throughout the Hellenistic world, people would consult oracles, and use charms and figurines to deter misfortune or to cast spells. Also developed in this era was the complex system of astrology, which sought to determine a person's character and future in the movements of the sun, moon and planets.

Hellenistic Art

Hellenistic art is the art of the Hellenistic period and dating from 323 BC to 146 BC. A number of the best-known works of Greek sculpture belong to this period. Hellenistic is a modern invention: the Hellenistic World not only included a huge area covering the whole of the Aegean, rather than the Classical Greece focused on the Polis of Athens and Sparta, but also a huge time range. In artistic terms this means that there is huge variety which is often put under the heading of Hellenistic Art for convenience sake.