



HELLENISM

HELLENISM, a term created in Judea in the 2nd century BCE, signifying the adoption by some of the Jews of Greek language, customs, and manners. By extension it came to mean Greek culture and all the characteristics which made a Greek recognize himself as such. In the absence of any unified Greek political state, it was their cultural affiliation which made the Greeks recognize themselves as members of one and the same community (*koinè*). Among the strong points of Greek culture were the facility with which it spread among the nations who were in touch with the Greeks and the appeal it exercised on them. These factors account for its lasting influence, even after the disappearance of the last Greek state, especially in the Orient, one of the chief directions of its expansion. Cultural exchange was, however, by no means one-sided; through its contact with Eastern and Iranian cultures, Hellenism also was transformed. These relations thus led to mutual cultural enrichment. They also explain the longevity of Hellenism throughout the centuries.

The Aegean Sea was not a barrier, but rather an area of circulation; the populations who lived on its shores were at all times in communication; and a vast number of skills, practices, and techniques spread from one shore to the other. Contacts between Greeks and Orientals became closer from the early second millennium (the Mycenaean period), and again at the beginning of the first millennium, when the Greeks settled in Asia Minor on a long-term basis. But it was after the Greeks became incorporated within the Achaemenid Empire that Greek culture began to spread within the Eastern world and among Iranian populations.



The Achaemenid period. In the 540s BCE, Cyrus seized the kingdom of Lydia, ruled by Croesus, and acquired the rich Greek cities which he controlled. After the Persian conquest, Hellenism developed in the empire in two ways: one at its center, the court of the Great King, and one in Asia Minor. The Great Kings, especially Darius I, created an imperial art, intended to glorify them, which reflected the diversity of the empire. They summoned artists of all the provinces, each to be employed in his specialized trade. The Greeks of Asia Minor, who were good at stonework, introduced into Iran their cutting techniques and their tools, as well as certain architectural layouts, such as the massive use of columns (Nylander, 1970). The manner of sculpting the draperies of garments and a tendency toward realistic representation are stylistic elements which were influenced by Greek art, itself in full flower. These artisans are mentioned in the ‘charters of the foundation of the palace’ of Susa, in which Darius displayed a list of peoples who participated in the works (Lecoq, 1997). Two of them, Nikon and Pytharchos, also engraved their names at the Persepolis quarries (Pugliese Carratelli, 1966).

The imperial capitals where the Great King regularly stayed, and in particular Susa, which became the main one from the reign of Artaxerxes II, also attracted people coming from various regions of the empire and beyond it. Among them were Greeks such as a certain Nikoklès from Sinope, who died there (Cumont, 1928). Some Greeks were part of the Great Kings’ entourage (Hofstetter, 1978), including the Cnidian Ctesias (q.v.), who became the physician of Artaxerxes II after having been a prisoner. Several Greek warriors supplied their services and commanded troops of mercenaries, for instance the Spartan Klearchos, the head of the expedition of the Ten Thousand; others commanded parts of the Great King’s armed forces, as did the Athenian Conon and the Rhodian Memnon, at the head of the fleets of Artaxerxes II and Darius III. The Great Kings made good use of the abilities of these Greeks. For example, Skylax of Caryanda explored the maritime routes between the Indus and the Persian Gulf and is said to have traveled all over Arabia in the service of Darius I (Herodotus 4.44). Lastly, several Greek leaders in exile took refuge with the Great Kings and served them as advisers, among them the Spartan Demaratos and the Athenian Themistocles. Despite the example of Memnon, who was closely connected with the family of Artabazos, the satrap of Daskyleion and his brother-in-law, we must not exaggerate the role and importance of these Greeks, whom the Great Kings used to their own advantage (Briant, 1996). The Great Kings did not adopt the customs of the populations they had conquered; together with the Persian élites in their



entourage, they formed a leading group attached to Persian traditions.

The situation was different in Asia Minor, which was already very Hellenized. The Great Kings' wish to play a role in the Aegean diplomatic game led to the development of contacts among Greek cities and satraps. Several Persian aristocrats formed friendly relationships with Greeks with whom they could seek refuge. E.g., the son of Pharnabazos, satrap of Daskyleion, from an early age was the guest of Agesilaus, king of Sparta. The latter managed to have him allowed to compete in the Olympic games together with a Spartiate (trained citizen-soldier) with whom the young Persian was enamored (Bresson, 2002). The case of the son of Pharnabazos—behaving just like a young Spartiate, training at the gymnasium and having homosexual relations—is somewhat unusual but confirms that the court of Daskyleion had become Hellenized.

A large number of Iranians came to settle in Asia Minor, in the satraps' capitals as well as in the countryside (Briant, 1996). As a result, close contacts were formed between these Iranians and the local Greek and non-Greek populations, as is shown by onomastics (Briant, 1996, pp. 722-25), and this development led to a spread of Persian cultural models. In Lydia and at Sardis, for example, Persian influence can be observed in ceramics, metalwork, and also in funereal architecture (Macintosh and Dusinberre, 1997; Dusinberre, 1999; Paspalas, 2000; Özgen and Öztürk, 1996). Persian ascendancy is also shown in the spread of an imperial iconographic repertory similar to that which decorated the palaces of the great capitals and formed a setting for the Great King (Kaptan, 1996; Kaptan, 2001; Davesne and Laroche-Traunecker, 1998). Asia Minor thus formed a very fertile exchange center among local Anatolian, Greek, and Iranian cultures. It is in this context that the so-called 'Greco-Persian' art was born. The Persian satraps and aristocrats, as well as the local élites, called upon artists who were able to combine the different artistic traditions. On the Tomb of the Harpies at Xanthos, built around 480-470, the local dynast had himself represented like Darius I and Xerxes I giving audience, but according to the norms of Greek representation (Bernard, 1965; Asheri, 1983). Greco-Persian art also spread in Phrygia and especially Daskyleion (Bernard, 1969; Nollé, 1992). These artistic trends equally prevailed in the minor arts, including glyptic art. Greco-Persian seals have been found in the eastern regions, for instance in Mesopotamia (Wallenfels 1994), where this style was widespread.

The Persians were also confronted with Greek religion. They honored Artemis, especially her temple at Ephesus (Briant, 1996); an inscription tells us of a



familial cult which a certain Droaphernes devoted to Zeus of Baradates (Briant, 1998). It is sometimes difficult to define the reality of the cult under these names, whether they are Greek names of Iranian divinities, as was the case of Artemis, or local divinities of Asia Minor, or else composite divinities. But it was conceivable for Iranians to devote a cult to a divinity which had a Greek form and name. On the other hand, the priest of Artemis at Ephesus bore a title of Persian origin (Xenophon, *Anab.* 5.3.6; Briant, 1996, p. 722), leading us to suppose that there were exchanges in both directions. Greek dialects underwent changes through their contact with local languages of Lydia and Caria (Blümel, 1990). Several Greek authors also mention the adoption of Persian habits by the Greeks, especially those of Ephesus (Plutarch, *Lys.* 3.3; Athenaeus, *Deip.* 525c-e).

We must not exaggerate the impact of Greek culture and artistic traditions on the Persians, including those who lived in Asia Minor. Despite their familiarity with the Greek world, there were few of them who spoke Greek. Among the kings, only Darius III was said to speak it (Quintus Curtius 5.11.4). Indeed most of the satraps of Asia Minor did not. Tissaphernes needed an interpreter to speak with Greek mercenaries of the army of the Ten Thousand (Xenophon, *Anab.* 2.3.17), although he governed the Aegean regions of Asia Minor. Also, Greco-Persian art is a result of Persian influences in a Hellenized western Asia Minor (Root, 1991), rather than the introduction of Greek influences within a Persian milieu.

In Greece itself, Persian influence developed from the time when relations intensified between the cities and the Achaemenid Empire. Certain shapes of Attic vases and certain surface decorations are directly inspired by Persian metalware. The imperial Achaemenid iconography also influenced some Attic painters, such as the one who represented King Midas enthroned like the Great King on a *stamnos* wine-jar preserved in the British Museum (E 447). In the field of architecture, the Greeks may also have derived from the Persians their hypostyle rooms, such as the Telesterion of Eleusis or the Odeon of Pericles, built on the model of Xerxes' tent. A taste for Persian clothes such as the *kandys* developed among Athenian men and women in the second half of the 5th century (Miller 1988, 1993, and 1997).

Alexander's conquests and the Seleucid period. Alexander the Great's (ARSACIDS) were able to build an extensive empire which lasted until 224 CE. They did not renounce their Hellenistic heritage, and the Greek element for a long time formed an important part of their culture. But from the 1st century



CE, Greek influences gradually lessened, not because of a hostile attitude on the part of the kings, as has sometimes been assumed, but because the Iranian element increasingly took over and Greek influences became diluted within Iranian culture. The dynamic quality of Hellenism during the first three centuries of Parthian history is marked by the persistence of the Greek language. The kings used it in their relations with the Greek communities of their empire, who had kept their institutions and continued to administer them. This is shown by an inscription at Susa, reproducing a letter from king Artabanos II. A decree honoring the Parthian satrap of Susa confirms the community's good relations with the central power. Susa indeed for a while was named Phraata of Susa, after Phraates IV (Le Rider, 1965). But the Parthian kings employed Greek in a wider context. For a long time their coin inscriptions were written in this language, according to the norms of the Greek world. Other borrowings are evidenced by the adoption in Middle Persian of terms of Greek origin for weights and measures (Huyse, 2002).

From the reign of Mithridates I, the Parthian kings regularly adopted the title 'Philhellenic' on their coins, thus going back to their Seleucid predecessors. The proclamation of Philhellenism by the Parthian kings was not merely propaganda meant to curry favor with the Greeks of their empire. It was real, if we trust Plutarch's testimony (*Crassus* 33): when Crassus's head was taken to Orodes, the latter was celebrating the marriage of his son with the daughter of King Artavasdes of Armenia and was watching a presentation of Euripides' *Bacchantes*. Plutarch said that Orodes knew Greek and Greek literature and that the Armenian Artavasdes wrote works in Greek, some of which were preserved. It is significant that the Parthians built Ctesiphon, their main capital, next to Seleucia on the Tigris, which was the greatest Greek city of the East and was to become even more prosperous during the Parthian period. The empire also had an intellectual life largely dominated by the Greeks, some of whose names are still known: the historians Apollodorus of Artemita, author of a Parthian history, and Agathocles of Babylon; the geographers Isidorus of Charax (q.v.), who described the stages of the road leading from Zeugma to Alexandria of Arachosia (Kanda-hār), and his fellow-townsmen Dionysios of Charax; and the stoician philosopher Archidemos, who founded a school for philosophy in Babylon. The Greek communities of the empire continued living in the Greek style of their ancestors. Susa again provides the best examples (Martinez-Sève, 2002a).

The art of the Parthians was still greatly influenced by Greek traditions. These



merged more closely with Iranian and Mesopotamian traditions, leading to an artistic tradition peculiar to the Parthian empire (Schlumberger, 1970). These productions are mainly known in the provinces outside the empire, such as Hatra (q.v.), but they reflect those of Ctesiphon. Greek influence always appears in the borrowing of a Greek decorative architectural element, of which the rules of proportion are no longer respected, while new architectural forms or forms little used before, such as the *ivān* type of vault, are developed. In the figurative arts, the iconography is still largely influenced by that of Greek art, but figures issuing from the old local mythological background are also represented. By their frontal style and their lack of depth, these representations differ from those of Greek art. The origin of this frontality has sometimes been questioned. Several influences may have combined, but it is probably due to tendencies observed in Iranian artistic productions and especially in Hellenized Mesopotamian ones. The presence of Greek gods is a constant feature of Parthian art. But these images covered more complex realities, and local divinities lay concealed behind them. Since the Iranians usually did not represent their gods, they often borrowed images of foreign gods. We thus notice a coin from Susa on which the Parthian king Artabanos is shown kneeling before Apollo, who is none other than Mithra (Le Rider, 1965, no. 97; Boyce and Grenet, 1991, p. 39).

The Sasanian period. After the fall of the Parthian empire in 224 and its replacement by the Sasanian empire, the influence of Greek culture markedly declined in the Iranian world. The Sasanian kings were not on principle hostile to Greek culture, but they chose to give precedence to Iranian traditions. To unite their empire, they furthered the development of a truly Iranian culture and presented themselves as the successors of the mythical Iranian rulers and the Achaemenid kings. They also possessed a power conferred on them by the gods of Zoroastrianism, which they promoted to the rank of a national religion providing them with an ideological, even theological, foundation. Despite the innovative character of these choices, they did not make a complete break with their Parthian past. Hellenism had already considerably weakened; and in a city like Susa Greek cultural influences had lost their vigor and had finally disappeared towards the late first century CE. Yet the Sasanian empire was not completely closed to Greek influences. There still remained Greek populations and people of Greek culture in the empire, since Šāpūr I felt the need to engrave a Greek version of his famous inscription, the '*Res gestae divi Saporis*' (Huyse, 1999). But what developed was mainly a new Hellenism, one that issued from the Roman



provinces of the East with their Greek culture. A number of iconographic motifs borrowed from Greek art and found in Sasanian art were introduced from the Roman world and reflect contemporary artistic evolutions. E.g., the famous mosaics of Bišāpur (q.v.) contain dionysiac motifs whose subject, it has been suggested, is the triumph of Dionysos (Gall, 1971). The mosaics were made by artists from Antioch; they were among the numerous artisans whom Šāpūr I deported from Antioch and settled in a new city, Gondēšāpūr (q.v.), situated about 30 km east of Susa.

The presence of Greeks in the East caused Hellenism to spread and take roots. We lack sufficient information to assess its influence on the populations, but what is certain is that it was mainly the élites who became hellenized. Greek culture, however, was not only transplanted in the East. It evolved and grew richer through contact with local traditions, and these cultural contacts led to new civilizations in which it formed a basic element, which was real, although less and less visible. These intercultural exchanges were, moreover, very fruitful as regards ideas and intellectual life. From the period of Achaemenid domination, several Greek philosophers such as Anaximander, Anaximenes, and especially Heraclites, developed theories partially based on principles of the philosophy of the Iranian Magi. Asia Minor under Achaemenid domination was certainly a fertile soil for such intellectual exchange. We also find several Zoroastrian elements in Plato's philosophy (Gnoli, 1995-96 and 1997-98). But the spread of Greek culture in the East during the Hellenistic period also had major repercussions on Eastern thought. It led to the expansion of the Greek language and a rationalistic view of the world, providing Eastern philosophies with new concepts and leading them to express themselves in a different way (Jonas, 1978). This caused the development, during the early centuries of our era, of new philosophical doctrines—particularly neo-Platonism and neo-Pythagorism—in the great intellectual centers such as Antioch and especially Alexandria. This encounter also furthered the appearance or the development of new religions (Judaism, Christianity, mystery cults, Gnosticism), which, in their turn, led to theological and philosophical thought. These exchanges and mutual enrichment between Greek and Oriental traditions continued during the Sasanian period. The persecutions of paganism and heresies by the Byzantine emperors led to the exile of many learned men and philosophers, who found refuge in the Sasanian Empire. Among them were Christian Nestorians, who established monasteries all over the empire and played an important part in spreading Greek medicine in Persia. They made up a body of scholars learned in Greek, Syriac, and Middle Persian; and they translated a



large number of treatises, notably some of the works of Aristotle. Their relationships with the Byzantine empire did not cease, and in 6th-century Sasanian Persia the scholars disseminated the works of the schools of Constantinople and Alexandria. They also enjoyed the support of several Sasanian kings. According to the *Dēnkard*, Šāpūr I had embarked upon gathering all the Greek learning spread over India and the Byzantine empire. He wanted to reconstruct the corpus of scientific texts contained in the Avesta which Alexander the Great was supposed to have acquired and ordered to be translated into Greek before destroying the original versions. The works were collected, preserved in the imperial libraries, and translated. This explains the influence of Greek thought on the religious literature written in Middle Persian, and especially the *Dēnkard* (q.v.). King Kōsrow I also supported these scientific activities and even received at his court the philosophers expelled by Justinian, especially those of the Athens school, which was closed in 529 (Hartmann, 2002). The Sasanian period was thus an important period for the conservation of Greek knowledge and its transmission to the Arabs. The work of translation was continued during the Arab period, especially under the Abbasids, who resumed the policy of the Sasanian kings of collecting ancient texts.

See also the articles under [GREECE](#), especially [ii. GRECO-PERSIAN CULTURAL RELATIONS](#), [iii. PERSIAN INFLUENCE ON GREEK THOUGHT](#), and [iv. GREEK INFLUENCE ON PERSIAN THOUGHT](#).

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