

## PART I

# *The Idea of Hellenism: What the Greeks Created*

# 1

## *The Scheme of Things Entire*

Historical speculation is fun; dates and facts are often thought of as tedious. But in their absence there is no structure, no framework in which to fit one's experience of things past. In the case of Classical antiquity, the very simplistic outline set out below may help. It begins with the independent Hellenic cities of the Aegean and the Greek mainland in the 8th century BC, and charts the spread of Hellenism through their founding of colonies. It continues with Alexander's conquests and the dominions of his successors, which are followed by the generally benign attitude of the Romans towards Hellenic culture. We then move through the slow disintegration of the Roman Empire, to conclude with the transformation of Classicism into Byzantine Christianity in the 4th century AD.

### **The Archaic Age: Ionian cities and colonies, c. 750–547 BC**

This is the era when numerous small, free, independent Hellenic cities – most conspicuously Miletus – prospered, founding colonies (settlements related to the mother city) on the coasts of the Black Sea, the Sea of Marmara, Asia Minor, North Africa and southern Italy. Latterly the chief mainland power in western Asia Minor was Lydia.

*c. 750–675* Homer creates the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Hesiod writes.

*c. 625–547* Miletus flourishes. Thales and others begin the first enquiry into the physical nature of the universe.

*560–547* Croesus is king of Lydia.

*547* Cyrus the Great, king of the Persians, takes Lydia and numerous Ionian cities.

### **The Classical Age: Persian Wars, Athens and Sparta, 547–334 BC**

This period is usually regarded as the core of Classical antiquity. It is dominated by wars between Persia and various alliances of Greek

cities, by the cultural achievements of Athens, and by the Peloponnesian Wars between Athens and Sparta. In its last seventy years, it saw something like a cold war between Persia and various Greeks, and in Caria (south-western Asia Minor) the emergence of the Hecatomnid dynasty, nominally subject to Persia but a Hellenizing influence. The Mausoleum at Halicarnassus is its best-known product. The history of the Persian Wars is provided by Herodotus.

- 499 Ionian revolt against Persia.
- 494 Hellenic fleet loses sea battle of Lade; sack of Miletus.
- 490 First Persian expedition to mainland Greece, under Darius. Persians defeated in the battle of Marathon.
- 480 Second Persian expedition to mainland Greece, under Xerxes. Spartans lose the fiercely contested battle of Thermopylae. Most of the Persian fleet is destroyed in the sea battle of Salamis. Athens is evacuated, and the 'old' acropolis is destroyed by the Persians. Xerxes retires to Asia leaving his army to overwinter in Thessaly.
- 479 Greek counter-attack and victory in the land battle of Plataea and in the decisive sea battle off Cape Mycale.
- 478–431 Rise of the Athenian Empire, and the age of Pericles. Parthenon built. Great dramatists at work in Athens. Athenian democracy at its height.
- c. 467 Land and sea battle at the river Eurymedon ends active Persian threat to Greeks; thereafter, Persian kings rely on gold and diplomacy to maintain their western empire.
- 432–404 Peloponnesian Wars between Sparta and Athens, as recorded by Thucydides. Final defeat of Athens in 404.
- 404–347 Plato working in Athens.
- 404–334 Armed hostility between mainland Greece (Sparta) and Persia in protracted 'cold war'.
- 399 Death of Socrates.
- 377–334 Hecatomnid dynasty in Caria Hellenizes area under nominal Persian suzerainty.

### Alexander the Great of Macedonia and the destruction of the Persian Empire, 334–323 BC

- 340–323 Aristotle working in Athens.
- 334 Battle of Granicus gives Alexander opportunity to take most of Asia Minor.
- 333 Battle of Issus allows Alexander to take Egypt.
- 331 Battle of Gaugamela ends in the flight of Darius III. Alexander sets out to conquer the world to the east.
- 323 Death of Alexander the Great in Babylon.
- 322 Aristotle dies in Chalcis.

### The Hellenistic Age and the rise of Rome, 323–31 BC

After the death of Alexander, his vast conquests were divided, not always peacefully, between his generals and companions. This resulted in the spread of Hellenistic culture over wide areas of the eastern Mediterranean and as far east as the borders of India. Conspicuous among his successors were the Ptolemies, who ruled an extended Egypt, and the Seleucids, who reigned over Asia Minor and lands initially extending to modern Afghanistan. Almost by accident, the west of Asia Minor became a kingdom under the control of the rich and eccentric Attalids of Pergamon, the last of whom, Attalus III, bequeathed his kingdom to Rome with remarkable foresight of the shape of things to come.

- 331–on Athens becomes the philosophical capital of Western world with the establishment of schools founded by Plato, Aristotle, and the Epicureans and the Stoics.
- 146 Macedonia and mainland Greece become Roman provinces.
- 130 Roman province of Asia (Asia Minor) created.
- 88–85 Mithridates VI, king of Pontus, overruns Roman Asia Minor. Greek cities variously side with him or with Rome, to their cost or advantage.
- 44 Murder of Julius Caesar.
- 44–31 Roman civil wars, initially involving Mark Antony against Caesar's killers Brutus and Cassius (Mark Antony is victorious at the battle of Philippi, 42 BC),

and then Mark Antony against Caesar's adoptive son, Octavius.

31 Battle of Actium. Octavius becomes master of the Roman world.

30 Cleopatra, last Ptolemy of Egypt and ally of Antony, kills herself.

### **Pax Romana: The empire of Rome, 30 BC to 2nd century AD**

In 30 BC Octavius began the process that established Rome as a power governed by an emperor. In the first eighty years after the death of Augustus (Octavius) in AD 14, this produced a series of rulers that varied between the abominable, the competent and the highly successful, while in territory the empire expanded and remained unchallenged in any serious way.

In the 2nd century AD – the 'century of peace', as it has sometimes been called – a succession of men of ability and dedication ruled at the apex of Roman power. Their names and dates as emperor are:

96–98	Nerva
98–118	Trajan
118–138	Hadrian
138–161	Antoninus
161–180	Marcus Aurelius

Hadrian in particular is a name you will meet again and again, from the North Tyne in north-east England to Aswan in southern Egypt. He travelled everywhere, embellished cities, beautified the world and defended his vast dominions; but within twenty years of his death, the threat from the north re-emerged, and Marcus Aurelius, the great Stoic, was concerned more with defending the empire, internally still at peace, than with enjoying it by travel.

### **Danger and division, AD 200–395**

In the 3rd century AD the break up of the empire seemed always at hand but never happened. There was a succession of weak emperors put in place by the army and too briefly in charge to be effective; Goths invaded from the north (repelled with difficulty), and there was

an ever increasing threat from German tribes. Christians were subject to erratic and occasional persecution, which resulted in a challenge to the focus of allegiance in the empire. Economic dislocation became widespread.

Diocletian, who ruled from 285 until he retired in 305, made heroic efforts to reform the economic and political structure of the empire and to reaffirm its ancient religious structures. Some of his reforms were carried through by Constantine the Great (r. 306–337), who asserted Christianity as the official religion of the empire while clearly permitting the continuation of other religions and forms of worship.

337	Byzantium is refounded as Constantinople. Intended to be the New Rome, it rapidly becomes a New Jerusalem.
337–395	Evolution of a split between the Western Empire in Rome and an Eastern Empire in Constantinople.
361–363	Emperor Julianus (Julian) makes a final attempt as a pagan to accommodate Christianity and other religions.
379–395	Reign of Theodosius I. Final separation of Eastern and Western Empires, and the enforcement of Christianity as the only religion of the Eastern (Byzantine) Empire.

An entry in *Chambers Dictionary of Biography* speaks of Theodosius thus: 'A pious and intolerant Christian, he summoned in 381 a council at Constantinople to affirm the Nicene Creed, pursued heretics and pagans, and eventually in 391 ordered the closure of all temples and banned all non-Christian forms of religion.' He also closed all theatres and *gymnasia* (schools), and prohibited the Olympic games. It only remained for the Emperor Justinian, in 529, to order the closure of the remaining non-Christian schools of philosophy in Athens – those devoted to Neoplatonism – and the Classical world was at an end.

## 2

*The Idea of Hellenism*

‘Are you coming with us tomorrow to see Alinda?’  
enquired the Learned Doctor.

‘Some such name,’ said the Personality brightly. ‘Although I thought it was Alabanda. There’s probably not much difference. When you’ve seen one ruin you’ve seen them all.’

– John Gaskin, ‘From Lydia with Love and Laughter’ (2006)

The Learned Doctor’s outraged intake of breath at such crass cynicism was justified, but anyone who has seen the ruins of more than two or three Hellenic cities (of course not including such very ancient sites as Troy and Mycenae) will have some sympathy with the Personality. In some ways, and for a good reason, the cities from Elea to Alexandria *are* all similar.

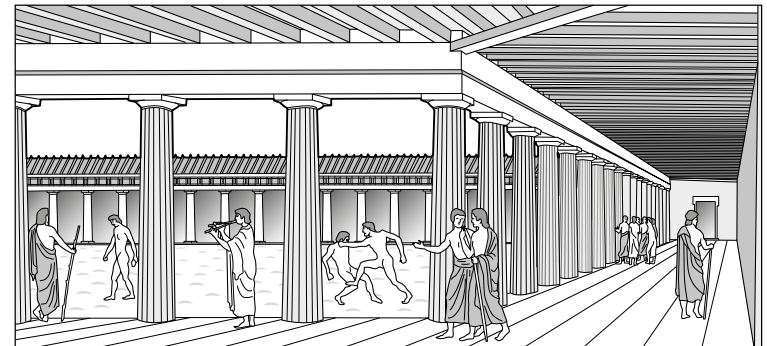
The sites resemble each other because they all have a set of structures in common. These structures result from the political and cultural activities that constituted being Greek: the idea of Hellenism. The earliest literary record of such an idea occurs in Book VIII of Herodotus’ *The Persian Wars*, written *c.* 430–420 BC, where an Athenian speaks of ‘the kinship of all Hellenes in blood and speech, and the shrines of gods and the sacrifices we have in common, and the likeness of our way of life’. About half a century later Isocrates, the Athenian orator and political theorist, opens out the concept of Hellenism beyond that of blood ties: ‘The name Hellene no longer suggests a race, but an intelligence, and the title “Hellenes” is applied rather to those who share our culture, than to those who share a common blood’ (from his discourse *Panegyricus*).

What was it to ‘share a culture’? It was to be a member of a *polis*—a settlement wholly or at least partly free from outside domination, organized according to a written constitution that contained some

democratic elements. The pattern typically involved a city with a *prytaneion*, a dining hall or town hall for entertaining guests or emissaries from other cities; a *boule* or ruling council, which met in a designated building, the *bouleuterion*; and an *ekklesia*, or public assembly, which met in the theatre. The *boule* conducted the day-to-day business of the city and appointed magistrates responsible for defence, aqueducts, markets, festivals, public games, civic buildings, outlying territory, and so on.

To be a Hellenic city was to have a theatre big enough to seat most of the citizens for the purpose of public meetings, trials, plays, festivals and other large-scale theatrical entertainments. It was to participate in inter-city games and musical competitions, and in the great pan-Hellenic Olympic Games. It was to have a common, but not exclusive, group of gods – the Olympians – one of whom would usually be the patron or protector of the city, and it was to have Greek at least as the lingua franca. It was to have schools (*gymnasia*) where boys were taught to read and write and speak in public, and where they developed their military and athletic skills; this explains the presence of the stadium, which was often outside the city walls or near to the gymnasium itself. Finally, it was to have a certain social system: citizens, free foreign visitors and residents, and slaves (or kept servants). There was a close-knit family life, and for the men a social life that centred upon the convention-regulated banquet or *symposium*.

*Interior courtyard of a typical gymnasium.*



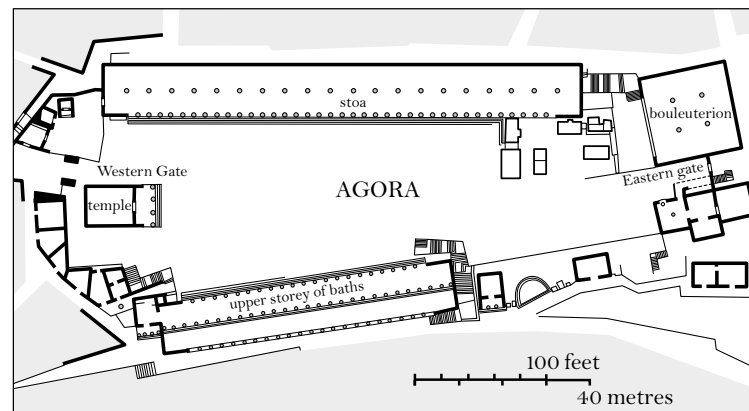
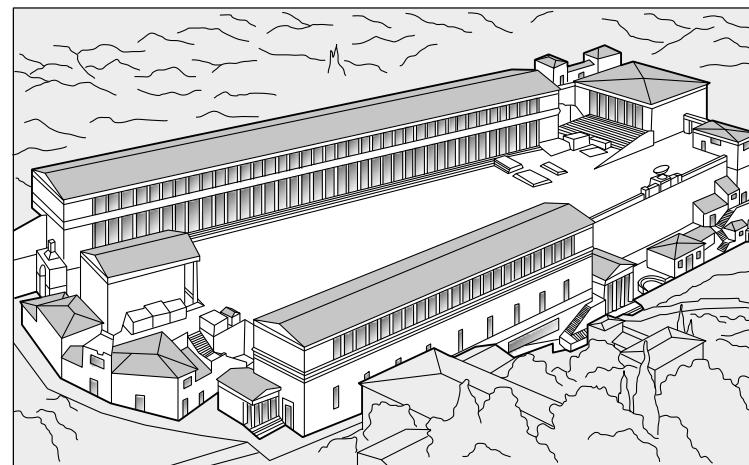
What I have outlined above originated in the 5th century BC or earlier, but persisted with changes well into the 2nd century AD. The notion of citizenship in particular expands in proportion to the larger political structure of the world: in the 2nd century AD, you will find memorials proudly recording the dead person as a citizen of Rome, of Caria (for example), and of a particular city. In the eastern half of the Roman Empire, Greek extended its hold as the language of commerce and as the lingua franca, but the idea of Hellenism became more that of a cultured elite, more literary, as the world became more precarious, despotic, large-scale, religiously dogmatic and hostile to constitutional democracy. Synesius of Cyrene (c. AD 370–413) – possibly a Christian, but certainly a man who deplored the decline of humane culture – defended a pagan or Hellenic Greek as ‘one able to associate with men on the basis of a knowledge of all worthwhile literature’ – a shrivelled but still not ignoble concept that survived into the 1960s.

So being a Hellenic *polis* necessarily involved having a certain set of buildings in common:

*an agora* – the forum or marketplace. The *agora* would be built as splendidly as the city could afford: a large paved square or oblong, sometimes with a shrine in the middle, surrounded by a colonnade behind which are shops and stalls with their stock rooms to the rear or below.

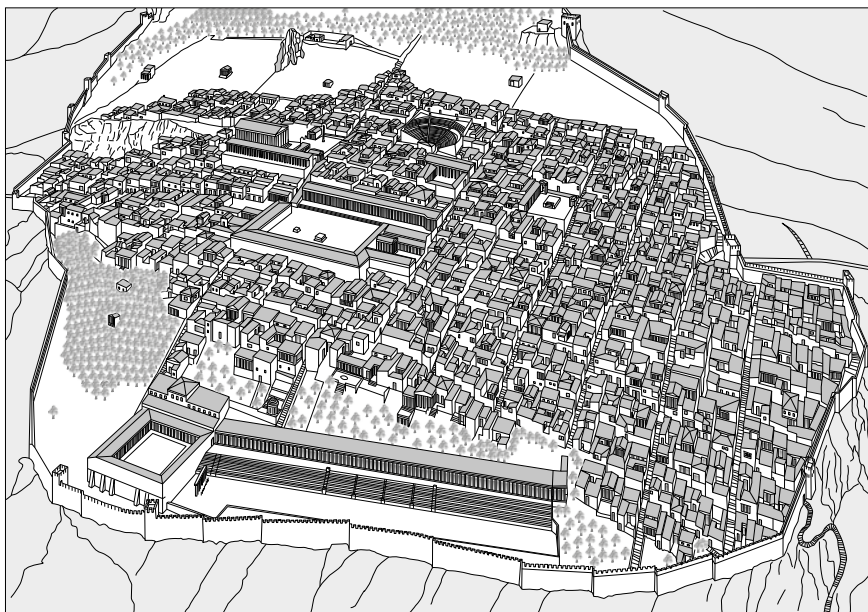
*city walls* – a defensive system that surrounded the city. Often pre-dating 30 BC, the walls were constructed from large, finely-fitting blocks of stone without cement joins (‘ashlar masonry’). These were largely redundant at the height of Pax Romana, but were often restored and augmented in the 3rd century AD. They are always massive, and make the walls of medieval Europe look like rubble-and-mortar constructions.

*an aqueduct* – a manmade water supply that ran overhead on arches, was piped below ground or followed the contours of a hill. The aqueducts usually arrived at an elaborate distribution point within the city, which was sometimes ornately decorated and spectacularly



*The city of Assos, showing public buildings of the Classical period.*

presented by the Romans as a *nymphaeum*, with statues, fountains and pools. See examples at Miletus, Lepcis Magna, Carthage, and the upper city of Ephesus (to the left as you enter from the top).



*Priene as a Hellenistic city, with its regular arrangement of streets.*

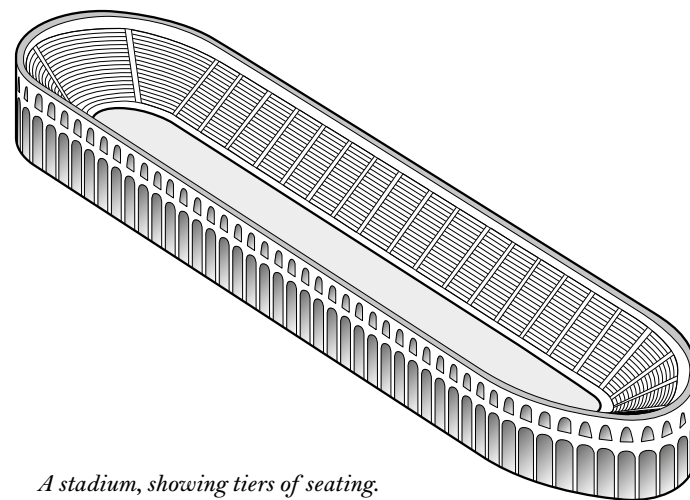
a **bath house** – a large complex of arches, rooms, pools and heating systems. Bath houses were always Roman additions to the original Hellenic city. The Hellenes did wash, and had domestic water systems for fresh water and sewage, but they did not have the vast hedonistic extravaganzas introduced by the Romans almost as a way of life.

**cisterns** – underground chambers for the storage of water. Traces of the pink waterproof cement with which they were lined are often still visible. But walk warily (in Alinda, perhaps): if you fall into one and live long enough to know that you have done so, you may have a considerable wait before anyone notices you deep below the ground. In the wilderness of Lydai there is one, said to be Byzantine, into which I almost fear to look.

a **Hippodamian grid plan** – a regular plan of squares according to which city streets were laid out. This arrangement is conspicuous at Priene, but also evident in some other sites.

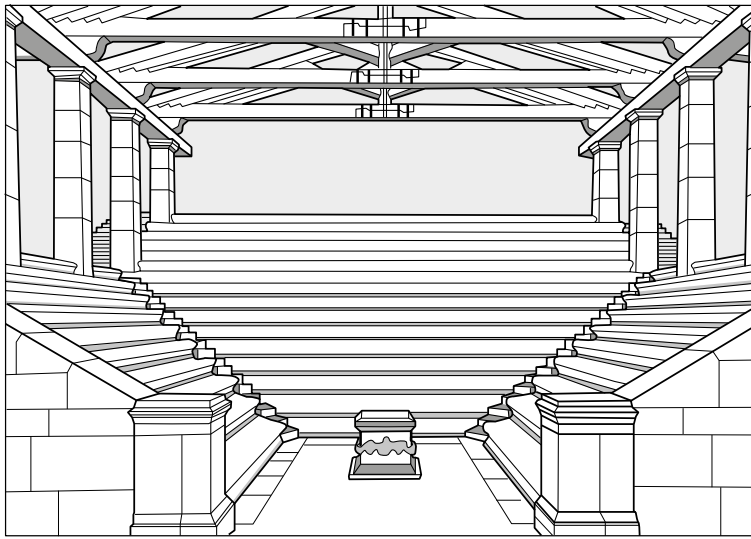
a **stadium** – an enclosed running track, typically with rounded ends and tiers of seating. It was used for athletic sports and races, and also sometimes for chariot racing – particularly under later Roman influence.

a **bouleuterion** – the meeting place of the city council. It was small enough to be roofed over, but in its ruinous state is difficult to distinguish from an *odeon*. The odeon took the form of an intimate theatre (a fine example is at Aphrodisias) for musical recitals, declamations of poetry, small meetings, and so on, where the audience would be in the region of one hundred people. (Theatres could seat twenty thousand or more.) The *bouleuterion* is sometimes a half-circle, like the *odeon* (e.g. at Nysa), but sometimes it takes the form of an oblong or right-angled horseshoe, with the fourth side open for access from the corners and with the speaker's position in the middle (e.g. at Priene).

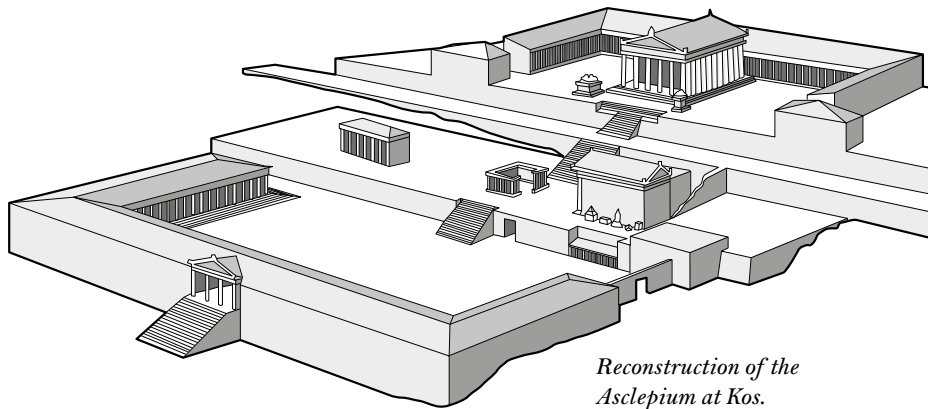


*A stadium, showing tiers of seating.*





*Reconstructed interior of a council house, or bouleuterion.*



*Reconstruction of the  
Asclepium at Kos.*

Sometimes there is also an *asclepium* – an area that could include a temple, a hospital and other buildings sacred to Asclepius, the god of healing and medicine. Celebrated examples are at Kos and Pergamon. The treatment comprised a combination of cleansing, resting, sleep, prayer and gentle medicine, and often resulted in the sort of cures still variously described as faith healing or miracles.

There is one last feature of the Hellenic, and later the Roman, city that cannot be seen as such, but that greatly enhanced what can be seen. These cities were rivals – not merely in trade and games and sometimes in fighting, but in appearance. To have bigger, better-presented or more finely embellished buildings than your rival was to score a point, to be a more notable place. The activity of Hellenistic kings set the precedent. Their civic improvements were emulated by Roman emperors – notably Hadrian – and followed by the successful citizen who had benefited from the city that reared him or her and sought to return something to it. It was a double process in which the city gained endowments and the donor won public approval. A similar custom operated in Victorian Britain, and still holds good in the United States.