

## 25 The Greek world during the Roman empire

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The history of the Greek world during the first four centuries AD is linked to that of Rome (see Map 10). With the victory of Augustus at the naval battle of Actium in 31 BC, the last great Hellenistic kingdom, Egypt, lost its independence and was annexed by the Roman empire. There was now no area of the Greek world which was politically autonomous. But Greek culture, which had spread through the conquests of Alexander, continued to exercise great influence in the eastern part of the empire. The transfer of the capital from Rome to Constantinople in 330 AD contributed to the shifting of the center of gravity of the empire to the east. When the Emperor Theodosius died in 395, the empire was divided into two, and its eastern part, dominated as it was by Greek culture, survived for centuries.

At the height of its power, the Roman empire stretched in the West to the Atlantic Ocean and to the east as far as Arabia and the land of the Parthians. To the north it reached the Rhine, Danube, and Black Sea, taking in both Dacia and Britain. Its southern boundaries were the Sahara, though it also penetrated deep into the valley of the Nile.

Rome's wars with its northern and eastern neighbors never ceased entirely, but within the empire itself, relative peace often reigned. The most important and bloodiest rebellions were those of the Jews in Palestine and Egypt towards the end of the first and beginning of the second centuries AD. At the end of the second century, external problems started to become more pressing, particularly the war against the Parthians. At the same time, an epidemic of plague caused a great reduction in the population. Raiders began to pillage the Greek coasts. In the middle of the third century, the empire suffered significant losses at the hands of the Goths and the Persians. Invaders reached as far as the Peloponnese. Nevertheless, by the end of the century, able emperors had managed to reverse these dire developments and Diocletian, with his reforms, laid the foundations for a new administration. By the beginning of the fourth century, however, all the external problems of

the empire were still open. In the east, there was the threat from the kingdom of Persia, while Goths and other raiders pressed in from the north. At the beginning of the fifth century, the western part of the empire started to disintegrate.

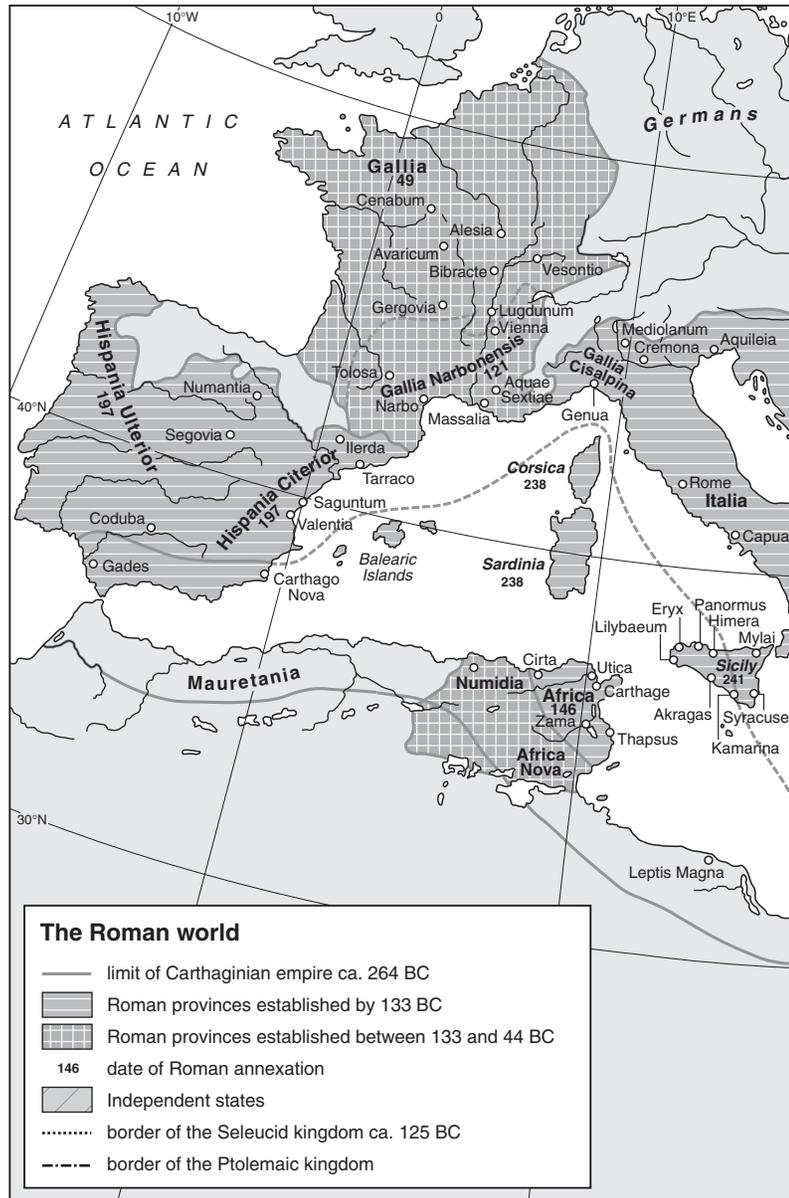
The Roman emperors became all too powerful, effectively limiting the traditional role of the senate. Imperial succession itself was not without its difficulties. Many emperors were assassinated and many usurpers threatened the unity of the empire. In the third century, the most important factor in the election of emperors and the prime guarantor of the unity of the empire was the army. Given the size of the empire, however, and the magnitude of its problems, the army was not well manned. In the fourth century, its ranks numbered barely 400,000.

Among the achievements of the empire, the cleansing of the Mediterranean of pirates and the opening up of great road networks figure highly. Movement within the Roman realm became swifter and safer. This had positive effects on the movement of military units, the exercise of the administration and trade. Two great arteries of communication now linked Italy firmly with the eastern part of the empire: the sea voyage from Rome to Alexandria, which basically guaranteed the transport of grain to the imperial capital, and the overland route along the Via Egnatia, which joined Dyrrhachium with Byzantium-Constantinople. The trade routes to India and China passed through Alexandria and Antioch.

The Roman empire was and remained at bottom an agricultural society. The greater part of the population lived in the country and was largely employed in agriculture and animal husbandry. Trade, too, within the borders of the realm, was mainly concerned with the transportation of agricultural produce. The ruling classes derived a significant portion of their income from their agricultural holdings and the imperial administration secured its tax income mainly from farmers.

The ruling elites were the senators and the equestrians. Gradually, many powerful men from the provinces were also admitted to their ranks. At the end of the first century, there were already a good number of senators who came from the Greek-speaking regions of the empire. The upper classes, in the broader meaning, also included leading families from provincial cities. In all cities, there were decurions, charged with the duties of local administration and the collection of taxes. All together, these upper classes accounted for about 1 percent of the population of the empire.

**Map 10** The Roman world.  
264–31 BC



The affluent land owners maintained residences close to their large holdings, but preferred to spend their wealth in the cities. The cities were the administrative centers and the place where taxes were collected. At the same time, the cities were also the centers of civilized life, in the eyes of the upper classes.

Privileged members of the empire were also those who held rights of Roman citizenship. At the time of Augustus, about four million people

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had such rights, in a total population of fifty to eighty million. This number increased rapidly, and in 212, with the *Constitutio Antoniniana* of Caracalla, rights to Roman citizenship were granted to almost all free residents of the empire.

The bulk of the population were farmers and, to a lesser extent, craftsmen and merchants. At the lowest end of the social scale were the slaves. Most of these were prisoners from the wars of conquest waged

by Rome. When geographical expansion ceased, however, their numbers began to fall and their price in the market to increase. In Italy, which had the greatest concentration of slaves, they may have made up more than a third of the total population. This was also the case in certain cities, such as Pergamum. In other regions, the percentage of slaves was significantly lower.

A large proportion of the slaves worked in urban households, providing both productive and non-productive services. Another group worked in the countryside, mainly on the large estates. As the slaves were moved around, they contributed to the spread of their local languages and beliefs. As the sources of slaves dried up, so the agricultural slaves began to be replaced by tenant farmers, known in the West as *coloni* and in the east as *πάροικοι*. From the time of Emperor Diocletian, these tenant farmers began to be tied to the land they cultivated and to lose their formal freedom. At the same time, many agricultural slaves acquired the features of serfs.

Under the direction of one man, the emperor, many factors contributed to the homogenization of the empire. Common legislation held good for everyone, as also did the common taxation system. The same Roman coinage was in circulation everywhere. The upper classes enjoyed their privileges wherever they lived, and the lower ones had similar duties and obligations. Within the empire, under these conditions, there developed a “universalism” which affected the education of the upper classes. Again, in the religious sector, general tolerance and syncretism were the order of the day as regards beliefs and rituals. Members of this universalist culture spoke Latin in the West and Greek in the east (see VI.3, VI.4, V.10).

Laws and imperial decrees were published in Latin. In the eastern part of the empire, however, they had to be translated into Greek in order to be generally understood (see VI.4). The peoples who lived in the eastern part of the empire were by and large divided into three basic linguistic groupings: about one third had Greek

as their native language, one third Syriac (see v.14, vi.7), and one third Egyptian (see v.13). There were many, however, who knew Greek as a second language. In all the great cities of the east, Greek was the predominant language and in several regions it had also penetrated deep into the surrounding countryside. Many people were, in essence, bilingual, while certain peoples lost their traditional languages entirely. So if people could travel from Britain to the Balkans speaking Latin en route, from there to Syria or Egypt they could travel using Greek. The western part of North Africa was another place where knowledge of Greek was far from negligible, as, of course, was the imperial capital. Despite Roman domination, there was no retreat on the part of Greek tradition in the eastern part of the empire, and only in Macedonia did Latin spread to some extent.

But the Hellenism of the eastern part of the empire was no longer to be identified with the language and education of the Classical Greek cities. The peoples who spoke Greek either as a first or second language used a common dialect which differed greatly from the traditional Greek dialects (see iv.6-8). And within Greek education there also developed local educational systems, local cults, and local mentalities. Hellenism gave to many peoples in the east the opportunity to communicate among themselves and also with the rest of the world, but did not nullify their individual features. On the contrary, it was enriched by these and was itself transformed. Even high philosophy in late Hellenistic antiquity was deeply marked by eastern wisdom.

The Jews had translated their sacred texts into Greek (see Text [1] and vi.2) and were now writing new religious and historical texts in Greek. The Egyptians circulated some of their traditional beliefs in "hermetic texts" written in Greek. These were a collection of books with a religious and philosophical content, the teaching of which aimed at the *deification* of Man. The *Chaldean Oracles*, a hexameter poem written by one Julian, teaching religious practices which have features in common with magic, was composed in Greek. Babylonian wisdom, astrology, and the various eastern cosmologies were most often expressed in Greek. Many novels of wide circulation were also written in Greek. Once Christianity had passed beyond Palestine, its adherents spoke Greek, even in the imperial capital. The New Testament and the first Christian texts were written in Greek. Gnosticism, a religious current which, at its height in the second century, clashed with the emerging orthodoxy, spread most widely through Greek. Resistance to Roman suzerainty and the predominance of traditional Greek education were now expressed, where necessary, mainly in Greek.

**Figure 48 opposite** The portrait is from Pompeii, which was destroyed in AD 79. The couple depicted, instead of holding jewels or symbols of authority, are holding up writing implements. The husband is holding a papyrus cylinder and the wife a diptych *deltos* or tablet, made from waxed, wooden panels, and a stylus, the tool used for scoring the waxed surface. The implication is that the husband owned and studied writings of note and that the wife made personal memoranda. Both spoke Latin, but as educated people they would certainly have known Greek, too. In neighboring Herculaneum, destroyed by the same eruption of Vesuvius, a library has been found containing hundreds of Greek manuscripts from the school of Epicurus. A couple such as this belonged to the 10 percent of the population who knew how to read and write well.

Many of those who were highly educated and cultured, almost always members of the upper classes, did not feel comfortable with this great spread of universalizing Hellenism. From the time when King Alexander had united a large part of the East to the Greek world, the upper classes were everywhere distinct in their use of Greek and in their perpetuation of Greek education. They secured this education by their attendance at local gymnasia, which were, at the same time, schools and sports centers (see II.23, VIII.1). At the time of Roman suzerainty, however, the Greek language in the form of the common dialect, known as Koine (see II.21, IV.6–8), and also certain forms of Greek education were shared by broad masses in the eastern part of the empire.

Those who wanted to retain the symbols of their superiority now learned Attic Greek and studied Homer and the great authors of the fifth and fourth centuries BC (see VIII.3). Certain grammarians in the Hellenistic period (see VIII.2), and especially the poets of Alexandria, had kept alive the idioms, dialects and means of expression used in epic poetry and in the great tragedians. For some time, however, their studies and their poems had been read by only a handful of scholars. Roman rule created a new state of affairs. The upper classes of the Greek world, who were no longer able to participate freely in politics, now recalled the times of greatness. By returning to the dialects and themes of their glorious forefathers, they demonstrated to the Romans – and to themselves – the superiority of Greek education. Simultaneously, they cut themselves off from the great tide of Hellenism in its common dialect. This ideological attitude was labeled *Atticism* (see VIII.3) and *Sophistic*, sometimes, indeed, *Second Sophistic*, to distinguish it from the movement of the ancient Sophists.

The main event in the religious and spiritual area was the spread of Christianity and its eventual imposition through imperial edicts. The Christian church in Rome, and, by extension throughout the West, kept Greek as its liturgical language until the end of the second century. Then it went over to Latin. With the biblical texts now translated into Latin, Christianity began its great expansion in the western part of the empire and beyond. In the eastern part, however, events unfolded differently. The Greek-speaking churches led the way in making translations of the biblical texts into the traditional languages of the East: first Syriac (see V.14, VI.7), then Egyptian (Coptic, see V.13) and later Armenian. At the end of the fourth century, the Scriptures had been translated into Persian, Indian, and other local dialects – as they would

later be into Slavonic. If in the western part of the empire Christianity functioned as a cohesive element for Latin education, in the east it acted as a catalyst in the reinforcement of the local languages. In certain instances, the local languages borrowed elements of the Greek alphabet to secure their expansion and consolidation even when they already had their own historical script.

Together with the upper classes, the higher clergy also began to abandon Hellenistic Koine, in which the New Testament and the whole of early Christian literature had been written. The first systematic elaboration of Christianity with the concepts and language of higher Greek culture began in Alexandria at the end of the second century. The Great Fathers of the eastern churches, in the late fourth century, now wrote in Atticizing Greek, which was agreeable to those who were themselves well educated. The *New Testament*, however, remained in its original form and its idiom was retained in some of the apocryphal writings which continued to be written and read.

Julian's efforts to turn Hellenism (see VII.C.1), as a cultural and a religious system, into the official and predominant current in the empire were short lived. His successors supported Christianity with drastic measures. Theodosius I banned for good the cults and sacrifices of the pagans, and in 393 AD the last Olympic Games were held. Meanwhile, certain Christians, headed by monks, became increasingly aggressive (see Text [2]). Pagan temples were destroyed, the Serapeum of Alexandria was razed to the ground in 392 and the female philosopher, Hypatia, met a tragic end at the hands of fanatical believers in 415. The heritage of Classical Antiquity and the later achievements of Greek philosophy, especially Neoplatonism, were preserved mainly within Christianity. In place of the old controversies between schools of philosophy, the Christian empire now had to face the battle against heresies and schisms within the Church.

On a broader scale, however, Hellenism did not fade out so quickly. In the large cities, imperial edicts were enforced more easily, but in the countryside the traditional beliefs and cults that had learned to express themselves in Greek Koine survived for quite a time, until they came into opposition with Islam.

At the beginning of the seventh century, with the expansion of the Arabs (see v.17), the empire lost Egypt and Syria. The regions that were thus cut off were now no longer under the influence of the Greek language. The Christians of the East, where they survived, all spoke their own languages. Greek became, however, the dominant language in the

Byzantine empire, within which dozens of traditional languages also survived. Greek in the Byzantine empire continued its dual existence as both Atticizing and a developed form of Koine. This dual tradition also left its stamp on Byzantine Christianity.

### Selected texts

[1] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.21 PG 7.947–8

Πρὸ τοῦ γὰρ Ῥωμαίους κρατῦναι τὴν ἀρχὴν αὐτῶν, ἔτι τῶν Μακεδόνων τὴν Ἀσίαν κατεχόντων, Πτολεμαῖος ὁ Λάγου, φιλοτιμούμενος τὴν ὑπ' αὐτοῦ κατεσκευασμένην βιβλιοθήκην ἐν Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ κοσμήσαι τοῖς πάντων ἀνθρώπων συγγράμμασιν ὅσα γε σπουδαῖα ὑπήρχεν, ἤτήσατο παρὰ τῶν Ἱεροσολυμιτῶν εἰς τὴν Ἑλληνικὴν διάλεκτον σχεῖν αὐτῶν μεταβεβλημένας τὰς γραφάς. Οἱ δέ, ὑπήκουον γὰρ ἔτι τοῖς Μακεδόσι τότε, τοὺς παρ' αὐτοῖς ἐμπειροτάτους τῶν γραφῶν καὶ ἀμφοτέρων τῶν διαλέκτων ἑβδομήκοντα πρεσβυτέρους ἔπεμψαν Πτολεμαίῳ, ποιήσαντος τοῦ Θεοῦ ὅπερ ἠβούλετο.

For before the Romans possessed their kingdom, while as yet the Macedonians held Asia, Ptolemy the son of Lagus, being ambitious to adorn the library which he had founded in Alexandria, with a collection of writings of all men, which were [works] of merit, made request to the people of Jerusalem, that they should have their Scriptures translated into the Greek language. And they – for at that time they were still subject to Macedonians – sent to Ptolemy seventy of their elders, who were thoroughly skilled in the Scriptures and in both the languages, to carry out what he had desired.

(This English translation is given in the series “The Ante-Nicene Fathers,” Michigan: Grand Rapids [reprinted November 1981] vol. I, p. 451. Being based on the ancient Latin translation which is considered in this instance as superior, it corrects the Greek text at the end.)

[2] Libanius, *To the Emperor Theodosius, for the temples* 8–9 Foerster

. . . οἱ δὲ μελανειμονοῦντες οὗτοι καὶ πλείω μὲν τῶν ἐλεφάντων ἐσθίοντες, πόνον δὲ παρέχοντες τῷ πλήθει τῶν ἐκπωμάτων τοῖς δι' ἰσμάτων αὐτοῖς παραπέμπουσι τὸ ποτόν, συγκρύπτοντες δὲ ταῦτα ἀχρότητι τῇ διὰ τέχνης αὐτοῖς πεπορισμένη μένοντος, ὃ βασιλεῦ, καὶ κρατοῦντος τοῦ νόμου θεοῦσιν ἐφ' ἱερά ξύλα φέροντες καὶ λίθους καὶ σίδηρον, οἱ δὲ καὶ ἄνευ τούτων χειρᾶς καὶ πόδας. ἔπειτα Μυσῶν λεία καθαιρουμένων ὄροφῶν, κατασκαπτομένων τοίχων, κατασπωμένων ἀγαλμάτων, ἀνασπωμένων βωμῶν, τοὺς ἱερεῖς δὲ ἢ σιγᾶν ἢ τεθνᾶναι δεῖ τῶν πρώτων δὲ κειμένων δρόμος ἐπὶ τὰ δεύτερα καὶ τρίτα, καὶ τροπαια τροπαιοῖς ἐναντία τῷ νόμῳ συνείρεται. τολμᾶται μὲν οὖν ἂν ταῖς πόλεσι, τὸ πολὺ δὲ ἐν τοῖς ἀγροῖς.

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. . . But the black-robed tribe, who eat more than elephants and, by the quantities of drink they consume, weary those that accompany their drinking with the singing of hymns, who hide these excesses under an artificially contrived pallor – these people, Sire, while the law yet remains in force, hasten to attack the temples with sticks and stones and bars of iron, and in some cases, disdain- ing these with hands and feet. Then utter desolation follows, with the strip- ping of roofs, demolition of walls, the tearing down of statues and the overthrow of altars, and the priests must either keep quiet or die. After demol- ishing one, they scurry to another, and to a third, and trophy is piled on trophy, in contravention of the law. Such outrages occur even in the cities, but they are most common in the countryside. (Trans. A. F. Norman)