CHAPTER 4

The Hellenistic Age: 336 - 31 B.C.E.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

I. The Warlike Kingdom of Macedon

Linguistically linked to Classical Age Greece, Macedon was a monarchy whose kings were obliged to wage war continuously in order to retain the support of the Macedonian army.

A. Unity and Expansion under King Philip

The Macedonian nobility adopted Greek culture but it was King Philip who united them and, with Macedon firmly under his control, conquered the Greek city-states themselves in 338 B.C.E.

B. The Conquests of Alexander

King Philip’s intention to conquer the Persian Empire as “revenge” for the Persian War was a shrewd linking of Greek civilization with Macedonian might, but it was his son Alexander who actually conquered not only the Persian Empire but beyond – as far as India. As he conquered, Alexander established cities at key locations, which drew thousands of Greek migrants who became the cities’ elites. Although Alexander tried to adapt Persian political structures to consolidate and unite his empire, resistance from his army ensured that at his death, without an adult heir, Alexander’s empire would eventually disintegrate.

C. Successor Kingdoms: Distributing the Spoils

Fighting among themselves, Alexander’s generals eventually created a number of kingdoms, run by all-Greek administrations in which the kings were worshiped as gods but relied on military success, public projects, and good government to ensure the support of their armies and subjects.

II. Hellenistic Society and Culture

Politically disunited, the Hellenistic kingdoms all had the same Greek social institutions and cultural orientation.

A. Cities: The Heart of Hellenistic Life

Hellenistic civilization was defined by its Greek-speaking cities. The people of the Hellenistic cities shared a common identity based on a common language, and the cities continued Greek traditions of learning, art, and architecture. They even continued the
tradition of active public life in an age of absolute monarchical power, as Hellenistic kings tended to allow considerable freedom in local government. Those governments were dominated by the wealthy, who spent lavishly to decorate and enhance their cities, which were becoming more diverse as the Greek concept of exclusive city-citizenship yielded to the reality of common subjectship to the king.

B. New Opportunities for Women

Women in the Hellenistic world were held in more regard than women in the Classical Age. Female infanticide was reduced, royal women often wielded considerable power, and overall female education improved, although women remained under the supervision of men with fewer rights and opportunities.

C. Hellenistic Literature, Philosophy, and Science

The Hellenistic era saw striking innovations in literature, philosophy, and science.

1. Literature: Poetry and History Writing

Faced with a repressive political climate, playwrights and poets produced frivolous but elegant works, while a few historians resisted the pressure to extol the deeds of the king to produce more thoughtful accounts.

2. Philosophy: The Quest for Peace of Mind

The schools of Plato and Aristotle continued in Athens, but new schools of philosophy arose, some of which shared a common goal of acquiring inner tranquility. Epicureans sought peace by withdrawing from the world and fears, Stoics by acceptance of fate and devotion to duty, and Cynics by rejecting not only all needs and desires but all the customs and conventions of society.

3. Explaining the Natural World: Scientific Investigation

Hellenistic scientists rejected the more speculative approach of classical Greek science in favor of an emphasis on realism, leading to great advances in mathematics, astronomy, and medicine.

D. Encounters with Foreign Peoples

During the Hellenistic Age, Greeks encountered large numbers of foreign peoples with important results for the West.

1. Exploring the Hellenistic World

Convinced of their own superiority to non-Greek “barbarians,” educated people in the Hellenistic world enjoyed learning about foreign peoples, whom the Greeks came into greater contact with as trade and curiosity drove them to explore the fringes of their world.
2. Resistance to Hellenistic Culture

While some of those foreigners conquered by the Greeks tried to learn Greek and assimilate to Hellenistic culture, most remained separated from, and resentful of, their Greek masters, who found they had to deal with Egyptian and Jewish revolts. Meanwhile, Egyptian, Persian, and Babylonian religions began to predict deliverance someday at the hands of a divinely sanctioned deliverer.

3. Celts on the Fringes of the Hellenistic World

Tribal, war-like, and non-literate, the Celts, ancestors of many modern Europeans, lived just beyond the Hellenistic World but exerted influence on that world through trade and, on occasion, invasion.

III. Rome’s Rise to Power

During the Hellenistic Age, Rome expanded from a city-state into a vast and powerful empire, attempting to incorporate those it conquered into its republican political structure. But trying to govern ever-growing territories with the institutions of a city-state undermined the Roman Republic.

A. Roman Origins and Etruscan Influences

For the first four centuries of its existence, Rome developed its prosperity from trade and its military skills fighting hostile neighbors. Rome was heavily influenced by its neighbors the Etruscans, through whom Rome absorbed much of Greek culture, especially in religion.

B. The Beginnings of the Roman State

Around 500 B.C.E., the Romans overthrew kingship and established a republic, although real power lay in the hands of a relatively small number of influential families. For the next 200 years, Roman political life was a struggle between the wealthy aristocrats (patricians) and the poor commoners (plebeians). This was known as the Struggle of Orders, in which the plebeians slowly but steadily won political and legal rights until they became fully integrated into Roman government. A major reason why the plebeians were able to succeed is that they were the backbone of the Roman army.

C. Roman Territorial Expansion

Conquests caused governmental change in Rome.

1. Winning Control of Italy

By 263 B.C.E., Rome had conquered all of Italy and learned the fundamental lessons of empire-building: the value of political alliances, the uses of careful diplomacy, the tenacity and discipline to endure reversals, and wisdom of extending Roman citizenship to those Rome conquered.
2. The Struggle with Carthage

In a series of three Punic Wars fought with Carthage from 264 B.C.E. to 146 B.C.E., Rome gained the islands of Sicily, Corsica, and Sardinia, survived a devastating invasion by the Carthaginian king Hannibal, and finally completely destroyed Carthage.

3. Conflict with the Celts

The Romans faced fierce resistance from the Celts in the Iberian Peninsula, whom it took them over a century to conquer, but they enjoyed wary but peaceful relations with other Celtic peoples until Julius Caesar’s conquest of Gaul right before the end of the Roman Republic.

D. Rome and the Hellenistic World

Although at first reluctant to do so, Rome extended her control to the Hellenistic eastern Mediterranean.

1. The Macedonian Wars

In three wars fought between 215 and 168 B.C.E., Rome conquered Macedon and Greece.

2. The Encounter Between Greek and Roman Culture

The acquisition of the eastern Mediterranean intensified Hellenism’s influence on Rome. Romans had a love-hate affair with Greek culture, admiring its sophistication but at the same time desiring to preserve their own rugged Roman virtues which they feared Hellenism threatened. Greek culture had a major impact on Roman literature and drama, and in philosophy, Stoicism had a tremendous appeal for the Romans. Art, architecture, and even religion also showed the pervasive influence of Hellenism.

E. Life in the Roman Republic

Territorial expansion brought prosperity, and while a small number of families dominated political life, they also ensured stability by making sure no one family was too powerful.

1. Patrons and Clients

The influence of the ruling families was extended through political networks built on the Roman custom of patrons and clients, in which a powerful man would exercise influence on behalf of a socially subordinate man in exchange for that man’s public support. Thanks to this system, complex webs of interdependency operated at every level of Roman society.
2. Pyramids of Wealth and Power

A well-defined hierarchy shaped Rome’s social organization as well as its political organization. By the first century B.C.E., Rome was dominated by a leadership elite comprised of old noble and former plebeian families, followed by a business class called the equestrians, and the often-impoverished citizen peasantry of plebeians. At the bottom were about two million slaves, one-third of the population, whose brutal treatment resulted in periodic slave revolts.

3. The Roman Family

This sense of hierarchy was reflected in the Roman family, whose male head, the *paterfamilias*, exercised full authority over not only his wife and unmarried children, but the family’s slaves and dependents as well. Even though they were always legally dependent upon a male relative, Roman aristocratic women usually retained control over their own property and could act with a considerable degree of independence – even influencing political matters behind the scenes.

IV. Beginnings of the Roman Revolution

The wealth of empire exacerbated the existing inequalities of wealth and power in Rome and led to the disintegration of the Republic.

A. The Gracchi

The brothers Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus sought to alleviate some of the worse aspects of these inequalities, especially poorer Romans losing their lands, which threatened recruitment for the Roman army. Both brothers met violent ends in their attempts at reform and unwittingly opened the door for unscrupulous politicians to exploit the poor, especially impoverished soldiers, in order to gain personal power. One of the first to do so was Gaius Marius, who eliminated the property requirement for enlisting in the army and whose soldiers swore loyalty not to Rome but to their general.

B. The Social War

In 90 B.C.E., Rome’s Italian allies revolted, demanding full citizenship. They lost their war against Rome, but gained all of their demands. Shortly thereafter the Roman general Sulla used his army to overturn his political opponents and gain control of Rome. Sulla attempted to restore peace and the power of the Senate, but the precedent of using military might in political contests had been set.

C. The First Triumvirate

In order to gain land for his soldiers, Pompey, a Roman general, formed an alliance with the wealthy Crassus and the ambitious Caesar, which became known as the First Triumvirate. In return for helping his partners, Caesar gained both wealth and the command of the Roman army in Gaul.
D. Julius Caesar and the End of the Republic

In conquering Gaul (modern France and Belgium), Caesar won glory and prestige and when he was politically opposed by Pompey and the Senate, Caesar used his loyal troops to instigate a civil war that he had won by 45 B.C.E., when he returned to Rome. There, one year later, Caesar had himself declared dictator for life but was assassinated by a group of idealistic Senators who hoped to restore the Republic. Instead, Rome was plunged into another civil war, which was won in 31 B.C.E. by Caesar’s grandnephew and legal heir, Octavian.

V. Conclusion: Defining the West in the Hellenistic Age

The cultural and geographical boundaries of the West began to take shape during the Hellenistic Age, which saw Hellenistic culture spread and interact with local cultures across the Mediterranean, most significantly leaving a distinctive mark on Roman civilization.

TIMELINE

Insert the following events into the timeline. This should help you to compare important historical events chronologically.

Alexander dies at Babylon
Sulla takes Rome
Tiberius Gracchus initiates reforms
Carthage fights Third Punic War against Rome: end of Carthaginian Empire
Pyrrhus of Epirus is defeated
Roman Republic is created
Carthage fights First Punic War against Rome
Celts invade Italy and plunder Rome

_____ 509 B.C.E.
_____ 390-386 B.C.E.
_____ 323 B.C.E.
_____ 280 B.C.E.
_____ 264-241 B.C.E.
_____ 149-146 B.C.E.
_____ 133 B.C.E.
_____ 88 B.C.E.
MAP EXERCISE

The following exercise is intended to clarify the geophysical environment and the spatial relationships among the important objects and places mentioned in this chapter. Locate the following places on the map.

Susa
Macedonia
Seleucid Kingdom
Granicus (334)
Babylon (330)
Pharsalus
Persepolis (324)
Ptolemaic Kingdom
Illyricum

Pickup map from Kishlansky Study Guide, page 32
MAKING CONNECTIONS

The following questions are intended to emphasize important ideas within the chapter.

1. What factors permitted the domination of Macedonia over the Greek poleis?
2. What did Alexander hope to accomplish with his enormous territorial conquests? How successful was he in creating a homogeneous culture in his empire?
3. How did Greek architecture come to represent the Hellenistic world-view?
4. What factors determined the break between Greek and Roman culture?
5. Discuss the circumstances surrounding Julius Caesar’s assassination. Was this an attempt by the Roman senate to restore the Republic?

DOCUMENT QUESTIONS

1. “The Ruinous Effects of Conquest” details the agricultural system implemented by the Romans. What other societies (throughout history) have implemented similar systems?

2. What rights of citizenship did Arisodama gain in Lamia? What can we infer about the social and political structure of Lamia?

PUTTING LARGER CONCEPTS TOGETHER

1. What is the final significance of Greek civilization? How did Greek civilization have a lasting impact on subsequent history?

2. Given what you have learned about the rise of these ancient empires, discuss the factors necessary for imperial greatness. What do they all have in common? What variables came together in all of these cases?
SELF-TEST OF FACTUAL INFORMATION

1. Which of the following statements about Alexander the Great is not true?
   A. He came from Macedonia.
   B. He benefited from his father’s reorganization of the phalanx.
   C. He envisioned himself as “King of Asia.”
   D. He defeated the Romans.

2. The battle of Gaugamela (332 B.C.E.) marked
   A. Philip II’s victory over the Greek poleis.
   B. Pyrrhus’ victory over the Romans.
   C. Hannibal’s victory over the Romans.
   D. Alexander’s victory over the Persians.

3. Which term is correctly matched with its description?
   A. Koine – roofed colonnade
   B. Paterfamilias – Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible
   C. Hellenes – Greeks
   D. Septuagint – standard version of Greek

4. Which statement about the Stoics is not true?
   A. They spurned all normal customs, morals, and conventional standards of behavior.
   B. They believed in a universal cosmic order.
   C. They promoted active involvement in public affairs.
   D. Their views remained influential in both Hellenistic Greece and the Roman Empire.

5. Which man is correctly matched with his achievement?
   A. Archimedes – organized Greek medical knowledge
   B. Euclid – wrote Elements of Geometry
   C. Galen – calculated the value of pi
   D. Erastosthenes – wrote plays

6. Which city was located in Africa?
   A. Actium
   B. Carthage
   C. Cannae
   D. Chaeronea
7. Which statement about Hannibal is true?

A. He failed to induce Rome’s allies to fight against Rome.
B. He invaded Rome from Sicily.
C. He won the Macedonian Wars.
D. He suffered a major defeat at Cannae.

8. Cicero was a(n)

A. Roman lawyer and orator who stressed moral behavior.
B. Greek navigator who ventured to India.
C. gladiator from Thrace who led an uprising.
D. Alexandrine astronomer who propounded a geocentric view of the universe.

9. The Gracchi brothers

A. led military campaigns in the Punic Wars.
B. joined Julius Caesar to form the First Triumvirate.
C. wrote plays in Latin that reflected the Hellenistic New Comedy.
D. introduced reforms to limit the power of wealthy landowners and corrupt officials.

10. Which of the following is not true of Julius Caesar?

A. He conquered Gaul.
B. He sought to increase the power of the Senate.
C. He defeated Pompey.
D. He was a patrician.