Perhaps no discipline in the academic tradition has enjoyed more scholarly interest than the study of the ancient world, referred to in universities as “Classical Studies”. To this day, the texts of ancient historians such as Herodotus and Thucydides, along with the historical phenomenon of the rise of Rome “from village to Empire,” are considered fundamental cultural monuments of European civilization. The two most important “lieux de mémoire” are Athens and Rome. Their history and languages have produced endless fascination in both scholars and amateurs in the study of antiquity. However, often omitted between the Aegean control of Classical Athens and the Roman dominance over the entire Mediterranean, is a gap of several centuries summarily filled with the heroic image of the short and explosive reign of Alexander the Great. The history, culture, states, religions and individuals of these intermediate centuries, were virtually devoid of any serious scholarship until the 19th century. With a view to explaining this paradox within the context of the evolution of Classical Studies, this paper seeks to analyze scholarly tendencies and breakthroughs in order to identify the distinct character of what has been conventionally called the Hellenistic Age as a historical period worthy of professional study in its own right.

A famous story recorded by the Roman historian Suetonius relates that Augustus, having just defeated both Marc Antony and Cleopatra at Actium, sailed to Egypt to claim the Ptolemaic kingdom as conquered territory in the name of Rome. While there, “he paid homage to the sarcophagus containing the remains of Alexander the Great. […] When he was asked if he would also like to view the tomb of the Ptolemies, he replied that he wanted to see a king, not dead bodies.” This anecdote captures the perception of the Hellenistic Age that has continued until modern times. Andrew Erskine notes that, “the dismissive outlook evident in the story reflects a general and continuing neglect of the Greek world after Alexander.” Indeed, even as late as the 19th century, George Grotte, a liberal historian, could still write in the preface of his History of Greece that “as a whole, the period between 300 BC and the absorption of Greece by the Romans is of no interest in itself, and is only so far of value as it helps us to understand the preceding centuries.”

Such unequivocal dismissal of the Hellenistic period was fuelled in great part by the Roman historiographical tradition through authors such as Polybios, Livy and Tacitus, who equated “Greekness” with oriental effeminacy. Influenced by such dismissive

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2 Sue. Aug. 18.
Roman perceptions, early modern historians consequently interpreted the victory of Philip II of Macedonia over the Greeks at Chaeronea in 338 BC as the death of the Periclean democratic ideal representative of Classical Greece, and the triumph of the *idiota*, as *ataraxia* (tranquility) became the only realistic goal in life. Therefore scholars believed that, “when this society fell victim, finally, to the Roman military machine, with its crass and philistine efficiency, the feeling was that these degenerate Greeklings had got no more than they deserved.” But as J. B. Bury argued, such Rome-centered bias often overlooks the fact that this was the time which produced the brilliant Academician Carneades, the famous *Aphrodite of Melos* and the *Dying Gaul* statues, and the works of Euclid.

It took many centuries until these perceptions of the historical period from Alexander the Great to the fall of the last Hellenistic kingdom would be subjected to critical overhaul. The first serious study of the Hellenistic period came from Johann Gustav Droysen in the 19th century academy of Wilhelmine Germany. In his three-volume *Geschichte des Hellenismus* published in 1878, Droysen perceived Alexander the Great as “an Aristotelian superman [who] is an instrument of history and of God himself,” whose incredible success caused Greek language and culture to spread in and mix with other pagan cultures - especially that of the Jews. According to Droysen, such cultural and religious syncretism ignited and sustained by Alexander and his successors, created an environment of religious and cultural dialogue which facilitated the appearance and dissemination of Christianity.

Despite the later criticism that would attack and finally destroy his thesis, Droysen nonetheless deserves merit for giving a distinct name and identity to a previously dismissed historical period. As Ulrich von Wilamowitz commented, “Droysen showed great boldness in building up his history of a period of which no continuous narrative has come down to us, though it represents the zenith of Greek power.” However, this new perspective on the post-Alexander centuries did not immediately impose itself within the discipline of Classical Studies. It took time, however, for this “new” concept to be considered in the Classical curriculum. One could not escape the uneasy feeling that what came after the Classical period – the name itself evokes primacy – is the epilogue of Greek genius, only to be replaced centuries later by the greatness of Rome. Indeed, when compared to the intellectually innovative and defining texts that embody the prominence of Classical Greece, “it is difficult to resist the first impression that there is something wrong with an age which has left an

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6 *Idiotes*: private individual who did not hold any office and did not participate in political life. *Ataraxia*: freedom from every kind of excitement, peace of mind.
insufficient account of itself.”

Therefore, it should not be a surprise that even as late as 1963 eminent historians such as M. I. Finley characterized Hellenistic political history as “a wearying one, monotonous and often ugly, of unceasing warfare, bad faith and not infrequent assassination.” It is due to such dismissive perception that Finley dedicated a mere eleven pages in his book *The Ancient Greeks* to the study of the Hellenistic centuries compared to the 137 pages discussing “the Classical City-State”.

It is essential to keep in mind, however, that the term “*Hellenismus*” – rendered in English as “Hellenistic” – was never conceived of, or used in antiquity as Droysen presented it. Modern scholars have always been aware that the term was in fact coined by Droysen “[pour] désigner la langue parlée dans le monde issu du mélange des peuples occidentaux et orientaux du nom de ‘langue hellénistique.’” The root of the term is the word *hellenismos* used in a Biblical sense to designate pagans and “barbarians” imitating or acquiring Greek language, especially in the case of the Jews. Therefore, the term “Hellenistic” must be used cautiously because otherwise it can pose serious problems for a historian studying the period of time which it serves to identify. After all, it is a modern term designating a time period artificially constructed according to modern concerns in Classical Studies; the ancients certainly did not conceive of historical periods or their own contemporary times as modern scholars do.

Nevertheless, the precedent set up by Droysen would not be completely overlooked. Although in 1913 J. B. Bury concluded his nine-hundred-page long *History of Greece* with the conquests and death of Alexander the Great, ten years later he dedicated a one-hundred-fifty-page study *The Hellenistic Age*. In it he wrote that “the habit of treating what is, not very happily, called the Hellenistic age as if it were no more that a wayside inn in which a historical student travelling from Athens and Sparta to Rome is forced reluctantly to halt for a few tedious hours is not yet obsolete.” Furthermore, he also observed that the study of the Hellenistic period “has entered little into liberal education except so far as it is involved in the history of the Roman Republic.” Bury’s criticism found important supporters. Around the same time, in 1924, Wilamowitz took up the term proposed by Droysen and in his *Hellenistische Dichtung in der Zeit des Kallimachos* he presented Hellenism as the imperialistic achievement of Greek conquerors.

Interest in the Hellenistic period grew slowly but surely and by 1941 Michael

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13 Droysen quoted and translated by Préaux (1978, 7).
15 Bury 1925, 1.
16 Ibid, 1-2.
17 Momigliano 1994, 158.
Rostovtzeff could write in the preface of his two-volume *A Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World* that “as every student of ancient history knows, the old-fashioned conception of this age as a time of decay of Greek civilization and of a pitiful collapse of Greek political life is unfounded or at least one-sided and misleading.” Rostovtzeff’s work was a landmark in the field because for the first time attention was directed from military and political events to social problems and global economic patterns, making him “primarily the historian of […] traders, gentlemen farmers, and professionals.” Rostovtzeff’s effort is all the more significant for the study of the Hellenistic period because for the first time a great body of archeological, numismatic and epigraphic evidence was brought together and given serious consideration. The work of Rostovtzeff signaled that there was finally serious consideration in academic institutions of the Hellenistic period and its overwhelming body of evidence. Behind Rostovtzeff’s project stood reviewers from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, from the State Museum of Berlin, from the University of Oxford and Yale University, as well as from the American Numismatic Society. As a matter of fact, Rostovtzeff’s list of acknowledgements including scholars and institutions from all over the world spans two pages, apparently in an abridged version. All of this points to the fact that the study of the Hellenistic period had finally imposed itself within Classical Studies and was a serious scholarly effort that could no longer be taken lightly, let alone ignored.

This conceptualization of a distinct “Hellenistic” age also brought up important issues concerning the process of “periodization”, which recent Hellenistic scholarship does not shy away from pointing out. In a chapter entitled “The Problem of Periodization”, Barry Strauss calls into question the historian’s tendency to catalogue and arrange events according to specific criteria and perceptions. He observes that “each of these periods [i.e. Classical, Hellenistic or Republican], indeed any historical period, raises chronological difficulties.” He then asks, “when, for example, did the Hellenistic period end? With the mission of Jesus c. 30 CE? Or earlier, in 30 BCE, with the death of Cleopatra?” His point may seem hypercritical but still it must not be taken lightly. Indeed, from a political approach historical convention decrees that the fall of Ptolemaic Egypt and, consequently, of the last Macedonian kingdom that grew after the death of Alexander the Great signifies the end of the Hellenistic period and the rise of the Augustan age. However, the ancient historian Polybios ended the period even sooner in 220 BC when the Romans became in-

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20 Rostovtzeff 1941, xi.
21 Ibid, xiii-xiv.
23 Green 2007, xv.
involved in Eastern Mediterranean affairs.\textsuperscript{24}

But if Momigliano was right in claiming that “Hellenism suggests to us more the idea of a civilization than the idea of a mere political system,”\textsuperscript{25} then it must also be taken into account that “while he was working on Hellenistic political history Droysen did not concurrently study Hellenistic poetry, philosophy, and religion;” all of these cultural trends and developments that certainly did not end with the rise of Rome.\textsuperscript{26} Therefore, Claire Préaux’s argument that from a cultural and linguistic perspective “l’expansion de l’hellénisme se poursuit en Orient, après Auguste” must be acknowledged.\textsuperscript{27}

On the other hand, the conventional beginning of the Hellenistic period must likewise not be accepted \textit{a priori}. Alexander’s conquests were certainly revolutionary in many ways, but recent scholarship illuminates various patterns of continuity from Classical well into Hellenistic times. The most continuity is that of the \textit{polis} as a socio-political way of life. Despite what M. I. Finley suggested in 1963, “the Greek city-state continued to exist and in some respects to flourish and prosper; it seems clear that more cities were in some sense democratic than before, but that their freedom of action was limited.”\textsuperscript{28} In fact, this was not an entirely new situation given the ever-present tyrannical or oligarchic factions, as well as the earlier Persian monarchic threat in a \textit{polis}. Moreover, in a relatively recent study on ancient social and gender relations entitled “Change or Continuity: Children and Childhood in Hellenistic Historiography”, Mark Golden made the argument that “alleged Hellenistic characteristics,” such as attitudes towards children, “[were also] found in the Classical period.”\textsuperscript{29} It was not all about \textit{ataraxia}, after all.

Therefore, there is a growing tendency in modern scholarship to reject the perception of history of the Hellenistic age simply as a clear-cut intermediate period from what is conventionally called “Classical” down to “Roman” times. Instead, narrative theory has been adopted to explain the Hellenistic period as an example of “the authoring of a beginning, middle and end to the story.”\textsuperscript{30} This creative process of writing history has been identified by Alun Munslow as the “story space” model of what, how, when, why, and to whom things happened in the past, “which the reader/consumer enters into when they read, view or ‘experience’ the past, constituted as history.”\textsuperscript{31} As a result, history students are warned that while thinking in terms of historical periods may be helpful in conceptualizing the past, they must always be aware that “the historian’s story space is a universal space. History can only be presented ‘in’ it [since] it is the only means through which we project

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\textsuperscript{24} Préaux 1978, 6, Polyb. 1.3.
\textsuperscript{25} Momigliano 1994, 147.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, 153.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid 1978, 6.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid, 6.
\end{footnotes}
the past. How and why we do it depends ultimately on our epistemological choices. Thus the concept of historical periods is but a mimetic construct.

The fact that such deconstructionist efforts have been undertaken is proof that post-modernism has finally caught up with the study of the Hellenistic age. An important aspect of this development is the growing use of gender theory to define the Hellenistic period as distinct from earlier times. Ever since the pioneering work of Grace Harriet Macurdy, *Hellenistic Queens: A Study of Woman-Power in Macedonia, Seleucid Syria, and Ptolemaic Egypt*, first published in 1932, the field has been more responsive to the study of gender relations. Indeed, work from scholars such as C. Schneider in the 1960’s and Sarah Pomeroy in the 1980’s has led to the conclusion that “women are seen to play more prominent roles in [Hellenistic] public life, albeit within a male-dominated value system.”

Moreover, despite complaining that “Classics does not offer feminists enough ammunition for a true revolution: the subject matter is too patriarchal, the evidence too scarce, the history too long, the traditions too deeply ingrained”, Barbara McManus has nevertheless pointed to the crossing of a “rational frontier” that led to a redirection of the Classical discipline and a redefining of professional boundaries.

Since Hellenistic history has been exposed as “emplotted” history, then “the meaning of the past does not lie in the absolute significance of a single event but how that event is fitted into an appropriate story narrative.” For decades, therefore, the narrative of the period has been constructed according to the criteria which define the term “Hellenistic”. With the definition explained above, its use has proven to be problematic for late 20th century and early 21st century historians. As Barry Strauss has observed, “one half of the term - “istic” - suggests a mere derivative of the pure and original Hellenic; the other half - “Hellen” - ignores the non-Greeks in the lands ruled by Alexander’s successors, who outnumbered and frequently ignored the conquerors and their descendants. Indeed, in a compelling study published in 1993 entitled *From Samarkhand to Sardis: A New Approach to the Seleucid Empire*, Susan Sherwin-White and Amélie Kuhrt have challenged the Hellenizing achievement of Alexander’s successors by emphasizing the continuity of Achaemenid structures of government under Seleucid administration.

Around the same time, the concept of cultural and religious syncretism as characteristic of the Hellenistic world has been discarded in a masterful comparative studies project published by Walter Burkert in 1992. *The Orientalizing Revolution* heralded

32 Ibid, 19.
34 Barbara McManus, *Classics and Feminism* (Toronto, Canada: Prentice Hall, 1997), 29, 139.
35 Munslow 2007, 38.
36 Strauss 1997, 165-166.
by Burkert “pursues the hypothesis that, in the orientalizing period, the Greeks did not merely receive a few manual skills and fetishes along with new crafts and images from the Luwian-Aramaic-Phoenician sphere, but were influenced in their religion and literature by the eastern models to a significant degree.” As a result, such syncretism is not limited to a single period in Greek history, but pervades its entire history and identity since its earliest foundations; as Burkert put it, “the Greeks are the most easterly of the Westerners.”

Therefore, Alexander’s conquests are beginning to be interpreted simply as an accelerating factor to an already-existing contact in areas such as trade, travel, diplomacy, and the exchange of ideas, which was in no way an exclusively Greek initiative. On the contrary, there has been a socio-cultural tendency in recent scholarship to focus on multiculturalism and the “barbarians” as worthy of study in their own right.

This constant challenge and overhaul proposed from all corners of the discipline has ultimately rendered the title “Hellenistic” meaningless and simply incorrect when referring to the historical period which it was initially meant to designate. Lately, there have been suggestions to replace the term “Hellenistic” with “post-classical” or “Alexandrian.”

Most recently, in 2008, Malcolm Errington proposed to describe the centuries between Classical Athens and Imperial Rome as the “Macedonian Centuries” since “all changes and developments in these years were directly conditioned by regional Macedonian monarchies.” Most historians, however, propose that terminology should never be a decisive issue. Instead, they argue that “revaluation of the Hellenistic era was overdue” and that recent trends and debates in the field ought not to discourage a young student.

On the contrary, Graham Shipley remarks that the fact that “so few interpretations and explanations are as yet the subject of a settled consensus” is proof that “we have barely scratched the surface of the period.”

The study of the Hellenistic period has witnessed an astonishing development in the course of its evolution. From its millennial obscurity, it has experienced a growth of interest on an exponential scale ever since its emergence in academia during the 19th century. In past decades it seemed that the study of the Hellenistic period needed justification, being taught in few universities until the 1990’s. Presently, Hellenistic studies are undergoing what Graham Shipley calls “a quiet revolution.” Indeed, there is a great amount of archeological, numismatic and epigraphic evidence for the Hellenistic period that has been

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39 Ibid., 129.
44 Green 1993, 11.
45 Shipley 2006, 324.
46 Shipley, 315, 318-319.
recently made available. Challenging interpretations have also been posited lately, ranging from socio-cultural and linguistic considerations to gender analysis and narrative theory. All of this points to the overarching establishment of the field, heralding an optimistic future for its students because “we may be about to see a new generation who cross methodological boundaries more easily.”

47 Shipley 2006, 319.
Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


