

I

The Greeks and their neighbours in the Hellenistic world

PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

I

The philosophic historian will never stop meditating on the nose of Cleopatra. If that nose had pleased the gods as it pleased Caesar and Antony, a loose Alexandrian gnosticism might have prevailed instead of the Christian discipline imposed by the two Romes, the old one on the Tiber, and the new one on the Bosphorus. The Celts would have been allowed to go on collecting mistletoe in their forests. We would have fewer books on Queen Cleopatra and on King Arthur, but even more books on Tutankhamen and on Alexander the Great. But a Latin-speaking Etruscologist, not a Greek-speaking Egyptologist, brought to Britain the fruits of the victory of Roman imperialism over the Hellenistic system. We must face the facts.

The victory of Roman imperialism can in its turn be described as the result of four factors: the new direction given by Rome to the social – that is the military – forces of old Italy; the utter inability of any Hellenistic army to match the Romans in the field; the painful erosion of Celtic civilization and its appendages which went on for centuries and ultimately enabled the Romans to control the resources of western Europe from the Atlantic to the Danubian regions; and finally the co-operation of Greek intellectuals with Italian politicians and writers in creating a new bilingual culture which gave sense to life under Roman rule. Only the Jews and the Iranians stood up to the Romans, as they had stood up to the Seleucids. The Jews had not a chance, but in the

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course of their toils one of their minority groups acquired autonomy and challenged the Roman Empire in a more fundamental manner than the old worshippers of the Temple of Jerusalem had ever done. As for the Arsacid dynasty of Parthia, it claimed its independence about 247 B.C. and made good its word. For nine centuries Iran remained free. Not only its army, but its religious tradition was a force to be reckoned with.

Four of the five protagonists of this story – Greco-Macedonians, Romans, Jews and Celts – came together for the first time in the Hellenistic period. Indeed for all practical purposes the Greeks discovered Romans, Celts and Jews only after Alexander the Great. There is an element of paradox in this. Greek colonies had prospered in Italy not very far from Rome for centuries. Massalia had been in direct contact with the Celts at least since the fifth century B.C. The Jews lived in a region where Greek mercenaries were often stationed and Greek merchants often called. The Iranians, who soon freed themselves from Hellenistic control and always escaped that of Rome, were also the only nation which the Greeks had known and appraised before Alexander. The Persian Empire was indeed another story altogether: it had ruled over Greeks. But even for the Iranians the Hellenistic era meant a change in appreciation: the prophet Zoroaster took the place of King Cyrus as the most characteristic Iranian figure. Rome replaced Persia as the empire by which the Greeks were directly challenged. Parthia was by now a remote state, though formidable: the Magi had some of the prestige of the mysterious region from which they came and offered spiritual goods of their own.

Thus the Hellenistic age saw an intellectual event of the first order: the confrontation of the Greeks with four other civilizations, three of which had been practically unknown to them before, and one of which had been known under very different conditions. It seemed to me that the discovery of Romans, Celts and Jews by the Greeks and their revaluation

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of Iranian civilization could be isolated as the subject of these Trevelyan lectures. The details are not well known, nor is the general picture clear. There are of course things to be said also about Egypt and Carthage. Hermes Trismegistus emerged from Egypt more or less at the time in which Zoroaster and the Magi became respected figures among the Greeks: they will have to be considered together. In both cases the Platonic school played an essential part. Though Plato never made it explicit that Thoth, the inventor of science, was identical with Hermes, the identification is stated by Aristoxenus of Tarentum and Hecataeus of Abdera (Stobaeus 1, *Prooem.* 6, p. 20 Wachsmuth = Aristoxenus fr. 23 Wehrli; Diodorus 1.16). The search for cultural heroes and religious guides was never confined to one country only. It already embraced Brahmans, Magi, Egyptian priests and Druids by the beginning of the second century B.C., as we know from the authors quoted by Diogenes Laertius in his prooemium. The group went on growing until St Augustine, or rather his source, made it include all the barbarians: 'Atlantici Libyes, Aegyptii, Indi, Persae, Chaldaei, Scythae, Galli, Hispani' (*Civ. dei* 8.9). Two considerations, however, have persuaded me to leave Egypt on the periphery of my enquiry: (1) Egypt had interested the Greeks since Homer as a country difficult to approach and with puzzling customs. It was never treated as a political power. If anything, it was a repository of unusual knowledge. Herodotus gave two ultimately contradictory reasons for spending so much of his time on it, first that 'the Egyptians in most of their manners and customs exactly reverse the common practice of mankind' (2.35), and secondly that the Greeks derived so many of their religious and scientific notions from the Egyptians that even those 'that are called followers of Orpheus and of Bacchus are in truth followers of the Egyptians and of Pythagoras' (2.81). There was therefore no dramatic change in the Greek evaluation of Egypt during the Hellenistic period, though the rise of Hermes Trismegistus as a god of knowledge was new. (2) Native Egyptian culture declined during

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the Hellenistic period because it was under the direct control of Greeks and came to represent an inferior stratum of the population. The 'hermetic character of the language and of the script', as Claire Préaux called it (*Chron. d'Égypte* 35 (1943), 151), made the Egyptian-speaking priest – not to mention the peasant – singularly unable to communicate with the Greeks. The creation of Coptic literature in the new conditions of Christianity indicates the vitality of this underground culture. But the Hellenistic Greeks preferred the fanciful images of an eternal Egypt to the Egyptian thought of their time.

Carthaginian culture, on the other hand, did not decline: it was murdered by the Romans, who, quite symbolically, donated the main library of Carthage to the Numidian Kings (Plin. *N.H.* 18.22). I would gladly talk about the ideas of the Carthaginians, if we only knew them. Carthage, like the Phoenician cities of Syria, had become increasingly Hellenized. Aristotle had treated Carthage at length as a Greek polis. About 240–230 B.C. Eratosthenes put together Carthaginians, Romans, Persians and Indians as the barbarian nations that came closest to the standards of Greek civilization and specified that Carthaginians and Romans were the best governed (Strabo 1.4.9, p. 66).

In the second Punic War Hannibal had the support of Greek historians, such as Silenus of Caleacte and Sosylus of Sparta, and of course made an alliance with Philip V of Macedonia. In the next lecture I shall produce some evidence that about 190–185 B.C. there were many in Greece who looked at Hannibal as a possible saviour from the Romans. Vilification of the character of the Carthaginians was to be found in the Sicilian-born historian Timaeus even before some Roman orators and writers made '*Punica fides*' into a catchword. But it is doubtful whether many Greeks were taken in by such propaganda. Polybius refused to believe it (cf. for instance, 9.26.9; 31.21.6). Notwithstanding Cato and Cicero, and perhaps Ennius, there were even Latin writers who refused to join in the chorus: there is nothing

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very wrong in the *Poenulus* of Plautus; Cornelius Nepos wrote a most sympathetic sketch of Hannibal; Virgil came near to transferring 'Punica fides' to Aeneas. Only Greek imperial writers such as Plutarch and Appian accepted what had become the conventional literary description of the Carthaginians without reflecting that 'Punica fides' had its counterpart in 'Graeca fides'. During the second century B.C. there must have been a feeling of common danger and interests between Greeks and Carthaginians. It was reinforced by the considerable contribution to Greek philosophy by men of Phoenician stock. Iamblichus gives names of Carthaginian Pythagoreans (*Vita Pythagor.* 27.128; 36.267). One of the few circumstantial items of information we have suggests that if the Romans had not destroyed Carthage the Carthaginian intellectuals, like the Greek intellectuals, would have become pro-Roman. A young Carthaginian called Hasdrubal came to Athens about 163 and joined the Academy under Carneades three years later. He became famous under the Greek name of Clitomachus and in 127 was recognized as the official head of his school. He dedicated books to L. Censorinus, consul 149, and to the poet Lucilius: he praised or perhaps adulated Scipio Aemilianus about 140. It does not contradict his devotion to the Romans that he should write a consolation for the Carthaginians after the destruction of the city in 146. Cicero still read this work (*Tuscul.* 3.54); and, being rather thick-skinned in these matters, did not feel the horridness of the situation. One wonders where the Carthaginians were to whom Clitomachus distributed his consolation. He had been caught in the spiral which made his contemporary Polybius the champion of Roman law and order. Another of these stray Carthaginians who wandered between Greece and Rome in the second century B.C. is probably to be recognized in Procles, son of Eucrates, a Carthaginian, whom Pausanias quotes twice. From one quotation (4.35.4) we learn that Procles compared Alexander with Pyrrhus and found the former superior in fortune, but the latter a better tactician. In the other quotation (2.21.6) he

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appears to have taken the Gorgon Medusa killed by Perseus as a member of a wild Libyan race: 'he (Procles) had seen a man from this race brought to Rome'. The Greek-sounding name of Procles and his father are more probably signs of Hellenization than of Greek origin. Procles was using his wits in the sort of intellectual games – rationalistic interpretations of myths, comparisons of popular military leaders – which appealed to the Greek and Roman public. He, too, in a more trivial way, seems to have been caught in the Greco-Roman spiral. Unfortunately, there is not enough evidence to make a coherent account of how Carthaginians and Greeks saw each other in the third and second centuries b.c. and how Rome came to profit from the situation – not least by the importation of an African slave who became the most accomplished of the Hellenized dramatists of Latin literature, Terence.

I shall therefore devote the substance of my lecture to a study of the cultural connections between Greeks, Romans, Celts, Jews and Iranians in the Hellenistic period. I shall go back into the classical age of Greece only in so far as it is necessary in order to understand the later times. What I want to ascertain is how the Greeks came to know and evaluate these groups of non-Greeks in relation to their own civilization. I expected to find interdependence, but no uniformity, in the Greek approach to the various nations and in the response of these nations (when recognizable from our evidence) to the Greek approach. What I did not expect to find – and what I did find – was a strong Roman impact on the intellectual relations between Greeks and Jews or Celts or Iranians as soon as Roman power began to be felt outside Italy in the second century b.c. The influence of Rome on the minds of those who came into contact with it was quick and strong.

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II

Hellenistic civilization remained Greek in language, customs and above all in self-consciousness. The tacit assumption in Alexandria and Antioch, just as much as in Athens, was the superiority of Greek language and manners. But in the third and second centuries B.C. trends of thought emerged which reduced the distance between Greeks and non-Greeks. Non-Greeks exploited to an unprecedented extent the opportunity of telling the Greeks in the Greek language something about their own history and religious traditions. That meant that Jews, Romans, Egyptians, Phoenicians, Babylonians and even the Indians (Asoka's edicts) entered Greek literature with contributions of their own: what Xanthus did for the Lydians in the fifth century B.C. became a routine performance. More foreign gods were admitted into the Greek pantheon than at any time since prehistory. In their turn the barbarians not only accepted Greek gods, but assimilated many of their own gods to Greek gods. It was an unsystematic syncretism which was particularly successful in Italy (Etruria and Rome), left its mark on Carthage, Syria and Egypt, was unsuccessful in Judaea, rather insignificant in Mesopotamia, and affected at least the iconography, if not the substance, of Indian religion through Gandhara art. The notion of a barbaric wisdom gained consistency and acceptance among those who considered themselves Greeks. As early as the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. the Greek philosophers and historians had shown a keen interest in foreign doctrines and customs and had been inclined to recognize some value in them. The story of Pythagoras' studies with barbarian teachers is already to be found in fourth-century sources and may be older. Hermes Trismegistus, Zoroaster and his Magi, and to a lesser degree Moses and Abraham became respected figures with doctrines of their own on the operations of nature. The intellectual influence of the barbarians was, however, felt in the Hellenistic world only to the extent to which they were capable of expressing themselves in Greek. No Greek read the

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Upanishads, the Gathas and the Egyptian wisdom books. It was indeed very difficult to find somebody non-Jewish reading the Bible in Greek even when it was made available in that language. Greek remained the only language of civilization for every Greek-speaking man. Even in the first century A.D. the author of the *Periplus maris Erythraei* cannot find a better accomplishment for a king of Ethiopia – to counterbalance his notorious greed for money – than his knowledge of Greek. The Jew Philo celebrated Augustus for extending the territory of Hellenism (*Leg. ad Caium* 147).

The effort of the natives to be heard by the Greeks was evidently encouraged by the curiosity of the Greeks about the natives and, generally speaking, corresponded to the political situation. But the Greeks were seldom in a position to check what the natives told them: they did not know the languages. The natives on the other hand, being bilingual, had a shrewd idea of what the Greeks wanted to hear and spoke accordingly. This reciprocal position did not make for sincerity and real understanding. When there was no urgency, utopia and idealization abounded; where there was an immediate purpose, propaganda, adulation and reciprocal accusations prevailed. Nevertheless, the Mediterranean world had found a common language, and with it went a literature which was uniquely open to all sorts of problems, debates and emotions.

The novelty of such a situation will be more apparent if we compare with it what can be called the classical situation of the ancient world between 600 and 300 B.C. It has become a commonplace, after Karl Jaspers' *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* – the first original book on history to appear in post-war Germany in 1949 – to speak of the *Achsenzeit*, of the axial age, which included the China of Confucius and Lao-Tse, the India of Buddha, the Iran of Zoroaster, the Palestine of the Prophets and the Greece of the philosophers, the tragedians and the historians. There is a very real element of truth in this formulation. All these civilizations display literacy, a complex political organization combining central government and local authorities, elaborate town-planning,

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advanced metal technology and the practice of international diplomacy. In all these civilizations there is a profound tension between political powers and intellectual movements. Everywhere one notices attempts to introduce greater purity, greater justice, greater perfection and a more universal explanation of things. New models of reality, either mystically or prophetically or rationally apprehended, are propounded as a criticism of, and alternative to, the prevailing models. We are in the age of criticism – and social criticism transpires even from the involuted imagery of Zoroaster's Gathas. The personality of the critics is bound to emerge: they are the masters whose thoughts still count today and whose names we remember.

It is not for me here to try to account for the common features of movements so different in nature as those we have mentioned. What matters to us is that they were independent of each other and, to the best of our knowledge, ignored each other. During the Persian Empire Aramaic did not function as an international language in the same way in which Greek did in the period after Alexander. Aramaic did not penetrate deeply into Greece or Italy. There are exceptions. I would take as one of them the letters in Assyrian characters sent from Persia to Sparta which the Athenians intercepted and managed to translate in 425 B.C.: for surely by *Assyria grammata* Thucydides must mean an Aramaic text (4.50). If Democritus, who was supposed to have appropriated the sayings of Ahiqar, was not in fact acquainted with them, at least Theophrastus was (Diog. Laert. 5.50; Clem. Alex. *Stromata* 1.15.69). But the amount of Aramaic literature which went into international circulation must have been limited in quantity and variety. The mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic we find in two books of the Bible implies that, at least among the Jews, Aramaic was written for no more international a public than that capable of reading Hebrew. True enough, even while using Greek, the Jews remained only too often bilingual for their own consumption, but the extent of their apologetic production in Greek indicates that they

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Excerpt

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aimed at Gentile readers. I cannot see any intention of this kind in the Books of Ezra and Daniel.

The *Achsenzeit*, the axial age, is the development of several civilizations on parallel lines. Characteristically, the *Achsenzeit* is not centred on Mesopotamia and Egypt, two civilizations which were very much in touch with each other and with Persia, Judaea and Greece. But Mesopotamia and Egypt still lived in a world which had been built in the second millennium upon the power of monarchy – the divinely protected monarchy of Mesopotamia and the divine monarchy of Egypt. They did not have to face protests and reforms in the middle of the first millennium B.C. In Egypt a morality of silence prevailed, and Mesopotamia – whether Assyria or Chaldaea – seems to have been bent on conquering the others rather than on criticizing herself. The men of Greece, Judaea, Iran, India and China who transformed their countries through their criticisms of the traditional order did not communicate with one another and did not create an international civilization. What constitutes the novelty of the Hellenistic age is that it gave international circulation to ideas, while strongly reducing their revolutionary impact. Seen in comparison with the preceding axial age, the Hellenistic age is tame and conservative. Until St Paul arrives on the scene, the general atmosphere is one of respectability.

What accentuates the peculiar physiognomy of Hellenistic civilization is the special role two foreign groups – Jews and Romans – came to play in it. The Jews basically remained convinced of the superiority of their beliefs and ways of life and fought for them. Yet they continuously compared their own ideas with Greek ideas, made propaganda for their own beliefs, absorbing many Greek notions and customs in the process – and ultimately found themselves involved in that general confrontation of Greek and Jewish values which we call Christianity. The Romans never took their intellectual relations with Hellenism so seriously. They acted from a position of power and effortlessly preserved a strong feeling of their own identity and superiority. They paid the Greeks