

CHAPTER 1

IN SEARCH OF HELLENISTIC INTELLECTUAL
HISTORY

The unity of the Hellenistic world . . . was a unity which comprised the whole of the Greeks (including those of the mother country) but not the whole population of the Eastern monarchies, where it was restricted to its Greek superstructure.¹

Between the late fourth and early third century BC, the political and cultural landscapes of the Mediterranean and Near East were transformed. The conquests of Alexander the Great and the formation of the successor kingdoms after his death restructured political, socio-cultural and economic relations across an area stretching from western Europe to central Asia. Forged in the flames of Persepolis and quenched with the blood of potential successors and unwilling subjects alike, from the fragments of Alexander's empire there arose what we call the Hellenistic world. For the first time, communities from the urban heartlands of Greece to the steppes of modern-day Afghanistan became part of the same interlocking imperial system, linked to the Macedonian kingdoms by relations ranging from occasional diplomatic contact to direct subordination. Diaspora groups of Greeks and Macedonians settled in the string of Alexandrias, Seleucias and Antiochs that stamped Graeco-Macedonian imperialism onto the physical and cultural geography of the Near East, marrying with local populations, acting as vectors of cross-cultural contact and establishing or intensifying links of trade and exchange between these areas and the Mediterranean world. Macedonian kingship and Greek cultural practices were enacted across a vastly expanded geographical and socio-cultural arena, and were themselves transformed in the process.

These overarching political and socio-cultural changes also had an impact on intellectual life. Under the lavish and competitive

¹ Rostovtzeff 1941: 1053.

In Search of Hellenistic Intellectual History

patronage of the Hellenistic kings, scholars from all over the Greek-speaking world gathered in and circulated between the Hellenistic royal capitals: Antioch, Pergamon, Pella, and above all, Alexandria. The vast resources of the royal courts and the kings' collections of both books and scholars catalysed Greek intellectual activity across all disciplines. This was the period in which Eratosthenes calculated the circumference of the Earth to a remarkable degree of accuracy, and his correspondent Archimedes computed the number of grains of sand required to fill the universe.² It was also a period which saw cross-cultural exchange in the intellectual sphere as in other cultural domains. Greek script, language and literature were adopted and adapted as far east as Bactria and India, while elements from the intellectual traditions of other cultures in turn found their way into Greek scholarship: astronomical and astrological concepts from Babylonia; new medical techniques and pharmaceuticals from Egypt.³ Rarely, we can pinpoint culturally and intellectually 'bilingual' or 'multilingual' individuals whose writings exemplify or elucidate these processes of cross-cultural transmission. Perhaps the best-known are two men – one Egyptian, one Babylonian – who wrote about their respective homelands in Greek: Manetho, a priest from Sebennytos in the Nile Delta, who integrated Egyptian and Greek sources and concepts in his *Aegyptiaca*, and Berossus of Babylon, another priestly figure whose *Babyloniaca* reflects a similar intertwining of Greek and Babylonian traditions and conceptual frameworks.⁴

² The only detailed ancient account of Eratosthenes' method for calculating the circumference of the Earth is Cleomedes *Caelestia* 1.7.64–110 (ed. Todd 1990); for the major ancient witnesses to the calculation see Roller 2010, Appendix 1. For a hypothesis which attempts to reconcile the two different figures for the circumference attributed to Eratosthenes (250,000 and 252,000 stadia respectively), see Carman and Evans 2015. Archimedes computed the 'number of sand' in the universe in the *Sand-Reckoner* (*Psammites*): the most recent edition is Mugler 1971.

³ On astronomy and astrology see Chapter 2; Egyptian influence on Graeco-Roman medicine: Ritner 2000: 114–16 on enema techniques, pulse taking and the introduction of certain drugs in Alexandrian medicine as due to Egyptian influence; for a more sceptical view cf. for the Hellenistic period Von Staden 1989: 1–31 and more generally Jouanna 2012 with a survey of earlier contributions to the debate.

⁴ On Manetho see Dillery 1999; 2015; Moyer 2011: Chapter 2 with earlier bibliography. On Berossus see Chapter 3.

In Search of Hellenistic Intellectual History

Despite the intense cultural interactions which characterised the period after Alexander, when it comes to intellectual life Hellenistic historians tend to focus on the Hellenic – indeed, the panhellenic. Centre stage is usually occupied by the Museum and Library of Ptolemaic Alexandria, the rival intellectual milieu of Attalid Pergamon, and the learned Greek scholarship that took place in both centres: the editing of the Homeric poems; intensive philological analysis of Greek and its dialects; the composition of densely allusive poetry which showcased (and required of its audience) a profound knowledge of Greek myth and literature. Meanwhile, back in the ‘old Greek world’, Athens maintains a starring role as a centre for (Greek) philosophy, whose schools drew adherents from across all the kingdoms.⁵ When a cross-cultural element is added to the analysis, it is usually tied into this prevailing paradigm; for instance, by tracing Greek utilisation of ‘local’ concepts or data, linking Manetho and Berossus to the Hellenistic kings, or connecting their works and those of other foreign scholars to the libraries of Alexandria and Pergamon.⁶ This is not surprising given the challenges of the sources and the

⁵ To give only a few examples from synoptic works of the last two decades, the *Blackwell Guide to Hellenistic Literature* (Gutzwiller 2008) focuses only on Greek literature; the more recent *Companion to Hellenistic Literature* has welcome chapters on Jewish and Egyptian literature, but the predominant focus is on Alexandrian literary production. The chapters on Arts and Sciences in the *Blackwell Companion to the Hellenistic World* (Erskine 2003b) examine Greek medicine (Alexandria), Greek philosophy (mainly Athens), and Greek literature, with the telling lament that we know ‘far too little about Greek literature [my italics] reflecting the cultural interchange of the high Hellenistic period’ (Hunter 2003a: 478). The *Cambridge Companion* (Bugh 2006) includes chapters on historiography and rhetoric, philosophy and science and technology, of which only the last engages with non-Greek scholarship in tracing Greeks’ utilisation of Egyptian and Mesopotamian medical and astronomical knowledge; the entry on Hellenistic Scholarship in the *Wiley Encyclopedia of Ancient History* focuses exclusively on Greek intellectual production (Schironi 2016). There are important exceptions, but they are specialist works on particular disciplines or contexts, such as the body of work on intercultural poetics at Alexandria (e.g. Stephens 2003; Petrovic 2014), or the historiography of ancient astronomy and astrology which has long adopted a more cross-cultural perspective because of the interconnections between Babylonian, Egyptian and Graeco-Roman traditions (see further Chapter 2). In mainstream, introductory and popular works, ‘Hellenistic’ intellectual production remains Hellenic or Hellenocentric.

⁶ E.g. Keyser and Irby-Massie 2006 trace Hipparchus’ debt to Babylonian astronomy and astrology and claim that ‘Local traditions, especially in Egypt and Mesopotamia, continued to be woven into the tapestry of medicine in the Greek eastern Mediterranean’ (253). Dillery 2015 suggests that Manetho and Berossus were inspired by their exposure to Greek historiography via the Hellenistic courts. On the case for foreign works in the Library of Alexandria see Chapter 4.

In Search of Hellenistic Intellectual History

deep imprint, imaginative as well as substantive, that Alexandria and its analogues left on western scholarship. But a Hellenocentric approach which focuses on the dominant centres of scholarship is not the only paradigm available for Hellenistic intellectual history.

Active around the same time as Eratosthenes, Archimedes, Manetho and Berossus were two men whose intellectual horizons and accomplishments were rather more circumscribed. Neither of them, as far as we know, entered into the cosmopolitan intellectual world of superstars like Eratosthenes and Archimedes. Nor would they ever ordinarily occupy the same page in any work of 'Hellenistic' history, for they lived thousands of miles apart, spoke and wrote in different languages and came from very dissimilar cultural environments. The first, Semos, was from the Aegean island of Delos; the second, Anu-aḥa-ušabši, lived in the southern Babylonian city of Uruk. Semos spoke and wrote Greek, a language which at the time had ever-increasing numbers of users, and his work has been transmitted to us, in fragments, through Athenaeus and other later Greek authors.⁷ By contrast, Anu-aḥa-ušabši was a member of a small and shrinking scholarly elite which studied and wrote texts in two already ancient languages: Sumerian, a linguistic isolate which had died out as a spoken language in Mesopotamia nearly two millennia previously, and Akkadian, a Semitic language related to Hebrew and Arabic which probably ceased to be spoken as a first language several centuries before his birth. Anu-aḥa-ušabši's own mother tongue was Aramaic, and it is possible that he also knew Greek, but all we know of his intellectual activity comes from clay tablets inscribed with texts in Akkadian and Sumerian which he wrote or owned; in contrast to the continuous tradition which preserved Semos' work, Anu-aḥa-ušabši's tablets and the knowledge they contained lay beneath the soil in Uruk for over two thousand years awaiting discovery and decipherment. Semos and Anu-aḥa-ušabši never met, and might never have understood each other if they had. Their surviving writings betray no mutual knowledge of, or interest in, each other's culture or history, nor do they contain any borrowed motifs or concepts which might implicitly reveal cross-

⁷ *FGrHist/BNJ* 396.

In Search of Hellenistic Intellectual History

cultural contact. Yet there are other reasons to connect these two individuals.

Despite the geographical and cultural gulfs that separate them, the lives and work of Semos and his Babylonian counterpart are in many ways parallel. Both came from elite families whose members had for generations played a key role in the political and religious life of their local communities – communities which in turn were important centres within their respective regions and whose temples attracted the patronage of Hellenistic monarchs. Both men were closely connected with these temples, and this connection is reflected in their writings in similar ways, from the subjects they selected to the privileged knowledge of local religious practice evident in their work. Beyond their local contexts, Semos and Anu-aḥa-ušabši also shared the same macro-regional political framework: both were living in a world of competing Macedonian kingdoms, and in their surviving works it is possible to detect similar intellectual responses to that broader imperial world. Both produced historical works which assert the significance of their local temple or city, at a time when communities large and small across the Mediterranean and Near East were concerned to safeguard their autonomy and identity in a world dominated by new dynastic powers. Some of the strategies they use to assert that significance are very similar, and reappear in a variety of literary and epigraphic compositions produced by Greek and non-Greek groups for local, international and royal audiences. From this perspective, Semos and Anu-aḥa-ušabši can be aligned closely with each other as local scholars advocating for their communities in ways that transcended linguistic and cultural difference.

In terms of his social position and his intellectual career and interests, Semos of Delos has a considerable amount in common with his Babylonian contemporary, indeed perhaps more than with some of his more famous Greek peers like Eratosthenes or Archimedes. This observation provokes several important questions about intellectual life during the Hellenistic period, and its relationship to political and cultural boundaries. To what extent were individuals' intellectual activities determined by their cultural background, and independent of the large-scale socio-political structures

In Search of Hellenistic Intellectual History

or shifts which mark the period between Alexander's conquest and the battle of Actium? Apart from isolated instances of cross-cultural contact, were the intellectual histories of different cultural regions separate, or are there aspects of intellectual life characteristic of the period that can be seen to transcend cultural boundaries? In sum, what, if anything, rendered intellectual activity in third or second-century Athens and Babylon similarly 'Hellenistic', as well as Greek or Babylonian?

These are the overarching questions behind this book, which focuses on the specific case of Greek and Mesopotamian intellectual culture. Its central concerns are twofold. On the one hand, it offers a new approach to the long-standing problem of how to connect the intellectual histories of the Greek world and Mesopotamia, during a period when these two regions and their cultures were brought into closer contact than ever before by the Graeco-Macedonian conquest and settlement of the Near East. On the other, it attempts to formulate a new paradigm for Hellenistic intellectual history. Using the Greek world and Babylonia as a test case, it asks whether there are elements of intellectual life in the Hellenistic world which transcend cultural and linguistic divisions and are fully 'Hellenistic' in the sense of being co-extensive with the broader structures or boundaries of that world, and conditioned by its particular political or socio-cultural phenomena. To borrow a distinction used by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell in their magisterial study of the Mediterranean, it is an attempt at writing intellectual history *of*, not only intellectual history *in*, the Hellenistic world.⁸

1.1 'Hellenistic Intellectual History'

Many Hellenistic histories exist. Among general accounts, Frank Walbank's learned and lucid introduction to the Hellenistic world has been joined by a profusion of treatments in the last two decades: Graham Shipley's *Greek World After Alexander*, Malcolm Errington's *History of the Hellenistic World*, Hans-Joachim Gehrke's *Geschichte des Hellenismus*, Peter Green's

⁸ Horden and Purcell 2000: 2–4 and *passim*.

1.1 'Hellenistic Intellectual History'

provocative and dystopian vision of the closing centuries of the first millennium BC, Peter Thonemann's brief and exhilarating introduction, and now also (for a more popular audience) Angelos Chaniotis' *Age of Conquests*.⁹ For political history Edouard Will's *Histoire politique du monde hellénistique* and Claire Préaux's *Le monde hellénistique* remain authoritative;¹⁰ for social and economic history, Michael Rostovtzeff's three-volume masterpiece, whatever its difficulties, is still unmatched in scope and detail.¹¹ As yet, however, there is no intellectual history of the Hellenistic world. This does not mean that historians have neglected the intellectual life of the Hellenistic period; quite the opposite. Surveys, companions and handbooks highlight selected phenomena as 'Hellenistic'; histories of ancient philosophy, science or literature sketch developments in specific (Greek) disciplines during the period; Peter Fraser's *Ptolemaic Alexandria* stretches well beyond its stated remit to elucidate intellectual life in the wider Greek world.¹² But there are no overarching or synthetic studies, and certainly no intellectual history which is fully 'Hellenistic' in the sense of being coterminous with the Hellenistic world as a whole, and not just its Greek-speaking parts.

One of the driving questions behind this book is what such a history might look like; where its boundaries would lie; what, if any, its themes would be. More specifically, it asks whether there are particular characteristics or trends which link intellectual life in different geographical, cultural and linguistic zones of the Hellenistic world, making 'Hellenistic intellectual culture' a coherent concept and fruitful object of study. In other words, is it meaningful to speak of 'Hellenistic intellectual history' which encompasses multiple cultural and linguistic traditions, in the same way as Hellenistic political and economic histories now regularly integrate them? This study contends that it is, and seeks to provide an example of how such history might be written. Tracing connections between the lives and work of Greek and Babylonian scholars which go beyond the transmission of Babylonian doctrines in Greece and the adoption of Greek

⁹ Walbank 1993; Shipley 2000; Gehrke 2008; Green 1990; Thonemann 2016; Chaniotis 2018.

¹⁰ Will 1982; Préaux 1978. ¹¹ Rostovtzeff 1941. ¹² Fraser 1972.

In Search of Hellenistic Intellectual History

language and intellectual traditions in Babylonia, it offers a further challenge to Rostovtzeff's contention – quoted at the head of this chapter – that the social and cultural unity of the Hellenistic world was restricted to the Greekness which linked its political elites, itself often 'no more than a thin veneer'.¹³

A statement of intent to write 'Hellenistic intellectual history' immediately generates two questions of definition. The first is, 'what counts as Hellenistic?' The second is, 'what counts as intellectual history?' In a meaningful sense, the answers to these questions form not the departure point but the ultimate object of this book. Nonetheless, the following aims to establish some basic navigational aids.

1.1.1 Intellectual History

In 1985, the well-known intellectual historian John Pocock remarked that, after reading two recent collections of essays on the subject, he was 'persuaded that whatever "intellectual history" is, and whatever "the history of ideas" may be, I am not engaged in doing either of them'.¹⁴ This comment serves to highlight both the plurality of approaches to what its practitioners call 'intellectual history', and the absurdities that can result from an excessive concern for disciplinary definition. In general, my methodological sympathies are with Stefan Collini's argument that 'the richness of characterisation and fineness of discrimination needed to do justice to the expression of human consciousness, past or present, are unlikely to be encapsulated in the rigid conceptual boxes of some purpose-built vocabulary'.¹⁵ While such expansive pronouncements encourage creativity, however, they are not always conducive to clarity; we build conceptual boxes for a reason. The topics and methodologies of the current study are drawn from a variety of historiographical realms and disciplinary contexts, such that the reader who opens this book with the expectation of 'intellectual history' in any of its current forms may feel, with justifiable frustration, that I am not engaged in doing it either. In order to

¹³ Above, 1; 'thin veneer': Rostovtzeff 1926: 370. ¹⁴ Collini *et al.* 1985: 52.

¹⁵ Collini *et al.* 1985: 48.

1.1 'Hellenistic Intellectual History'

avoid disappointment, therefore, it seems necessary to plant my flag at the outset and state explicitly what I mean by the term.

The intellectual history this book seeks to write is not a 'history of ideas', either in the more Platonist conception of that history as practised by Arthur Lovejoy and his successors, or in its contextualist twentieth-century incarnations, associated particularly with Pocock and Quentin Skinner, which sometimes prefer to call themselves 'intellectual history'.¹⁶ Its primary aim is not to trace the contours, development or contexts of any particular idea, concept or thought, or to recover the thought-world or scholarly practices of a particular individual, group or institution, although some of these enquiries will be undertaken along the way and form an integral part of the whole. Nor is it a history of intellectual contacts between Greece and Mesopotamia during the Hellenistic period, although it includes these components within it. Rather, it is a history of (selected strands of) Hellenistic intellectual culture and intellectual activity which aims to highlight cross-cultural connections, both direct and indirect.

The adjective 'intellectual' is understood here in a broad sense which is not limited to high-level or formalised scholarly enquiry, but potentially includes all forms of conceptual engagement with pre-existing traditions (written or oral) and the contemporary world. I use the terms 'intellectual activity' or 'intellectual production' to denote the creation, curation or study of all material which falls under this expansive definition. This includes the copying and composition of texts within formal traditions or institutional contexts which would usually come under the heading of 'scholarship', but also less formalised kinds of creative or reflective engagement with the world, which attest to the knowledge and perceptions of individuals and groups beyond specialist academic enquiry.

The material of analytical interest, therefore, includes writings produced within the formal scholarly contexts and traditions which are typically the preserve of intellectual history: astronomical and astrological texts; historiographical compositions in

¹⁶ History of ideas: see e.g. Lovejoy 1936; 1940; modern contextualist approaches: see e.g. Skinner 1969, and the essays collected in Pocock 1971; 2009.

In Search of Hellenistic Intellectual History

Greek and Akkadian; treatises on the flora and fauna of the known world. But it also encompasses sources whose contents or contexts take us outside these domains: elementary school exercises in Akkadian and Sumerian; honorific inscriptions set up by Greek poleis; correspondence to and from the Hellenistic kings. In turn, the individuals under discussion include, but are not limited to, those associated with formal institutions of learning: we will encounter Aristotle and Theophrastus at the Lyceum in Athens, but also the priests of Athena in her sanctuary at Lindos on the island of Rhodes.

In a similar way, the treatment of the sources, the questions asked and the analytical techniques utilised draw upon, but are not restricted to, those typical of the history of ideas as practised by Lovejoy or Skinner and their followers. The early chapters trace the transmission of particular concepts across cultural boundaries at a level of abstraction which brings us close to Lovejoy. At times, close and contextualised exegesis of a source is undertaken with the aim of understanding precisely what a given individual or group was doing or saying, or trying to do or say. This is securely within the methodology of modern ‘intellectual history’, although it is to be noted that the potential ‘contexts’ here include not only the linguistic context prioritised by Skinner, but all the proximate circumstances of a source’s creation and subsequent interpretation or utilisation in antiquity – political, social, cultural and intellectual.¹⁷ Not all contexts will be relevant in every case, nor will they always be submitted to analytical scrutiny, but following Mark Bevir, I do not regard any single context as necessary or sufficient for understanding a given source, and so all must remain available for consideration.¹⁸

Elsewhere, it is not so much the argument or narrative of a particular composition or the aims or beliefs of its author(s) which will be of interest, but features which can be analysed as indices of *mentalités* or more far-reaching intellectual trends. That is to say, sometimes it is a case of using the text to get at the intellectual and cultural context, which is more or less the inverse of the interpretative paradigm often hailed as the distinctive

¹⁷ Skinner 1969. ¹⁸ Bevir 1992, esp. 94.