

From Polis to Cosmopolis- The Hellenistic City

To the Greeks of the Archaic and Classical ages the word “city” (polis) more often meant the self-contained, self-sufficient and autonomous organization of a community of self-governing citizens:

- The urban centre, characterised by public buildings and temples, was not independent of the countryside where the majority of citizens lived
- The polis physically comprised both **khora** (“countryside, rural settlements and farms”) and **astu** (“urban city-centre”)
 - A citizen’s life oscillated back and forth between these two poles

In the Hellenistic period, after the death of Alexander the Great (322 B.C.), urban communities in the Hellenised East were not independent but formed important economic and intellectual hubs within vast territorial kingdoms. As such they developed quite different characters and functions when compared to the great cities of Old Greece.

- Towns like Alexandria, Antioch and Pergamum are certainly not poleis in the old sense and they look more like “cities” as we understand them
- Nevertheless, many who dwelt in them continued to think of “civic culture”
- One could find there flourishing all the old institutions: gymnasia, council houses, fountains and temples
 - But something had changed irrevocably- the city was, seemingly, no longer more than the sum of its signs of urban culture- **Had the political identity really vanished?**

The Hellenistic Age marks the transformation of Greek society from localised, city-states to extroverted centres of commerce and culture

- Cities were characterised by a hybridisation of Greek and Non-Greek lifestyle
- This new capital lifestyle was most evident in the urban spaces of the period- city planning and euergetism were central
- Traditional Greek cities of the Classical period were unplanned and grew organically outwards
 - * Classical period = introduction of a more organised ‘grid system’
 - * The shift in city planning directly mirrors the shift in Greek culture- from disorderly, to orderly

Changes imposed during the transition to the Hellenistic city:

- The Greek polis = rigid social and political order of the Classical period
- Great new Hellenistic cities = rise of the monarchy = much more cosmopolitan society
 - * Kings manipulated the public through great displays of wealth (‘appeasing the masses’)
- At this time, Greek cultural influence and power was at its peak, experiencing prosperity and progress throughout the Mediterranean
- Social freedom was more common
- The multicultural mixing of society provided a greater social awareness and acceptance.
- The state became more concerned with affairs such as education (previously there was only concern for political issues)

HOW changes were imposed:

- Man was the driving force behind the construction of architectural space- most evident in systems of patronage and euergetism established by Hellenistic leaders
- e.g. exterior block inscription on the Temple of Athena Polias in Prene reads “King Alexander dedicated this to Athena Polias”
- Used as a form of propaganda- manipulated the masses + encouraged certain cultural shifts