

# Entrevista com Andrew Erskine: governo, ideologia e helenização no Mundo Helenístico\*

*Interview with Andrew Erskine: government, ideology and  
Hellenization in the Hellenistic World*

**A**ndrew Erskine is a Professor of Ancient History in The University of Edinburgh at School of History, Classics and Archaeology. He is a notable specialist in Hellenistic history and has many works about this and others themes about Ancient History which represent a significant contribution to scholars. Erskine is the author of *Troy between Greece and Rome: Local Tradition and Imperial Power*, *The Hellenistic Stoa: Political Thought and Action*, *Creating a Hellenistic World* (editor) and numerous articles on the ancient world.

*1. Alessandra André: The Hellenistic World, especially in its early years, has been an important issue of research for you. In your opinion, what is the importance of studying it and what are the major difficulties a historian dedicated to the study of this period has to deal with?*

**Andrew Erskine:** One of the attractions of the studying the Hellenistic world for me is its diverse, multicultural character, which has a particular resonance in today's globalized world. I don't think the Roman empire in the east can be understood without also understanding the practices and culture of its Hellenistic predecessor.

After all, 31 BC and the end of the Ptolemaic kingdom marks a political rather than a cultural change. The chief difficulty for any historian studying the Hellenistic World is the lack of surviving narrative sources, especially contemporary ones – a marked contrast with the classical period where historians can look to Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon. But by way of compensation there is a rich array of alternative material in the form of inscriptions and papyri, which allow different questions to be asked and take the focus away from Athens.

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2. *Recently you have collaborated with the organization of the book Plutarch: Hellenistic lives. The work of Plutarch, as well as the work of Polybius, is one of the main sources used by historians to analyze the Hellenistic period, including the creation of the Hellenistic monarchies, whose contemporary accounts did not survive. Regarding specifically the written sources, what would be the biggest challenges for a scholar devoted to the study of the Hellenistic World?*

**R:** It would certainly be wonderful if we had the complete text of Polybius or if the history of Hieronymus of Cardia were to be discovered, but without these we have to rely on texts written under the Roman empire, not only Plutarch but also writers such as Diodorus, Strabo, Appian and Justin. The Brill New Jacoby project goes a long way towards making the remains of lost histories accessible (and there is no shortage of lost Hellenistic historians), but assessing so-called 'fragments' is very much a work of literary archaeology. Writers such Plutarch reveal as much (or more) about the time they are writing as about the events they are describing. Separating the two is the main challenge for the historian.

3. *In your opinion, what contribution can the usage of material culture bring to the study of the Hellenistic World?*

**R:** The inclusion of material culture into the study of the Hellenistic World allows for a more holistic approach, as demonstrated by John Ma's work on statues and civic honorific culture or Peter Thonemann's wide-ranging study of the Maeander valley. Particularly exciting have been the results of the underwater archaeological projects at Alexandria of the last couple of decades.

The Egyptian-style, Pharaonic statuary discovered there have forced scholars to re-think their idea of Alexandria as a firmly Greek city. Of course there can be considerable debate about how this material is to be interpreted – does it emphasise Ptolemaic control over Egypt or is it addressing an Egyptian audience? Even less dramatic discoveries can illuminate. I recently heard a fascinating paper from Paul Kosmin on a public archive building in Seleuceia on the Tigris – how material is archived can be enormously revealing about how a state conceives of itself. Here the building comes with some 30,000 sealings or bullae, mostly Greek but some showing oriental motifs. Then there are places further east like Bactria where it is the material culture which offers our main source of evidence, for instance at Ai Khanum, in so far as it survives the ravages of the last forty years or so.

4. *When faced with the monarchical system of the Hellenistic period, we realize that there were many elements involved in its structure, including the religious one. What do you think about the importance of religious and cultural elements to the understanding of the ancient political systems?*

**R:** It is a commonplace that religion and politics were interconnected in antiquity, yet at the same time it is all too easy to play it down. Athens was dominated by the Parthenon and religion permeated its public life. In Rome the politicians were also the priests. For Polybius it was superstition that held the Roman state together. Religion helps to structure and confirm people's relations to the state, to each other and to the divine.

5. *Keeping our conversation in the religious field, I would like to ask you to give us an overview about the worship of the basileis in the Hellenistic kingdoms.*

**R:** Ruler cult is one of the more striking phenomenon of the Hellenistic period – precedents can be and have been identified in the Classical period, Lysander and Philip II for instance – but it is after Alexander that it takes off. The first thing to note is that for the most part the impetus comes not from the king (leaving aside Alexander's alleged request to be treated as a god) but from the Greek cities themselves. It is well-attested in the epigraphic record with some impressive and detailed documents, such as the late fourth century decree from Scepsis honouring Antigonus Monophthalmus and the two decrees from Teos directed at Antiochus III.

Yet, at the same time its momentum must have been sustained by the willingness of these kings to accept the honours that were granted to them. For a long time scholars questioned the sincerity of the cities establishing these cults and emphasized the political, but since Simon Price's work in the 1980s it has become clear that the religious component cannot be ignored. These cults were very much part of civic religious life and they were long-lived. They gave cities a way of understanding the inordinate power of the kings and of positioning themselves in relation to those rulers. Interestingly when the Athenians revoke their honours for Philip V of Macedon and the Antigonid dynasty at the beginning of the Second Macedonian War, they decree that public prayers should incorporate a curse on Philip and his family, a kind of ruler cult in reverse.

6. *Historians of the Hellenistic World hardly fail to report to Alexander in their research, often considering his action a determinant for the creation of the Hellenistic basileia. What do you think about the Alexander's role in this process?*

**R:** Alexander becomes a model for the representation of power. Think of the relatively youthful beardless portraits of Seleucus Nicator and Ptolemy Soter, even when they are well into old age. This has been well shown by Andrew Stewart in his *Faces of Power* book. Whether he is a model for the exercise of power, however, is another matter. Alexander's restless conquest is rather different from the Successors whose initial priority was to establish some kind of kingdom for themselves rather than extend one they inherited. On the other hand, the latter part of Alexander's reign does clear the way to a more personal form of rule that comes to be adopted also by the Hellenistic kings that follow.

*7. Regarding yet the emergence of the Hellenistic World, I would like to hear you about the factors that led to the creation of a new civilization after the conquest of the Persian Empire by Alexander and the role of the Diadochi in this process.*

**R:** In thinking about this it might be helpful to imagine what would have happened if Alexander hadn't died prematurely. Suppose he had lived long enough to ensure an heir and establish a dynasty that ruled this vast conquered territory. I suspect what we would have seen then would have been something very similar to the Persian empire but with a Greco-Macedonian (and Persian?) court at its centre.

Alexander was, I think, the catalyst for the Hellenistic World rather than its creator. It is the fragmentation of his empire that is crucial for the development of the distinctive civilization that followed. The emergence of several successor kingdoms rather than just one meant that they needed a shared culture and that culture was drawn from their Greco-Macedonian homeland, reinforced and sustained by things such as intermarriage and diplomacy. So at the centre of each kingdom was a king whose main means of expressing power was in Greek idioms. This has an impact within the kingdom itself but also beyond it in the smaller non-Greek kingdoms that were influenced by their more powerful neighbours. So at the international level it was Greco-Macedonian culture that was dominant but within the kingdoms, at least those outside the Greek mainland, there was much cultural variety and the rulers took care to address their native populations. But the combination of the Greek character of the ruler, the foundation of Greek cities and the introduction of Greek and Macedonian settlers meant that Greek culture was to the forefront.

*8. Many historians have emphasized the importance of the army to the creation of the Hellenistic basileia, considering it a key element of the political system. How do you see this importance attributed to the army, and to what extent this factor was decisive to the consolidation of the Hellenistic monarchies?*

**R:** Hellenistic kings were warlords – they were self-created kings, who used their army to hold and extend their territory, but the successful ones were those who were also politically astute and nurtured the kind of ideological superstructure that meant their rule was acceptable without recourse to violence. Both Seleucus and Ptolemy supplement their military strength with other strategies. Seleucus is already thinking dynastically when he founds cities named not only after himself but other members of his family. Ptolemy exploited Alexander's name to legitimize his rule in Egypt – he built up Alexandria as a royal capital, made himself guardian of Alexander's corpse and wrote up Alexander's campaigns.

Yet, the Wars of the Successors gives us many names of men who may have had aspirations to rule but never succeeded, big names such as Perdikkas and lesser figures such as Leonnatus. And then there was Lysimachus whose kingdom disintegrated in military failure and dynastic chaos. A king could rely on his army but while force might be a last resort it was preferable if his subjects were willing to accept the authority of the king without recourse to it. The image of the king as warrior was thus as important as the reality – this is one reason why a single military defeat could put a monarchy in jeopardy.

*9. With regard to the relationship between the Hellenistic kingdoms and the Greek poleis, you are the author of an article in which you discuss the influence of rhetoric in the political strategies devised by the Hellenistic kings to obtain the support of the poleis. I would like you to say a little more on this point.*

**R:** I am not sure we should see rhetoric as part of the royal repertoire, at least not if by rhetoric we have in mind the practice of oratory. Rhetoric is very much a civic skill. It is part of the world of the polis, necessary to persuade fellow citizens to take a particular decision, whether in the assembly, the law-courts or the council. Kings, on the other hand, do not really need rhetoric – they persuade by means of their power. As Strabo observes, persuasion through words is the mark of an orator, kings persuade through the granting of benefits - or they use arms to force people to do as they wish.

To seek to persuade through rhetoric then would put the king on the level of the citizen and imply this was an exchange between equals. Of course kings did occasionally speak before a polis. The inscription from Teos that I mentioned earlier offers an interesting example. Antiochus III spoke in the bouleuterion and announced that the city and territory be sacred, inviolable and free from tribute. By saying this he made it so. This was speech not as persuasion but as accomplishment, a reflection of the king's power and fittingly recorded in the context of the establishment of cult honours for the king.

10. *Despite the fact the studies on the Hellenistic World have been flourishing in the last years, we still find stress points when dealing with the question of the contribution of the oriental cultures for the making of the Hellenistic basileia. What is your opinion about it?*

**R:** Hellenistic *Basileia* can be seen in two ways. On one level it is very much a Greek or Macedonian phenomenon. The various kingdoms have much in common as I said earlier – they have their roots in Macedon and its aristocracy and the kingdoms are in some ways the Macedonian aristocracy writ large, still intermarrying and competing. At the same time these kings (at least those outside Macedon itself) are also ruling a population that is neither Greek nor Macedonian.

Recent scholarship has done much to emphasise the role of native cultures in these kingdoms. Amélie Kuhrt and Susan Sherwin-White changed the way that scholars approached the Seleucid kingdom. The role of Babylon and evidence such as the Borsippa cylinder is particularly important here. In the scholarship on Ptolemaic Egypt there has been greater emphasis on the native temples and demotic texts. Joe Manning's work on Ptolemaic Egypt is pointedly entitled *The Last Pharaohs*. What it means is the Hellenistic kingship is very complex phenomenon, the kings projecting multiple images and engaging with multiple audiences both within and beyond their kingdoms. Thus in so far as they engage with each other Seleucid and Ptolemaic kings have much in common but understood within their kingdom they are very different. The tension you point to comes from understanding them both as kings within their own kingdom and kings in relation to each other. It comes out even more sharply in the case of a non-Greek such as Mithridates of Pontus, whose self-presentation contains both Greek and Iranian elements depending on audience.