‘The oikoumene was the name the ancient Greeks gave to what they saw as the inhabited world. In Age of Conquests, Angelos Chaniotis tells the story of the Hellenistic oikoumene – its staggering cultural diversity, as well as the people, ideas, and events that unified it for centuries. Chaniotis boldly breaks with the traditional chronological divisions of ancient history and writes of the long Hellenistic era from the reign of Alexander to Hadrian. Anyone interested in the great cultural achievements of the ancient Greek world will profit greatly from this ambitious book by a leading historian.’ Alain Bresson, author of The Making of the Ancient Greek Economy: Institutions, Markets, and Growth in the City-States

‘A wide-ranging and lively history of the Greek East that offers a rare combination of erudition and accessibility.’ Andrew Erskine, University of Edinburgh

‘Angelos Chaniotis conveys all the richness and excitement of an extraordinary era in human history in this new work. The period of Greek history after the death of Alexander is the story of the rise and fall of empires and kingdoms, of a new global Greek world stretching from Cyrenaica to Afghanistan, and of the struggle of the cities of the ‘old’ Greek world to maintain their position. But it is also a period of intense cultural and scientific creativity, in which rulers were widely worshiped as gods, and where for the first time our sources reveal details of the lives of everyday Greeks and foreigners. There is no one who knows the evidence for the long Hellenistic Age better than Angelos Chaniotis – and in Age of Conquests he brings this canvas to life.’ Tom Harrison, University of St Andrews

‘The period that begins with the conquests of Alexander the Great and ends with the reign of the Roman emperor Hadrian is one of the most important and tumultuous in world history. Jesus Christ, Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, and Nero are only a few of the figures who lived during this era. Greeks and Greek-speakers played a crucial role during these years and bear witness to a number of astonishing phenomena – the emergence of Christianity, the consolidation of the Roman Empire, the founding of the library in Alexandria, and lasting developments in philosophy, literature, political thought, and technology. Angelos Chaniotis brings the Hellenistic age to life with remarkable learning, mastery of evidence, and sensitivity. His book offers a brilliant picture of the cosmopolitan Greek world and shows why it still matters to us today.’ Phiroze Vasunia, author of The Gift of the Nile: Hellenizing Egypt from Aeschylus to Alexander
AGE OF CONQUESTS

THE GREEK WORLD FROM ALEXANDER TO HADRIAN (336 BC–AD 138)

ANGELOS CHANIOTITIS
CONTENTS

Maps xi
List of Figures xxviii

Preface xxxii
Introduction 1

1 How It All Began: From Macedonia to the Oecumene (356–323 BC) 10
A father’s legacy (c. 356–336 BC) – A son’s vision: from Troy to Egypt (336–331 BC) – Passage to Persia: Alexander the Avenger (331–327 BC) – Pothos: the desire to reach the limit (327–324 BC) – Becoming immortal (324–323 BC) – Alexander’s legacy

2 The Successors: Adventurers and Architects of Kingdoms (323–275 BC) 31

3 ‘Old’ Greece in the Short Third Century: Struggles for Survival, Freedom and Hegemony (279–217 BC) 56
4 The Ptolemaic Golden Age (283–217 BC)

5 Kings and Kingdoms

6 The City-state in a World of Federations and Empires
The polis: physical decline and ideological longevity – A world full of poleis – Hellenistic federalism: great expectations and great failures – Political institutions – Illusions of democracy and realities of plutocracy – The Hellenistic star system: demagogues, tyrants, dynasts and heroes

7 Entanglement: The Coming of Rome (221–188 BC)

8 The Greek States Become Roman Provinces (188–129 BC)

9 Decline and Fall of the Hellenistic Kingdoms in Asia and Egypt (188–80 BC)
Götterdämmerung in the East – A clash of cultures in Judaea: from high
priests to kings – The rise and fall of Greek kingdoms in central Asia – The Seleucid dynastic conflicts and the slow death of the Seleucid dynasty – Game of thrones: the civil wars of the Ptolemies

10 A Battlefield of Foreign Ambitions (88–30 BC)
Longing for the freedom to fight wars – Pontos: from peripheral kingdom to international player – The First Mithridatic War and the rise of Sulla – The Second and Third Mithridatic Wars and Lucullian ambitions – The wars against the pirates and the rise of Pompey – Pompey’s vision for the Roman East – The last Ptolemies: from rulers to clients of Roman patrons – A Roman affair: Cleopatra and Caesar – The dictator is dead. Long live who? – The last Hellenistic drama: Antony and Cleopatra

11 A Roman East: Local Histories and Their Global Context (30 BC–AD 138)
Earthly gods and heavenly kings – The Greeks as an audience of global history – Augustus and the shaping of the Principate – Organising a Roman East: client kings and annexations – Revitalising Greece and Asia Minor – Nero, the short-lived freedom of the Greeks and the long struggle of the Jews – Integrating the Greeks into the imperial elite: the Flavians – Consolidating the borders of the oecumene: Trajan and Hadrian

12 Emperors, Cities and Provinces from Augustus to Hadrian (30 BC–AD 138)
The Divine Providence’s gift to mankind: the Roman emperor – Ruling from afar: the visibility of the emperor – Theoi sebastoi: the divinity of the emperors – Provincial administration – The cities: traditional poleis, Roman colonies and political life

13 Socio-economic Conditions: From Greek Cities to an ‘Ecumenical’ Network

14 Social and Cultural Trends: Benefactors, Confrères, Ephebes, Athletes, Women and Slaves
Detecting trends and innovation – ‘Euergetism’: benefactions, social
prestige and political power – Voluntary associations – Agonistic culture and international stars in sport and entertainment – Shaping civic values and civic identity: the ephebeia and the gymnasium – New marriage patterns and the visibility of women – Shades of grey: slavery in the Hellenistic world and the Roman East

15 From Civic Worship to Megatheism: Religions in a Cosmopolitan World
Global trends, individual experiences – What is ‘Hellenistic’ about the religions of the ‘long Hellenistic Age’? – Festivals – Shifting popularities of the old gods – Egyptian and Egyptianising cults – Mithras – The Highest God, Jewish influences and monotheistic trends – An age of miracles – Lend me your ears: personal communication with the divine – Traditional mystery cults – Afterlife – Religious innovation: cult founders, missionaries and ‘holy men’ – Christianity and the beginnings of religious intolerance

16 The Greeks and the Oecumene
Six degrees of separation: an ancient ‘globalisation’ – Connectivity: a small world – People on the move – Cultural convergence and local traditions

References and Sources
Bibliography
Chronology
Index
LIST OF MAPS

Map 1: Greece and western Asia Minor
Map 2: Alexander’s campaign
Map 3: The Hellenistic world
Map 4: South Italy and Sicily during the campaign of Pyrrhos
Map 5: Asia Minor
Map 6: The Seleucid kingdom and the Greco-Bactrian kingdoms
Map 7: The empire of Augustus
Map 8: The Roman Empire under Trajan and Hadrian
Greece and western Asia Minor
This book has been written for a non-specialised audience. It aims to provide general information about the main historical developments in politics, society and religion in the areas in which Greeks lived after the Classical period. The book covers two historical periods which are commonly treated separately: the Hellenistic period, which conventionally starts with the campaigns or the death of Alexander the Great (334 or 323 BC) and ends with the death of Cleopatra (30 BC), and the early Imperial period, from the establishment of Augustan monarchy (27 BC) to the death of Hadrian (AD 138). In the Introduction, I explain how the joint treatment of these two periods contributes to a better understanding of social and cultural developments. The title *Age of Conquests* does not only refer to the fact that the main turning points of these two periods are military conquests (of Philip and Alexander, the Hellenistic kings, Roman generals and emperors, the Parthians and other eastern states); it also metaphorically refers to an unprecedented expansion of knowledge, technical skills and intellectual horizons.

The narrative part presents, with inevitable brevity, the main political developments from the foundation of a Greek alliance by Philip II of Macedonia and the campaigns of Alexander the Great to the death of Hadrian. Because of the complexity of the relevant military and political events, the narrative must move back and forth to different theatres of events; the Chronology (pp. 427–35) will help the reader establish the synchronicity of the various episodes. It has been impossible to narrate in detail the history of individual kingdoms or cities, to describe battles or to present biographies of the protagonists. The narrative is selective, and the main criteria for the selection were the historical significance and the exemplary character of a given event. I interrupt the account of events at
the end of the fourth chapter, when Rome enters the scene, in order to provide overviews of kingship, the administration of kingdoms, the institutions and political life of city-states, and the rise of federal states, an important innovation of the third century BC, in Chapters 5 and 6. The subsequent four chapters examine the Roman expansion into the East, from the first wars against the Illyrian pirates to the death of Cleopatra and the end of the Roman civil wars. Chapter 11 is a short overview of the major developments in the world of the Greeks under the first Roman emperors. Chapter 12 deals with the main institutions of the Imperial period from the perspective of the Greek and Hellenised provinces: the position of the emperor, provincial administration and the changed political systems of the cities and the Roman colonies. The next three chapters are dedicated to important changes in society, culture and religion. An adequate and differentiated discussion of philosophy, literature, science and technology, the visual arts and architecture would have required space that was not available in this book. Finally, in the last chapter, I briefly summarise how the ‘long Hellenistic Age’ changed the position of the Greeks in the *oeumene* (the inhabited earth), making their history an integral part of ancient ‘global’ history. Unavoidably, sometimes the depth of the analysis had to be sacrificed for the sake of the geographical breadth, exactly as the presentation of general features and trends left little space for an adequate discussion of local differences.

Until the late nineteenth century, Hellenistic history was primarily written on the basis of the surviving narratives of historians – especially Polybius, Diodorus and Appian – the information provided by the geographer Strabo, the Lives of Plutarch and a few other literary sources. The study of the Greek world under Roman rule was underdeveloped, with the exception of literature and art. Things changed in the course of the twentieth century, with the progress of archaeological research, especially in Macedonia, Asia Minor and central Asia (e.g. at Ai-Khanoum), the publication of inscriptions and the study of papyri and coins. New textual sources – inscriptions and papyri – are continually added to the known source material, answering some questions, confronting us with new ones and adding nuances to established knowledge. Today, the Hellenistic and the Imperial periods are extremely dynamic areas of research. New discoveries continually enhance scholarship, calling for revisions, usually small but sometimes dramatic.

If I were to list all the books, articles and corpora of inscriptions on
which the content of this book is based, the bibliography would probably be much longer than the narrative part. In the notes, I have limited myself to references to sources that are quoted or mentioned in the text and to a small selection of articles and books which are recommended for further reading and which contain references to sources and further bibliography. The general bibliography is also very selective.

Neither the bibliography nor the notes do justice to the contribution of editors and interpreters of inscriptions to the study of the Hellenistic world and the Roman East. Among them I mention with great respect only those who are no longer alive, and on whose work our understanding of the post-Classical Greek world is based: Wilhelm Dittenberger, Philippe Gauthier, Peter Herrmann, Maurice Holleaux, Louis Robert, Frank Walbank and Adolph Wilhelm.

A note on the transcription of Greek names is required. Generally, I do not use the Latinised forms of Greek personal and geographical names – I use Miletos and not Miletus, Pyrrhos and not Pyrrhus – except for the cases in which the Latinised form is very common (e.g. Polybius and not Polybios) or the modern English form is familiar (Ptolemy and not Ptolemaios, Corinth and not Korinthos).

Tom Harrison and an anonymous referee offered invaluable advice. I am also very grateful to Michael Fowler, Roberta Gerdes, Henry Heitmann-Gordon, Kathryn Minogue and Matthew Peebles for improving my English prose, and to Emyr Dakin who assisted me in the proofreading process. I am especially grateful to Lesley Levene, who prepared with efficiency and care the copy-edited version. Penny Daniel and Louisa Dunnigan at Profile Books competently supervised the publication process. John Davey invited me to write this book and accompanied its composition, often in difficult times, with good advice and patience. He did not live to see it published. It is dedicated to his memory in gratitude.
Alexander the Macedonian, son of Philip ... defeated Darius king of Persia and Media and became king in his place ... He waged many wars, conquered strongholds, and slaughtered kings in the land. He marched to the ends of the earth, and seized plunder from a mass of peoples ... He reigned for twelve years and then died. His followers assumed power, each in his own province, and they all put on the diadem after his death; they were succeeded by their own children over a period of many years. The earth was filled with miseries.

This excerpt from the first book of the Maccabees, a Hebrew text from the late second century BC surviving in a Greek translation, is a subjective summary of what we traditionally call ‘the Hellenistic Age’ – the time between the campaigns of Alexander (334–324 BC) and the death of Cleopatra (30 BC). The author’s perspective is that of a militant representative of a conquered province that took arms against Greek kings and their Hellenised Jewish supporters.

There are good reasons to begin a book on the history of the Greeks in a cosmopolitan era by quoting a Jewish text: first, because it shows the existence of different perspectives and contrasting views; second, because a book that challenged Greek cultural and political domination was diffused thanks to the use of Greek as a lingua franca; and third, because the Hellenistic Age owes its name to the ‘Hellenisers’, a Jewish group that adopted Greek ways. This text reflects some of the contrasts and contradictions of this period.

What is the Hellenistic period? Why do we study it? And is it appropriate to expand the traditional end date, the year 30 BC, and examine this period together with the first 150 years of the Imperial period, as a ‘long
Hellenistic Age’? As for its beginnings, the death of Alexander the Great is indeed an important turning point in the history of ancient Greece. The creation of dynasties by his successors is perhaps the most visible and certainly the most novel aspect of the decades that followed his death. And the earth was undeniably filled with miseries, perhaps not the miseries that the Jewish author of the *Maccabees* had in mind – the religious and cultural oppression of the Jews – but certainly the miseries caused by never-ending wars, private and public indebtedness, and civil strife. Of course, to characterise the Hellenistic Age simply as an age of misery is one-sided and wrong. This historical period is more than just the sum of wars between the successors of Alexander, the dynasties that they founded, Rome, barbaric tribes, foreign kings, cities and federations. What else is worth considering about these three centuries?

In our everyday speech we say that someone made a colossal mistake or that a person stoically endures adversities in life. We may refer to epicurean delicacies, and while on holiday in a foreign place we may be tempted to visit a museum. Some who took Euclidean geometry at school hated it, others loved it. When we unexpectedly find the solution to a problem, we may exclaim, ‘Eureka!’ And although we may not understand how they work, hydraulic pumps and cylinders are part of our life. What the words colossal, stoical, epicurean, museum, Euclidean, eureka and hydraulic have in common is that they originated in the Hellenistic Age. The philosophical schools of the Epicureans and the Stoics were founded in the late fourth century BC; ‘Eureka!’ (‘I have found it!’) is what Archimedes allegedly exclaimed around 230 BC, when he realised that the volume of water displaced while stepping into a bath was equal to the volume of the part of his body he had submerged; and Euclid was a mathematician who lived in Alexandria in the early third century BC under Ptolemy I, the king who founded the Mouseion, ‘the shrine of the Muses’, a centre of learning attached to his palace. In the Mouseion, the mathematician and engineer Ktesibios applied his understanding of water power to create the first pipe organ (*hydraulis*), which operated through the pressure of water. The Colossus was a huge statue of the sun god erected in the harbour of Rhodes in 280 BC, regarded together with the Pharos – the huge lighthouse of Alexandria – as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. In order to assess the impact of a historical period, it is worth examining the words or expressions that it has bequeathed to posterity.

Scientific, artistic, intellectual and cultural achievements such as
those above cannot and should not be studied out of their contexts. The
Mouseion of Alexandria, the library attached to it, and the innumerable
contributions of the scholars and scientists who worked there existed
only because Alexander founded the eponymous city of Alexandria, and
because the kings who ruled Hellenistic Egypt had huge resources and
made them available for the advancement of knowledge. The shift of
cultural leadership from Athens in Greece to Egypt and Asia was part
of a process that was initiated with the settlement of Greek immigrants
in newly founded cities in the territories conquered by Alexander. The
Colossus commemorated a military victory; the Pharos of Alexandria was
connected with the increased importance of traffic in the eastern Mediter-
ranean; Stoic philosophy was set in a constant dialectic with political life
and social developments. The history of the social conflicts, wars, political
experiments and innovations in the cities and kingdoms of the Hellenistic
Age is indispensable for understanding art and science, philosophy and
literature, technology and religion. So, there are good reasons to study
the Hellenistic Age, and more will be mentioned later. The campaigns of
Alexander are a good place to start. But where do we stop?

The study of the Hellenistic Age traditionally ends with the suicide of
Cleopatra in 30 BC and the annexation of her Egyptian kingdom by Rome.
This certainly is an important turning point in political history. It marks
the end of the last great Hellenistic kingdom and the beginning of the
principate – a form of monarchical rule that took shape under Augustus
and his successors. The year 30 BC, however, is not a turning point in the
history of society, economy, religion and culture. Trends that we observe
in the Hellenistic Age continued in the two centuries after Cleopatra’s
death. In order to fully understand them, we need to consider sources
that postdate that year. And vice versa, we cannot understand the political
institutions, the social organisation, the economy, the culture and the reli-
gion of the Graeco-Roman East in the first two centuries of the Imperial
period without considering their Hellenistic roots. The period from Alex-
ander’s campaigns in the East to roughly the reign of Marcus Aurelius (AD
161–80) should be best studied as one single historical period, for which I
introduce the term ‘long Hellenistic Age’. One may recognise several dis-
tinct phases in this period of approximately 500 years – indicated by the
division of chapters in this book – but the development was continuous.

The historical narrative of this book ends with the death of Hadrian
in AD 138, although the conditions in the Greek-speaking provinces did
not change under his successor, Antoninus Pius. Changes started to occur with the beginning of the wars of Marcus Aurelius against the Parthians in AD 161. If I have chosen Hadrian’s reign to mark the end of this book, it is neither because he is better known to a general readership than his successor nor because he consolidated the borders of the Roman Empire, putting an end to the great offensive under his predecessor Trajan. Rather, it is because the foundation of the Panhellenion – a council that, at least in theory, united all cities of Hellenic origin – symbolically closes a circle that was opened with the effort of Philip II of Macedonia and his son Alexander to unite all the Greeks. Since the unity of the Greeks – or the lack thereof – is one of the broader themes of this book, it is appropriate that the Panhellenic alliance of Philip and Alexander and the Panhellenic council of Hadrian frame the narrative.

Alexander started the campaign against the Persian Empire as the leader of an alliance of the Greeks with the declared aim of liberating the Greek cities of Asia Minor that were under barbarian rule, and of avenging the destruction of Greek sanctuaries by the Persians in 480 BC. He could never forgive the Spartans, a great power that did not join the alliance, for preventing him from claiming that he was leading a campaign of all the Greeks. After his first victory at Granikos, he made a dedication to Athena in Athens. The short dedicatory inscription humiliated the only enemy that Alexander had failed to defeat in direct battle: ‘Alexander, son of Philip, and the Greeks, except for the Lacedaemonians, from the barbarians who inhabit Asia.’ Hadrian did not try to succeed where Alexander had failed; his Panhellenion had nothing in common with Alexander’s military alliance. Precisely this contrast between two different versions of Greek unity – one addressed against a barbarian enemy, the other uniting the Greeks within the administrative framework of the Roman Empire – makes Hadrian’s reign a suitable point of closure for this book.

Four and a half centuries after Alexander’s campaign, Greek cities – this time, all Greek cities – were once again subject to an imperial power: the Roman Empire. Alexander’s birthplace, Pella, was a Roman colony; his eponymous city in Egypt, Alexandria, remained the most important harbour in the Mediterranean, but had lost its significance as a centre of political power that it had held for the greater part of the third century BC. Despite the cataclysmic changes in political power that integrated almost all areas in which Greeks and Greek speakers lived into the Roman Empire, what did not change was a separate Greek identity that
distinguished the Hellenes from the others. We have every justification to study a distinct Greek history within the empire, exactly as we can study the history of the Jews, the Germans, the Iberians, the Britons or any other subject group. Admittedly this ‘Greek’ identity was flexible and adaptable. Astute Greek authors could even declare the Romans to be descendants of a Greek tribe, if this helped them come to terms with Roman domination; Hellenised cities in Asia Minor could enter the Panhellenion by inventing evidence that they had been founded by Greek heroes or Greek colonists; almost anyone with a Greek education and citizenship in a city with real or invented Greek origin could be regarded as Greek, no matter whether his name was Greek, Thracian, Iranian or Roman.

Intellectuals in Athens, Ephesos and Alexandria may have looked with contempt upon Hellenised populations in Asia or the Balkans, but in the cosmopolitan world of the Roman Empire with its wide-ranging political, economic, cultural, social and religious networks a ‘history of the Greeks’ cannot be limited to the regions where Greek cities and colonies existed before Alexander’s campaigns; it must also consider the areas in which Greeks settled in Alexander’s empire and in the kingdoms of his successors. Accordingly, my approach to the history of the Greeks from Alexander to Hadrian is geographically inclusive. The main focus will be on the areas that are best represented in our sources and had the greatest concentration of Greek communities: mainland Greece, the Aegean, Asia Minor, Syria, Cyrenaica and the Nile Delta in Egypt. But I have tried, both in the narrative and in the overview of important political, social, religious and cultural developments, to include the western Greeks of Sicily and southern Italy, the Greek cities along the western and northern shores of the Black Sea, and the Greeks in central Asia – in Afghanistan, Pakistan and northern India.

The unifying factors in the ‘long Hellenistic Age’ that also distinguish it from the preceding periods are the importance of monarchy; the strong imperialist drive that characterised the policies of both Hellenistic kings and the Roman senate; the close interdependence of political developments in the Balkans, Italy, the Black Sea region, Asia Minor, the Near East and Egypt; the increased mobility of populations in these areas; the spread of urban life and culture; advanced technology; and the gradual homogenisation of language, culture, religion and institutions. Most of the above phenomena did not exist in similar dimensions before Alexander’s campaigns.
This period is truly the cosmopolitan era of the Greeks in a way that no preceding period of Greek history was. Many of the phenomena that one observes in the ‘long Hellenistic Age’ find parallels in the modern world, and the ‘modernity’ of this historical period adds to its attractiveness for both historians and alert observers of our own day and age. I will briefly comment on four of them: globalisation, megacities, new religions and governance.

Because of the interconnection of vast areas in Europe, Asia and North Africa, the Hellenistic world and the Roman Empire have justly been considered as early examples of globalisation. Of course, the modern term globalisation can only be used within inverted commas. First, the Hellenistic and Roman networks did not cover the entire globe but only what the contemporaries regarded as the oecumene, and second, many people in that period did not think of the inhabited earth as a globe but as a disc surrounded by the Ocean. The breadth of the connectivity in the areas known to the Greeks and the Romans is nevertheless impressive. The conquests of Alexander did not create a lasting empire but they did engender a huge political network of kingdoms, semi-independent dynasts and poleis (city-states) extending from the Adriatic to Afghanistan and from Ukraine to Ethiopia. These states had relations with Italy, the Greek colonies in southern France, Carthage in North Africa and the Mauryan Empire in India, thus constituting a network that comprised the entire known world with the exception of China. The Roman expansion enlarged this interconnected world by adding central and western Europe and large parts of North Africa. Already in the mid-second century BC, Polybius, a statesman and historian who discussed the early phases of Roman expansion, was fully aware of the connectivity throughout the entire Mediterranean and introduced the term symploke (entanglement; see p. 84).

How this change affected people’s lives and the institutions and cultures of very heterogeneous communities is a fascinating question. On the surface, one observes an increased homogeneity in various aspects of life. Greek became the lingua franca in the Hellenistic kingdoms in Asia and Africa and remained so in the eastern Roman provinces; it was often used in Italy and the western provinces, especially among intellectuals and immigrants from the East. Greek and Roman legal institutions reached remote areas. Most aspects of culture – from the appearance of cities to the dress and facial hair of men and the hairstyle of women, from the style of works of art to the form of the lamps that were used to light nocturnal
activities, and from the techniques of rhetorical performance to the forms of entertainment – showed an astonishing level of conformity, following the trends that were developed in the major political and cultural centres.

To call these processes of cultural convergence ‘Hellenisation’ for the Hellenistic and ‘Romanisation’ for the Imperial periods, as has been traditional, would be misleading. While these terms imply a one-sided relationship between centre and periphery, the development of a cultural koine (a common form of expression) in the ‘long Hellenistic Age’ was the result of longer and far more complex processes. The chief players were not only people with political authority, but also itinerant artists, orators and poets, soldiers and slaves, and magicians and dream interpreters moving across borders. Increased mobility in the multi-ethnic kingdoms and the Roman Empire resulted in cultural convergence and a merging of religious ideas characterised as ‘syncretism’. Therefore, when I use the term ‘Hellenisation’ and ‘Hellenised’ in this book, I refer only to the adoption of the Greek language and script by non-Greek populations, being aware of the fact that under the surface of a common language, local customs and distinct identities persevered. Bilingual and trilingual inscriptions in Greek and Latin, Greek and Egyptian, Greek and Hebrew, Latin and Aramaic, and so on, are visible expressions of the undying cultural complexity. A dynamic exchange between the Greeks, the local populations in Asia and Egypt, and later immigrants from Italy continually reshaped culture. The non-Greek element can most clearly be seen in religious practices and personal names, but it certainly also existed in a variety of phenomena that range from myths, historical memory and ideas about the afterlife to social customs, burial practices, garments, the preparation of food and the way the soil was cultivated.

Naturally, multiculturalism was a more prominent feature of the ‘megacities’ of this period. Cities such as Alexandria, Antioch, Athens, Ephesos, Thessalonike, Corinth and Pergamon, with populations of 100,000 to a million inhabitants, cannot be compared with the modern megacities of 10 million people or more. But they did appear oversized to contemporaries. In the early third century BC, the poet Theocritus presents the reactions of two women, immigrants from Syracuse to Alexandria, as they walk in a crowded street during a festival: ‘Heavens, what a crowd! How and when are we to get through this plague? They’re like ants – there’s no numbering or counting them.’ Big cities with a heterogeneous population, such as Alexandria, confronted their inhabitants with a number of problems that
A GE  OF  C ON qu ESTS

are familiar to us: safety, tensions between people of different origins, anonymity, the feeling of abandonment, the desire to belong to a group. The weaker the political participation of citizens in their communities became, the stronger grew the need to compensate for this loss with participation in another form of community – religious, professional or other.

Some of these needs, much as in our world, were answered by ‘new religions’ that promised protection in life and bliss after death. Exotic cults were imported and adapted to a Greek environment, organising their devotees in voluntary associations; these were both exclusive, inasmuch as they required initiation, and inclusive, since they were usually open to people independent of their origin, gender and social status. Voluntary associations, religious and other, gave members a sense of identity.

Despite the predominant position of kingdoms and large federal states, the polis remained the main stage of political, social and religious life. In no other period of Greek history, not even in the age of the great colonisation from the eighth to the sixth centuries BC, were so many new cities founded as in the late fourth and third centuries BC. Old and new poleis, and later the Roman colonies that were founded in Greece, Asia Minor and the Near East from the late first century BC to the early second century AD, all had some form of sovereignty and extensive self-administration. But this sovereignty was curtailed, first through royal interventions, after 146 BC through the establishment of Roman provincial administration and later through the overwhelming presence of the Roman emperor.

Although the cities retained institutions that allowed for the citizens’ participation in decision-making, such as the popular assembly, they were increasingly dependent on the contributions of wealthy benefactors. This, as well as the direct intervention of kings and Roman authorities in favour of oligarchic institutions, gradually transformed the cities from moderate democracies, in which wealthy men had to negotiate their power with the citizens, competed with their peers for offices and were subject to accountability, into oligarchies, in which political rights and power depended on property qualifications. This contrast between nominal people’s sovereignty and participation and real power, not unknown to democracies of today, resulted in the adoption by the elite, but also by kings, of a theatrical behaviour that aimed at creating a balance between staged affability and appropriate distance – a behaviour that resembles modern populism. Occasional uprisings of the indebted, the dispossessed, the less privileged and those facing discrimination failed to generate reforms. The rule of the
Introduction

‘notables’ was unchallenged as long as they were willing to spend part of their wealth on what we today call ‘public spending’. Social relations in the ‘long Hellenistic Age’ were based on complex forms of reciprocity.

Such features of obvious topicality will no doubt seem, for the modern audience, a striking aspect of the historical period discussed in this book. An ancient readership would have been fascinated with two other elements that the Hellenistic and Imperial periods offer in abundance: *peripeteiai* (sudden turns of fortune) and *paradoxa* (unexpected phenomena). The ‘long Hellenistic Age’ confronts us with contrasts and contradictions: the persistence of traditions and technological revolutions, such as the development of the Antikythera mechanism, a complex device that displayed phenomena of the heavenly bodies and cycles of the Sun and the Moon; between rationality and superstition, monarchy and people’s participation, the small world of the *polis* and the huge world of the kingdoms and the empire, the local and the universal. It provides the cultural context for the rise of Christianity. And it offers food for thought to alert observers of the modern world. Hopefully, these are sufficient reasons to delve into the pages of this book.