MIKE ROBERTS & BOB BENNETT

TWILIGHT OF THE HELLENISTIC WORLD

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Bob Bennett and Mike Roberts

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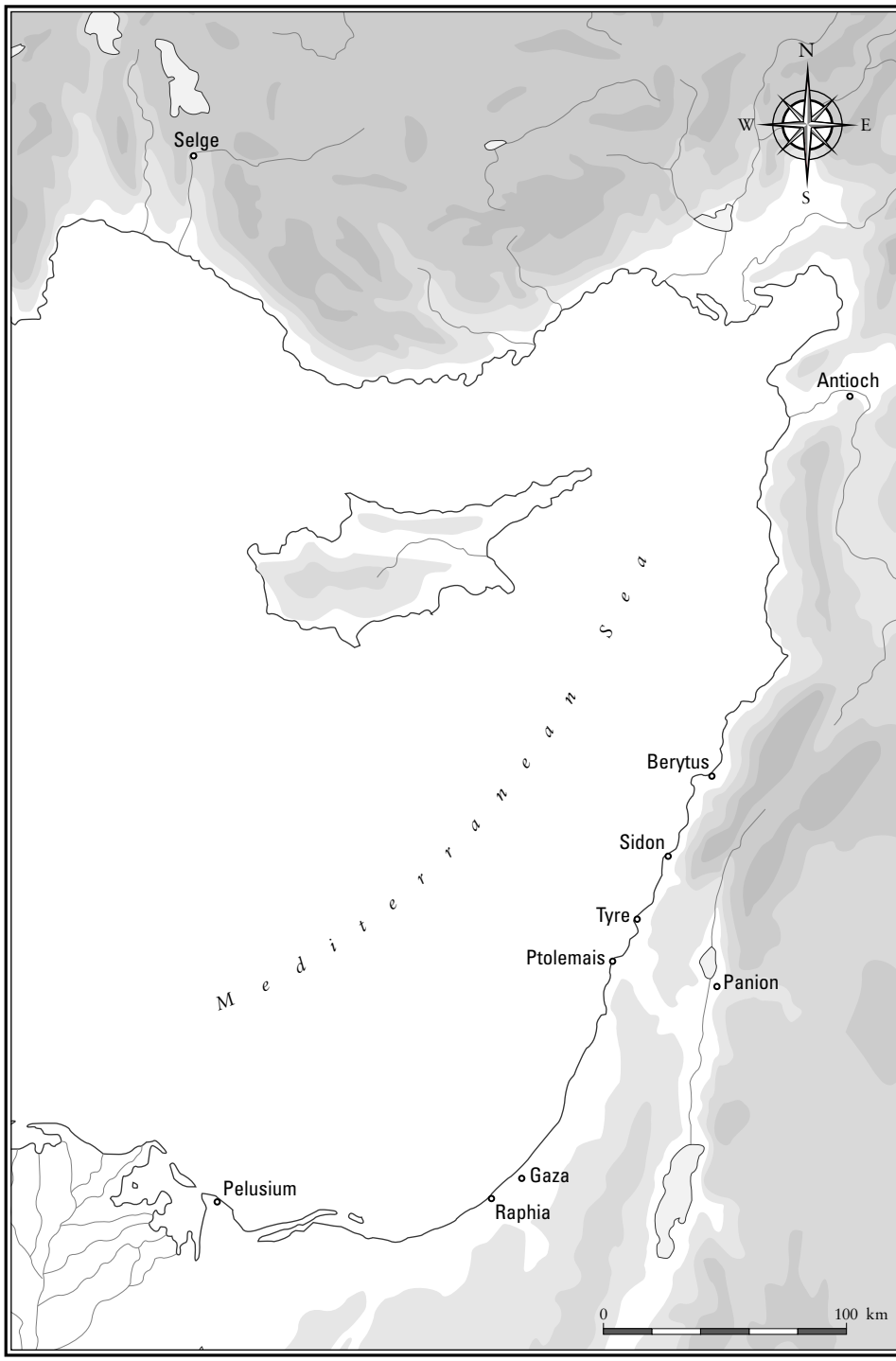
Map 1: Western Greece.

Map 2: Eastern Greece.



Map 3: The Poloponnese.

Map 4: The Eastern Mediterranean.

Map 5: The Levant.

Introduction

This project we are submitting to the reader fits neatly into the dialectic. Indeed, it is a carefully constructed antithesis. The Hellenistic World in the last thirty or so years of the third century BC has almost always been discovered as a preparation for the arrival of the armies of an irresistibly expanding Rome. This should be no surprise, as it is the stated perspective of the dominant source, the disingenuous but indispensable Polybius, who purposely states his intention of explaining this process to his fellow countrymen. But, the opposite pole that we intend to balance upon is just as arguable, that for the people of the time this was not how they perceived things at all. To the inhabitants of the Hellenistic World, the early years of the Second Punic War would have looked a bit like the American Civil War as perceived by the peoples and powers of Europe in the 1860s. Government and citizen alike knew there was an epic struggle going on off to the west, but very few would have anticipated that the country, generally considered as culturally backward, over the water and currently deluged in blood, would within a relatively short time become the dominant economic, political and military power over their own lives.

To continue the analogy of the USA and Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Europeans knew huge events were under way. Great armies were involved in mega campaigns but to them it was still far away and there were few who were prescient enough to understand how it might impact on their own continent. How ascendant the transatlantic power would soon become. And, even after we know what history had in store we still do not subscribe to a European historiography that sees the Franco-Prussian War, the unification of Italy and Germany, the Balkan Wars and indeed the First World War as just incidents in a timeline leading to a world in which the Americans ruled the roost. So, one questions whether it is reasonable always to take this approach to the Hellenistic World in these three decades down to 200 BC, and whether something more might be learned from eyeing up the era from a place much more in the centre of the eastern Mediterranean world rather than off to the west.

This is surely realistic; to share a perspective with the Hellenistic public that saw the power players of their own time as much the same as those who had shaken out after the death of Alexander the Great, plus a few others who had emerged over the intervening years. The kingdom of Pergamum, the Aetolian League, maritime powers like Rhodes, the great old cities like Athens or Sparta – not what they had been but still needing to be noted. Others would wax in power in the period we are considering, like the Achaean League, and others would fade, like the realm of Epirus, but even by the turn of the century, it was only the very far-sighted that imagined that this structure would crumble and alter under pressure from altogether another power from the west.

The interests of some Hellenistic peoples and their leaders were perhaps purely Peloponnesian, or for others attention was confined to the Greek peninsula. Certainly the great territorial kings had wider horizons west, east and south, but still most attention was given to the centre, where their borders and spheres of influence collided. The king of Macedon might interfere in Illyrian matters, a policy that brought them cheek by jowl with Rome; they might even ally with Carthage, but it is not credible that there was real ambition beyond some influence over the Adriatic coast. And the ruling elite at Pella had little enough understanding of what cataclysmic forces they were inviting in when they let themselves be involved on this western frontier. As for the Seleucids, they had a mess of centrifugal tugging to deal with before the greatest king since their founder turned east not west to encompass the greatest achievement of his life and won for his name the appendage of 'Great' and finally concluded a long line of Syrian Wars to his advantage. His enemy in these wars, the Ptolemies of Egypt, although early in their significant intercourse with Rome, still their main interests were far away from the west, first successfully contesting the war for Coele Syria but then finding themselves so riven by domestic strife that they managed to lose all they had won in the next round of fighting. The Nile valley, inner Iran, Afghanistan, the Chersonese, Thrace, Anatolia, and at the most Illyria; this was what the kings thought about while a menace grew over the western horizon, a menace that was seldom perceived as critical. To get an accurate view of the motives, strategies and policies of Antigonus Doson, Philip V, Antiochus III, the Ptolemies, the Aetolians, the Achaeans and the Spartans, these must be the focus of our concentration, not what was a happening hundreds of miles away over the Adriatic.

It is not just that there is an opening for a different perspective; there also seems to be a gap in modern detailing of these years, one that seems strange not to have been filled. This is not a period like the first three-quarters of the third century or the second half of the second when good source material peters out. There is plenty here, admittedly most of it based on just one voice, but still there is enough flesh on these bones that it is surprising that this space has not been filled recently. And exploring this fissure, both from written records and

on the ground, is not as difficult as with many other projects. The regions where the events we are considering took place are very accessible. Much occurred in Greece, Turkey and Egypt, places both very familiar to the original sources and also readily accessible to the modern traveller, avoiding the problems of having a centre of activity in Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan, places that were both *terra incognito* to most ancient authors and that have been difficult for outsiders to visit in safety for some considerable time.

Some years have passed since serious attempts have been made to tell the story of Cleomenes, Philip V, Aratus or Philopoemen. Antiochus the Great, with his bitty source attestation, is almost less embraced, the solitary recent major work dealing only with his encounters with Rome and eschewing much of interest in the first half of his reign. Articles, of course, continue to appear but pretty sparsely, although occasionally something substantial is vouchsafed, like a recent work on the Aetolian League. There are certainly some excellent general histories available, but the breadth and depth of the subject matter means this is not wholly satisfying to those who want more details on the individual careers, conflicts and local developments.[1]

Nor is this so difficult a stretch. The overriding source, Polybius, despite his Tiber-centric position and pro-Achaean bias, sniffing slightly of a quisling aroma, still held a declared manifesto to write a history of all the world. He covers in good detail much of what happened in Greece, Anatolia, Egypt, Mesopotamia and further east, and some of this still remains. And, even if the legions had long conquered in the time of others of the ancient writing pantheon, like Plutarch, Appian and Pausanias, they can still see a world where Sparta, Alexandria and Antioch loom as large as the city on seven hills.

Polybius dominates not just because of what is left to us but also because many who came after used his works as the basis of their efforts. He saw himself as a teacher of future leaders, as befitted a man who mixed with Scipio Aemilius, son of the victor of Pydna. A self-accredited didact, he took himself pretty seriously, earnestly criticizing, if not always avoiding, the failures he saw in others. He condemns lost toilers like Phylarchus, Theopompus, Zeno and Timaeus as having picked up some very bad habits that he did not want to reproduce. He described at length, and in detail, an intention to get back to a serious kind of history without the rhetorical flourishes and tragic tantrums that had marred these others. Also, he did not want to just be a library historian but to reclaim the ground Thucydides had stood upon by going where things had happened and talking to those who had been involved. This attempt to get back to clean Thucydidian lines was based on a real experience of warfare and statecraft, but still his inability to appreciate others does not make the man more congenial. If this is perhaps understandable with respect to some of the rhetorical or tragical extravagances that had been peddled as history before him, his refusal to accept the importance of telling a good story sends him down to us looking extremely po-faced indeed.

Polybius himself was from Megalopolis in Arcadia, but at the time he was born it had become part of the Achaean League. Not only that, he was the son of a prominent Achaean commander. Together with his use of Aratus as a source, it is perhaps no great surprise that we find him delivering verdicts on the Achaean League such as: 'one could not find a political system and principle so favourable to equality and freedom of speech, in a word so sincerely democratic as that of the Achaean League.'[2] Later, he excuses the League's habit of forcibly incorporating cities by informing us that 'those whom it forced to adhere to it when the occasion presented itself suddenly underwent a change and became quite reconciled to their position'.[3] Not possibly the observations of an unbiased commentator.

Mixing with the great, he saw them as the engine of events. It was Philip V or Hamilcar Barca that caused their countries' wars with Rome, rather than any other underlying factors. And the unpleasant toadying to the powerful is only slightly appeased by his belief that chance (*tyche*) also pressed some of the buttons of causation. Crucially, he was wonderfully near to things, although perhaps not as contemporary as Thucydides. Still, anything with his stamp on it does benefit from coming, if not exactly on the heel of events, then very soon after. His contemporaries would all have had parents or grandparents that lived through the events he chronicled. Indeed, he could have met very old men who when young would have been there at the proceedings he recounted. This is a special quality, as for the hundred and fifty years before there are no writers who are both extant and historically close to what they are describing. The years of Philip, Alexander, the Diadochi and the first Hellenistic kings are depicted by historians who lived hundreds of years after, as far distant as the days of Pitt the Elder or the Duke of Marlborough are from us.

The period he recounted was an age of kings; the Successor monarchs of Alexander's empire dominated the world. The framework was provided by the direct rule or spheres of influence of polities, now several generations deep. Leagues, cities and tribes might huff and puff but it was still the kings with their great standing armies and resource-sucking bureaucracies who really called the shots. As will be seen, it would only be when these lesser powers forged alliances that they could have any chance of standing toe to toe with a Seleucid, an Antigonid or a Ptolemy. It is not a period that resonates snugly in the way that the Classical Age does, and this is not just because the primary source does not stand up to Herodotus or Thucydides as either great writer or epic historian. Certainly, it is a time when something had very definably been lost, even before the grim intrusion of Roman might, though perhaps not the independent power of the city states of Athens, Sparta and Thebes; that was long gone. But still something that was so obviously culturally valuable and intellectually interesting that it would, under Roman tutelage, re-emerge in a sort of theme park Greece, a Hellenistic 'Disneyland' that every senatorial bigwig would visit with more or less understanding and interest.

War was perennially at the centre when still so much prestige and power came with the profession of arms, whether it be as a citizen phalangite or a conquering king in the Alexander mould. Hellenistic citizens conducted their business, whether economic, domestic or political, in the shadows of statues lining the marketplaces and other public spaces that might just as likely be of some warrior hero as of an all-powerful deity. And the spectacles on offer to a demanding audience were frequently martially based, from the local gilded youths and their cavalry exercises to huge parades of regal military power at Daphnia and Alexandria; these were just as much part of the calendar of entertainment as athletic, artistic and religious events. War was attention-grabbing because it was so dynamic, one of the few factors that would subvert the traditional range of social interaction. The pressures of war might see the bluebloods contemplating radical debt cancellation, to allow an increase in the citizen pool that supplied the warriors. Cities, when threatened by extinction, could free slaves to boost their defensive forces and even the involvement of women in fighting could be contemplated. Foreigners might be brought into the citizen fold if their assets made the difference in a fight for survival. Even the pantheon might be adjusted; kings were most often raised to the status of saviour gods by their decisive efforts in martial matters. Much could be changed because movement of people is always socially dynamic and war always moved people. Whether they were mercenaries mobilized by greed, ambition and thirst for adventure, or enslaved prisoners dragged from their homes, all meant great shifting of population in the Hellenistic era.

The three great kingdoms of the Hellenistic World were what events were really about in the time we are intending to describe. Many other polities will be mentioned, some familiar from centuries before and others new, but they were all structured around the great threesome. They will also to a considerable degree enforce the structure of this book. Our chapters are neither strictly chronological nor strictly regional. We defiantly, on occasions, jump between the Balkans and the Levant with occasional expeditions to Bactria and Anatolia, aiming to paint a picture that is both explanatory and entertaining. To be completely regional would lose some of the unity of the world we are describing, and in some ways we would have ended up with separate stories just welded together, whilst to be completely chronological would require jumping about in a very unhandsome manner.

The headline stories will range from the ascent of Achaea under Aratus to an ebullient and socially radicalized Sparta rising only to fall at the battle of Sellasia. There is the story of Philip V of Macedonia's attempt to resurrect the Empire of greater Macedonia of Philip II in the Balkans, with the Aetolian League always eager to place pitfalls in his way. Illyrians, the new kings of Pergamum and the Romans shuffle and rustle on the sidelines, and Dardanian and other wild raiders have their say. But still most events centre around the

Peloponnese and the Malian Gulf, the hunting ground of Greek and Hellenistic hard men from mythical times to Xenophon, Epaminondas, Philip and Alexander. Then there is another huge patch of action that sees two great kingdoms going head to head over ownership of Coele Syria when they were not distracted by local difficulties in the Nile Valley or, in the case of the Seleucids, by difficult relatives or rebellious proconsuls in Anatolia and Mesopotamia. And, of course, the great adventure in the lands of Iran and Afghanistan cannot be left un-noted, despite the scarcity of sources, as it did give the vaunted title of 'Great' to one monarch of our period.

We have tried to write, as many authors have said before, the book we would like to read on the subject. We think we can assume from our reader a general knowledge of the east Mediterranean world during the Classical Age, the rivalry of Sparta and Thebes, the rise of Macedonia and the conquest of Persia by Alexander the Great. If not superbly written, such a summary of centuries, often found in other volumes, can be frustrating to plough through. The years from Alexander's death and the Diadochi Wars down through most of the third century is less well known so we have touched on it, but in general we have tried to get straight into the meat of our story. The same is true of the military dimension; we have avoided a résumé of Classical hoplite fighting and the development of the Macedonian phalanx, although we will have discussions referring to both these matters and many others that were significant in the world of the high Hellenistic kingdoms.

But the book that we would like to read, while looking at the details of campaigns and the intrigues at the courts of Antiochus, Ptolemy and Philip, still must have a shot at understanding what life was like for the participants, whether by getting inside the heads of the old guard who tried to influence Philip V when he first came to power or the power brokers of Achaea, or else the more regular fellows who haggled in the market or strutted in garrison towns, playing out the role of both defender and oppressor. And this impulse to understand an era so long in the past is bound to involve making comparisons with our own world, and certainly there seem parallels to be drawn between the supposed waning of the Classical World into its Hellenistic by-blow and what has occurred during the last century of our era. All such comparative analysis is, of course, deeply questionable, but none the less irresistible. Indeed, the feet of clay of the process are always exposed by how often any era in the past is trotted out as mirroring the author's own days. Yet this does not disqualify the practice because all are considering aspects of human development, while human imperatives remain, human partiality remains, human self-delusion remains. And if, for example, the excellent Barbara Tuchman can throw up the late fourteenth century as a 'Distant Mirror' to her own time, we are following a vogue that has borne good fruit before.

There is certainly a dourness in the great Greek cities of the pre-Hellenistic Age that recalls to some extent the post-Second World War years in Britain. There is an epic that has been played out, but in its wake is an era bathed in a depressing aura. In our own time the cloud of drabness that hovered over the years immediately after 1945 has to some extent dissipated with a culturally mixed, much more interesting townscape emerging in Britain in the last few decades, just as it also surfaced in the age we are considering. The Hellenistic Age loved its food where Sparta only had its gruel, and even the Athens of Pericles' day was not much better. It also saw an enjoyment and cherishing of people, women as well as men, and even of strangers who had been dragged into the orbit of the new, expanded world in a way that is reminiscent of our own times. The era of open racism, misogyny and homophobia of Britain in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s has largely changed into something more light and interesting, and this was also true as the Hellenic changed into the Hellenistic Age. The corollary was then, as it is now, that old certainties were gone, so old authorities held not the same unreasoning sway. In such a more interesting world, the one unfortunate result, struggled with in both eras, is that public political participation has considerably decreased. People don't go to union meetings or support political parties in the way they did even thirty years ago, and in the Hellenistic Age the depth of communal involvement was just not what it was.

Longevity was always an ace in the hole for any ruler of the pre-modern world. The first three decades of the third century BC saw the start of three reigns, all of which would last a very long time, while all concerned were adults with good groundings in power when they came to the throne of a great Successor kingdom. The first to establish himself did so in Egypt. It was a rough enough ride for Ptolemy II to get to the throne; he had elder half brothers that had to be got off the scene before the regnal transition from father to son could be smoothly accomplished. He had a short period as co-ruler with his father but finally took full control of the reins in about 283 and, as he died in 246, it meant he contrived a personal government of nearly 40 years. A good long time in a polity which had advantages that some of its competitors did not. Egypt, the heartland, had been a state with settled government with effective communal relations between its constituent parts for millennia. It was not just rich and organized; it was also very defensible, with outposts of power all round the Eastern Mediterranean and a navy powerful enough to keep the whole lot stitched together. The first Ptolemy had chosen well when he picked the country as his prize in the lottery at the death of Alexander, and his son continued the cautious and pragmatic policy of that ruler and scribbler. The most noticed developments are at the city of Alexandria, where boom times funded the extraordinary flowering of Hellenistic culture at the Museum and Library. But, power politics counted too and the second Ptolemy took his part in Syrian Wars

against the Seleucids and frequently financed trouble for his Macedonian rivals through proxies in Sparta and Athens.

The next to establish firm roots was Antiochus I, son of Seleucus. He did not have siblings to fight for the prize; his place in the dynastic arrangements could not have been clearer. Indeed, he had led his father's armies at least since the battle of Ipsus in 301 and by the 290s was established as the real ruler of the eastern half of the Seleucid realm. His interest in that area never diminished; he is noted as the ruler of Bactria and built the great defensive walls at Merv. But, instead of sibling rivals, he had to face the disruption caused when the first Seleucid, who looked set to gain control of all of Alexander's empire outside of Egypt, was despatched by the assassin's blade of Ptolemy the Thunderbolt. This crumbled all the old man had built in the west of his empire, and the situation was only made worse by the eruption of hordes of Galatian invaders whose wanderings took them as far as central Greece, Thrace and Anatolia. From his power base in southern Mesopotamia and with the resources of the upper satrapies to call upon, Antiochus took up the challenges to his power. But it took years to re-establish real government in most of the places where his father's writ had run. Indeed, he never fully succeeded. If the elephant victory of 273 imposed some discipline on the Gallic intruders, it was not possible to put back in the bottle the genie of an independent Pergamum. Just before he died, Antiochus had tried to bring Pergamum under control but lost in battle near Sardis to Eumenes I. In Anatolia, the reality was that Bithynia, Cappadocia and Pontus meant he was not all powerful there. He overplayed his hand against Ptolemy II in the first Syrian War, where, if initially successful, he ended losing what he had gained and holdings in Caria and Cilicia as well. And he never even attempted to pass the Hellespont into the Balkan lands that Seleucus claimed at the end of his life after his victory over Lysimachus. The realm he left to his son in 261 included an unfinished war with Egypt, but Antiochus II wound it up with no great difficulty and it was a reasonably stable package that had been handed on. Antiochus' reign might not have been quite as extravagantly long as his compatriot kings but, when it is acknowledged that for many years he ruled jointly with his father, it is clear he was around long enough to bed his dynasty in what was the biggest and most centrifugally inclined of the Hellenistic kingdoms.

Chapter 1

Rise of Aratus

After Ptolemy II and Antiochus I, the last and longest lived of the three great Hellenistic kings hung his hat at Pella. Antigonus Gonatas, the son of Demetrius I Poliorcetes, after many vicissitudes, had firmly established the Antigonid dynasty in Macedonia by 271.* He lasted until 239 and must have been nearly 80 at his death, the very age his grandfather was when he perished at the battle of Ipsus in 301. It might have seemed that the Macedonian homeland was a secure place to put down dynastic roots but, in fact, it was a ruptured polity wracked after many years of turmoil. Civil war, multiple monarchs and Galatian invasions had cut away at foundations that were, anyway, far from tried and ancient. A Galatian Thracian state was a new threat to the east and Pyrrhus, king of Epirus, back from Italy and Sicily, had ousted the newcomer, at least temporarily, before that stormy petrel was seen off by an old lady with a roof tile in Argos. Still, by the end of the 270s, Antigonus had finally secured himself on the throne his father had lost in such an undignified manner only a few years before.

He had pressed his cause with a phalanx in one hand and a bevy of stoics in the other. His public relations offensive was ably led by the incredibly ancient Hieronymus of Cardia, and Demetrius' son pushed a policy that had been at the heart of the Macedonian approach at least as far back as the time when Antipater ran the state from Pella, whilst Alexander adventured in Asia.[1] Garrisons, tyrants, dictators and oligarchs held in thrall many of the communities in Greece, bending them to the will of the government of the northern kingdom in return for their own security in domestic affairs. Meanwhile, rivals, usually of more democratic bent, were either at home or in exile, perpetually looking for a chance to topple them. Better to be sure with paid swords or dependent but unpopular enforcers than to risk a popular assembly turning away from friendship and alliance when offered material blandishments and dreams of lost imperial glory by agents from Alexandria, Antioch, Pergamum or other great power centres of the Hellenistic World.

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* All dates are BC unless specified otherwise.