

## THE SPREAD OF THE GREEK LANGUAGE

For more than two thousand years Greek was the *lingua franca* of the eastern Mediterranean. The success of the Indo-European language of the immigrants began when the Mycenaean civilisation spread throughout the Greek mainland and islands of the Aegean. The first documents in Greek language written in a syllabic script (Linear B) came from Mycenaean palaces on the Greek mainland and Crete. Around the time the Mycenaean civilisation ended for reasons that are not clear and new Greek tribes arrived on the Greek mainland from the north, the development of settlements on the western coast of Asia Minor intensified, where after a period of transition the first Greek cities have been identified. Shortly afterwards, in the 8th century BC, the Greeks learned in contact with other peoples a new technique of writing their language. The alphabet of the Phoenicians that did not express vowels, as is customary with Semitic languages, was adapted to writing Greek, and shows a parallel to the development of the Greek language. All the forms of the Greek language as attested to by inscriptions at the end of the 8th century BC onwards, and all forms of alphabet show common basic features, but there are many local variations in the details of morphology, grammar and writing. Standardisation of forms of writing and language was only achieved much later as part of a gradual process. Apart from language and writing, the Greeks shared a particular form of political organisation which they themselves considered to be characteristic of their style of life - the Greek city state - the 'polis'. Here again there were many local variations and only later did the model of the most important of these city states impose itself - the model of classical Athens.

### Greeks and barbarians

Various factors associated with the demographic, political and economic development of the archaic city state led to a move by the Greeks to establish new settlements on the coasts throughout the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. In the age of the Great Colonisation (750-550 BC) Greek culture was widely disseminated from Marseilles in the west to the Crimea in the north east. In the course of their continuous contact with other people the Greeks developed a keen awareness of the level of their own culture, and all other peoples who spoke to them in a language they could not understand, they called 'barbarians' according to the principle of onomatopoeia. The conflict between Greeks and barbarians in the Persian wars at the beginning of the 5th century BC is the subject of Herodotus' work which marks the beginning of history. In consequence he shows

a great interest in non-Greeks and especially the Egyptians to whom he devotes the second book of his work. Their customs and mores are shown to be at the same time the origin and the opposite of those of the Greeks in a play between polarity and analogy. But even in this special case it is the Egyptians who learned the Greek language as Herodotus explains for the age of the first settlement of Greeks in the Nile delta (foundation of Naukratis around 650 BC) and for his own era (500 BC). This early text of Herodotus indicates already how little the Greeks were inclined to learn a foreign language. One can assume that the mercenaries in the service of the Pharaoh from the 7th century BC onwards had a basic knowledge of the Egyptian language, but significantly, we do not find any evidence of this in the sources. The growing tendency was for the Greeks to impose their language and culture on others.

### [The Greek language becomes predominant in the known world](#)

From 336 BC onwards Alexander the Great conquered his huge empire which encompassed not only the territories of Macedonia, Thrace and Greece inherited from his father, Philip II, but very soon Asia Minor, Lebanon and Palestine, Egypt, Mesopotamia and then the whole Persian empire and the territories up to the Oxus, Jaxartes in the north, the Indus and Hyphases in the east, and the coast of present-day Pakistan and the Persian Gulf in the south. The conquest also meant the victory of Greek culture and language during the following age of Hellenism (323 - 31 BC), when Greco-Macedonian or at least Hellenised dynasties ruled the larger and smaller Hellenistic kingdoms. Greek was the language of the army which the main support for the power of Alexander and his successors. By founding Greek cities according to the Greek model the Greek style of life and culture spread throughout the whole territory of Alexander's empire. Even Ashoka, king of the Maurya dynasty in distant India had his laws written in the Greek language. This wide dissemination of Greek helped to establish a common form of Greek - koine - in the Mediterranean world and Near East. Whoever wanted to belong to the ruling class had to learn the Greek language and Greek style of life in the educational institutions that were established throughout the Greek speaking world - the gymnasia. The sources do not always indicate sufficiently clearly the details of the relationship between the Greek-speaking ruling class and the indigenous population. It is only for Hellenistic Egypt that the papyri conserved in the desert climate provide sufficient information. They also indicate that the Greeks showed little inclination to learn the native Egyptian language - demotic : the thousands of documents of daily life in Hellenistic Egypt under the rule of the Greco-Macedonian dynasties of the Ptolemies show only very few Greeks who had sufficient knowledge of this kind. The example of a private document where the same text is written in the same hand in Greek as well as in Egyptian remains an almost unique exception. Other

more frequent examples show, on the contrary, that Egyptians completed administrative formalities in the official Greek language, and in one case the supplicant states expressly that he does not know the language and that is the reason he feels at a disadvantage. It is certain that a considerable number of scribes, either Egyptians or Greeks of a new middle class helped the indigenous population to write their letters and applications and played an important role as bilingual interpreters, although it is difficult to ascertain the details from the sources.

### The Roman Orient

The contacts of the Romans with the Greek world, which began when they expanded into southern Italy and Sicily and then from the end of the third century BC onwards gradually conquered the eastern Mediterranean, led to a kind of division of Roman life. While the Roman ruling class was very keen to follow the model of the ancient Roman tradition (*mos maiorum*) in public and political life, private leisure (*otium*) in their villas in the country was completely dominated by Greek culture, which had imposed itself against the opposition of not a few traditionalists (Cato the Elder). The first Roman historian who wrote at the time of the Second Punic War wrote in Greek. Greek philosophy and rhetoric were basic elements of the education of a young Roman of noble family and very frequently young Romans travelled to Athens or Rhodes to be taught. A Roman senator or general had to speak Greek because it remained the language of administration in the eastern part of the empire. The translation of texts from one of the two languages into the other was a feature of daily life. One can see the experience and skill acquired in this field if one compares for example the two versions of the report extolling the exploits of Augustus, one in Latin at the entrance of his mausoleum in Rome, and others in an excellent Greek translation found throughout the eastern half of the empire.. Translators and interpreters, who like other comparable categories such as private teachers and readers were most certainly frequently slaves, worked everywhere, in the private sphere and in the military and civil administration of the Roman empire. However their activity gets very little attention in the available sources.

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