

PHILOS BASILIKOS

ROLE-PLAYING IN THE HELLENISTIC AGE, 323 - 30 B.C.

by Volker Bach

It was an age of high adventure, familiar in essence to every fantasy role-player. Daring, ambitious warlords carved out kingdoms and founded dynasties that would in time be accorded divine honours. Adventurers of every stripe travelled to the ends of the known world, taking service with princes and rulers as mercenaries, advisers, sages, architects and explorers. Lonely garrisons guarded far-flung frontiers against savage tribesmen from the snowbound mountains of the north and the trackless deserts of the south. Barbarian invaders sacked the towns and temples of the heartlands of civilisation. Divine rulers surrounded themselves with courts of unheard-of splendour. Sages and philosophers strove to explain the mysteries of the cosmos. A refined civilisation blossomed in cities the likes of which the world had never seen. Desperate rebels challenged the might of the greatest kings of their day. And it all really happened!

The way in which historical RPGs have neglected the Hellenistic age as a setting seems inexplicable. If ever there was a period conforming to the genre conventions of High Fantasy, here it is. Everyone from time-travellers and dimension-hoppers to serious historical roleplayers should love it. And no gaming company seems to care. That is doubly sad because most non-RPG-related writing on the period is fairly inaccessible. Sources for the time are, admittedly, scarce, but to a creative GM that need not be an obstacle. In fact it can be an asset. A constant problem with historical campaigns is that they tend to fall foul of established fact at some point or other. Through most of the Hellenistic age it is possible to pick just about any place on the map, look up the big picture in a history book (that should be a short task indeed), invent the rest as required and get going; historical fact is scarce.

The truly wonderful thing about the Hellenistic age is, though, that while the history is fairly obscure - with lots of blanks to fill with whatever action players like - the background of culture, society, daily life and political systems is very well known. Much of it is simply Classical Greece writ large, bigger and (possibly) better. The Greeks in this setting are spread over most of the Mediterranean and well into Central Asia, leaving behind their roots in their impoverished homeland to literally become rulers of most of the known world.

GREECE WRIT LARGE

The Hellenistic world, known to its masters as the **Koine Oikumene**, extended from the frontiers of India to the Atlantic and from the Sahara desert and the Nile valley to the misty forests of the Danube and Gaul. At the heart of this cosmos lay the Hellene countries, Greece, Macedon, the Italian colonies and Asia Minor, and the great kingdoms of their day, Thrace, Syria and Egypt. Beyond this stretched the periphery, Mesopotamia with its ancient cities, Bactria's deserts,

Greek and Barbarian

To the Greeks - who collectively referred to themselves as Hellenes - all non-Greek people were barbarians. The word did not always carry the overtones of primitiveness we are used to today; in the original sense, it referred to anyone who did not speak Greek and therefore seemed to the Greeks to be saying something like "barbarbar". Since few Greeks bothered to learn barbarian tongues (even historians of the time frequently distinguish only between Greek and barbarian when discussing languages) the distinction remained in place for a long time. As rulers, the Greeks simply expected everyone who wanted to join the upper classes to speak their language, and many upwardly mobile foreigners readily did so.

The Greek language, spread over the length and breadth of the civilised world, went through a levelling process that left it much simpler and more uniform than the numerous dialects of the Greek heartlands. This almost universally spoken language was called **Koine** ('common'), and a speaker could be found almost everywhere. The upper classes regarded it as rather crude and paid elocution teachers large sums to teach them the classical Attic dialect. Speakers of Attic Greek and Koine can understand each other without trouble, but among the upper classes speaking flawless Attic should be good for a positive reaction. The fortunate citizens of Athens grew up with this dialect, but everybody else had to go to great lengths to learn it. Other Greek dialects also stayed alive in more remote regions, but they were considered quaint and rustic at best, primitive at worst.

Aside from **Koine** - and largely ignored by the Greeks - a wide variety of languages was spoken in the Hellenistic world. Throughout the East, Aramaic was the tongue of the common people. The inhabitants of Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Persia were

almost universally fluent in it, and in many places it had supplanted earlier languages. The Judean people used it instead of their native Hebrew, which had become a dead language used only in religious texts. Arabic dialects were spoken in parts of the Syrian desert and the Arabian peninsula. In Egypt, the old language of Pharaonic times continued to be used and developed, heavily influenced from the outside, into Koptic. Thracian and Illyric languages were spoken in the Balkans, and Celtic in Northwestern Europe. In Italy, a bewildering variety of local tongues confuse the visitor who would happily limit himself to the civilised southern seaboard with its Greek cities. Latin only gradually became the universal language of the land, and for much of the time the Romans appeared to the Greeks as a rude and primitive hill tribe. In North Africa, Punic was the common language. The tongue of the Phoenician colonists who had founded cities along the coastline also became increasingly common in the ports of the Western Mediterranean, until Carthage was defeated and destroyed by Rome. But on the whole, barbarians much more readily learned each other's languages, and Greek, than Greeks did 'barbarian'.

Judas Maccabeus

One of the many native revolts of Hellenistic times even made it into the Bible – the uprising of the Maccabees. The Judeans had been granted the right to live according to their religious laws by the Persian kings, and Alexander and their Seleucid masters initially respected these rights. Nonetheless the close proximity of Jewish communities living under Mosaic law and Hellenised Gentiles was a source of constant friction. The Greek lifestyle – with its gymnasias, markets and theaters – held great attractions for many Jews, though the religious ceremonies interwoven with every aspect of it were forbidden to the followers of YHWH. Greek art, glorying in the depiction of the human body, violated Jewish religious laws and its display in public offended many. The Greeks in turn thought that their neighbours' refusal to join in their civic religious festivals was the height of discourtesy. Circumcision, difficult to hide during athletics competitions held in the nude, was obscene to Hellene sentiment, and cosmeticists specialised in some means of concealing it. Traditional Jews

India's floodplains, the fertile lands of Carthaginian Africa, Italy with its semi-barbaric tribesfolk, the misty northern forests of the Celts and the endless plains of the savage Scythian horse-nomads. Throughout all these lands, Greek merchants and diplomats travelled, Greek soldiers marched, Greek goods were valued and Greek settlers welcomed. Their language rapidly became the lingua franca of the entire world and there was a fair chance even in the midst of an Indian rajah's court or a savage Celtic warband to find someone who knew at least a smattering of it.

Throughout the known world Greeks settled, founding city-state colonies modelled on the **poleis** of their homeland. The established cities of the Greek world continued to flower alongside the new foundations, making this the golden age of urban civilisation. Admittedly the politicians and philosophers of the Classical age would have heartily disapproved of the city states of the Hellenistic period. Technically independent communities, they were mostly controlled by a small elite of wealthy oligarchs, often from established aristocratic families, forming the city council and dividing the offices of government among themselves. Often, there were royal troops and occasionally governors in place preventing a violent overthrow of the established order. Royal residences frequently lacked even the feeblest trappings of democracy, being governed by the king directly. However, what they lacked in political freedom and participation, Hellenistic cities made up for in splendor. The wealthy ruling class made a virtue of generosity, adorning their home towns with theatres, colonnades, temples, libraries, statues and gymnasia, and hosting banquets, athletic games and lavish religious festivals. Royal residences were turned into architectural wonders by their rulers, foremost of all Antioch, city of the Seleucid kings, and Alexandria in Ptolemaic Egypt. Many great families of lesser cities badly overspent themselves trying to rival the glories of the metropoleis, or just their neighbor's latest extravagance. Competition between cities was as fierce as ever, and – deprived of the option of outright war – many were determined to outshine their erstwhile enemies. Intrigues, rivalries and hugely overambitious building projects offer countless opportunities for adventure even to players who despair over the nearly impossible task of restoring democracy and justice to their home town.

Such cities were found in the most unlikely corners of the barbarian realms. Greeks lived in Central Asia, all the way to the borders of India. They built **poleis** among the ancient cultures of Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia and Egypt, in the mountains of Armenia and the steppes of southern Russia. The familiar silhouettes of colonnaded temples, theatres and stadia dominated cityscapes in the midst of strange lands and uncomprehending (and frequently restive) natives. Greek citydwellers tended to look down on the subject people surrounding them, seeing them as barbaric, often primitive and generally uncultured. Since they formed the ruling class of most of the world they were free to express these feelings in the most hurtful fashion. Not unlike the colonial masters of more recent days, the Hellenistic Greeks away from home were not always easy to live with. Native revolts became almost regular occurrences and some, like the Maccabean uprising in Palestine, succeeded spectacularly. All of this offers wonderful opportunities for roleplaying, be it as the defenders of oppressed natives or Greeks surrounded by barbarians suddenly turned nasty.

KING OF KINGS

After Alexander the Great's successors declared themselves kings in their own right, kingship – **basileia** – became the most common form of government; in the eyes of many, it was the only really respectable one. Hellenistic kings were absolute monarchs, untrammelled by laws or assemblies of nobles. Many were even accorded divine honors by their subject cities, and at least one actually believed that he was a god. What they were not, at least for much of the period,

was territorial rulers. No Hellenistic king was king of anywhere – he was King. His subjects owed allegiance and tribute to him personally, and whatever he ruled was referred to as his **pragmata** - roughly speaking his personal possessions with which he could do as he saw fit. A good king was expected to be charismatic, rich, glorious, powerful, generous, merciful, and above all successful. Being the descendant of a king helped, but by and large subject cities and tribes owed their ruler allegiance because of his success and power and were not above changing sides on him if his luck changed. This was risky, of course – Hellenistic kings, being basically warlords without the spiked helmets, were occasionally known to make terrible examples of those that deserted them – but with a little political instinct it was always possible to identify and back the winning side. The potential rewards were huge, and most kings were realistic enough to take returning penitents back into the fold with a light slap on the wrist. Hellenistic power politics could make Macchiavelli's attitudes look like those of a choirboy.

All kings surrounded themselves with an elaborate court whose ostentatious display and cultured refinement were essential to their prestige. No expense was spared in providing for the enjoyment of the ruler and his courtiers, and anything that cost a lot of money and looked the part would certainly arouse interest. Many kings styled themselves patrons of the arts, devotees of the worship of specific gods, supporters of philosophers and architects and builders on a grand scale, surrounding themselves with the most famous people of their day. A large portion of their courts naturally consisted of military men and administrators, but a complement of poets, playwrights, philosophers, engineers, painters, sculptors, mosaicists, musicians, actors and magicians was considered essential to the glory of a ruler. The Ptolemaic kings led the way, sponsoring the Museion of Alexandria, a temple of the Muses incorporating philosophers' schools, a theatre and the legendary Great Library, and all others followed suit after their own fashion, not always with the same measure of success.

For those close to the king, a Hellenistic court was a rather less formal affair than those of Persia or Egypt had been. Courtiers were known as Friends of the King - **philoï basilikoi** - and joined him in informal **symposia**, traditional Greek drinking parties where everything from fiscal policy to the charms of well-known courtesans could be discussed. Membership in this exclusive, almost completely all-Greek and all-male club was the ticket to wealth and power and the eventual goal of many an ambitious soldier, artist or administrator. Proximity to the king was the one reliable measure of status, and his favour found expression in lavish gifts and lifelong grants of land that made his favourites fabulously rich. With the administrative structure of most Hellenistic kingdoms being rudimentary at best, appointments were governed by the king's pleasure, and any member of his entourage could one day find himself in command of a garrison, leading a diplomatic embassy or in charge of enforcing a government monopoly; this was not a time for specialist careers.

HELLENISTIC ARMIES

The true power base of a Hellenistic **basileus** was not the court, nor the loyalty of his adoring subjects, but the armed forces he could command. Lacking the ties of blood and tradition to command the loyalty of their subjects, these kings were of necessity forced to compose their armies and navies largely of mercenaries. The core of every royal fighting force was permanently maintained at the ruler's expense and increased in numbers as the occasion required. Mercenaries were mostly hired from Greece, with Macedonians and Peloponnesians finding particular favour. Many destitute young men left the arid mountains of Hellas to seek their fortune – or at least an agreeable living – in the service of a distant king; some found wealth, fame and power beyond their wildest dreams. Some kings maintained bodyguards of barbarian warriors sworn to defend them with their

even refused to eat at the same table with Gentiles, and the priesthood allowed no Greek to participate in any worship of their God - known to the Hellenes as Zeus Sabbaothis - and saw the common courtesy of altars and statues erected in his honor as blasphemy.

In the 2nd century BC, these tensions came to a boiling point. The Seleucid king Antiochos IV demanded that his subjects accord him divine honors. As common as this was for Greeks, it was unacceptable to pious Jews and they obstinately refused. Eventually Antiochos entered Jerusalem and forced the erection of a statue in the temple. A Judean of the priestly caste, Judas Maccabeus ("The Hammer") led an uprising in 166 BC that defeated the king's troops in a long, bitter guerilla campaign. Jerusalem was taken, the temple rededicated and every attempt at reconquest repulsed. Judas Maccabeus died in battle in 160 BC, but his family became the royal dynasty of a restored kingdom of Judea consciously designed to follow the tradition of the biblical state. The speed with which this state and its royal family were assimilated into the diplomatic patchwork of the Hellenistic east is a testament to the integrative power of Greek culture; a decade after the death of Judas, the Maccabean kings were one more local Hellenised dynasty.

The Maccabean uprising makes a good background for a historical campaign, or a foil for a more generic 'barbarian rising' adventure. Both sides are well playable, with the Jews portrayed either as the long-suffering faithful shaking off the yoke of heathen tyranny against an insane king thinking himself divine, or as narrow-minded religious fanatics assailing a more open-minded, sophisticated civilisation.

It Isn't Just a Game

Many Hellenistic kings sought to make money by declaring goods – sometimes olive oil, salt or marble - a monopoly in their kingdoms. Egypt was famous for this, but in many other kingdoms similar schemes were enforced. Retailing the monopolised goods and enforcing their exclusive rights was the job of businessmen who purchased the monopoly for a fixed sum and then milked it for all it was worth. They often had some degree of police powers and used them readily on a helpless populace. Monopoly cartels make wonderful villains – or, with some imagination, a job with a difference for a PC party.

The Mercenary Fair

Every spring the recruiters of the Hellenistic kingdoms came to the Peloponnese to seek out potential soldiers. Hopeful young men from all over Greece headed there to make their fortunes in the service of the great kings. What this mercenary fair really looked like is unknown, but the concept is intriguing and makes for wonderful role-playing opportunities. PCs as starry-eyed youths on their way to flutes, pikes and glory are as playable as recruiters competing for the best. Any long-term campaign can begin here as mercenaries with the right amount of talent, luck and ruthlessness could rise to high office in royal courts.

Phalangite Template [58 points]

The Phalangite is the typical grunt of any Hellenistic army, the backbone of the battleline rooted to the spot in the deep formation of the spear-bristling phalanx. Such a soldier does not need much by way of specialised Skills, his main virtues being strength, stamina and sang-froid. The Skill levels given here are for reasonably competent soldiers, but not elite troops. Any seasoned campaigner or guardsman character should definitely stock up on individual combat Skills, but the average foot-soldier was indeed near helpless once the ranks broke. The phalangite's weapon was the **sarissa**, a 15' pike used with both hands. A light shield strapped to the left arm has replaced the heavier **aspis** of the classical era. The only close-combat weapon that phalangites regularly carry is a shortsword with a leaf-shaped blade no longer than 1'.

Attributes: ST 12 [20], DX 12 [20], IQ 10 [0], HT 11 [10].

Advantages: A total of 10 points chosen from Composed [5], Extra Fatigue [3/level], Extra Hit Points [5/level], Fearlessness [2/level], Fit [5], High Pain Threshold [10], Strong Will [4/level] or +1 to ST, DX, IQ or HT [10].

Disadvantages: A total of -20 points chosen from Alcoholism [-15], Bully [-10], Chummy or Gregarious [-5 or -10], Code of Honor (enlisted man's) [-5 or -10], Duty (Basileus) [-5 to -15], Greed [-15], Lecherousness [-15] Overconfidence [-10] or Sense of Duty (comrades) [-5].

lives – Celts were especially popular – but military units of barbarians were used only as auxiliaries to the mainly Greek armies. All kings could theoretically call upon the military services of their subjects and some regularly used tribal contingents of Asian horse archers, Illyrian and Thracian warriors or Syrian militias, but their military value was questionable and Greek cities were generally exempt from such levies. Calling up levies for the army could be construed as an admission of weakness and most kings sought to avoid it for that reason. The navy, with its great demand for rowers, was sometimes supplied by levy with men from the coastal cities, but more commonly the kings maintained professional, paid crews for their ships in peacetime. Neither slaves nor prisoners were ever used to row warships.

Soldiering in Hellenistic armies was largely an unskilled job. Military men were full-time professionals and many must have eventually acquired impressive skills, but all that was required to begin was being able to hold a spear and shield. Basic military training and athletics were part of the upbringing of every freeborn Greek citydweller, so the recruitment material wasn't bad, but specialised training was given only in the arms that required it. Any reasonably fit man made a



satisfactory phalanx fighter, and after a year or two (and maybe a campaign) he would have all the necessary skills and, more importantly, the seasoning. Cavalrymen were mostly recruited from among members of the upper classes who already knew how to ride, though in times of need some fortunate pedestrian recruits might be taught the ropes by instructors and enter this highly paid elite force. Specialists usually were recruited specifically, mostly from certain ethnic groups where their skills were taught to many people. Archers came from Syria and Arabia, slingers from the Balearic Islands, elephant handlers from India. Only artillerymen and naval crews regularly got any kind of formal military training, and even they were expected to learn largely by experience. Good men would be transferred to guard units or made officers, incompetents dismissed or killed. The quality of any given army unit was a hit-or-miss affair, depending on the luck of the recruiter, its recent history and the number of seasoned veterans in its ranks. Hellenistic soldiers thought highly of their own skills, but given the way their armies fell apart when facing Roman legions they were probably not all that good.

Hellenistic armies and navies were highly specialised, with a multiplicity of arms acting in unison on the battlefield. Heavy infantry acted as the core of the force, supported by light infantry and armored cavalry protecting the flanks. Light cavalry did duty as scouts and skirmishers. Light catapults were sometimes used as field artillery, and both chariots (very occasionally) and war elephants (more commonly) saw service. The elephant arm lent splendor to a king's name and was lovingly maintained, often at an expense out of proportion with its rather limited military value. Fortification and siege engineering were developed to new heights; skilled military architects, siege engineers and technicians could command exorbitant wages. The navies also profited from this flowering of military development as the old-fashioned trireme of Classical Greece was replaced by larger types armed with catapults and carrying complements of trained marines for boarding actions.

Most Hellenistic armies followed the Macedonian manner in subdividing their troops. The core of the army was formed by a phalanx of heavy infantry, differing in size between several hundred and tens of thousands. A phalanx in itself

was not a unit but a formation, a massed square of pikemen referred to as phalangites. It was formed from smaller tactical units called **syntagma** (sing.: **syntagma**) of 256 men which were deployed 16 men wide and 16 deep or 32 men wide and eight deep. Six of these formed a **taxis** of about 1500 men. A battle-line could be formed out of a single **syntagma**, as was undoubtedly done in numerous minor engagements, or out of ten or more **taxis** as in the greatest battles of the time. The heavy cavalry was an equally valued - and at times more decisive - arm in battle. It was organised in squadrons of 200 men, known as **ilai** (sing.: **ile**). These armored horsemen were used to envelop an enemy battle-line engaged by the phalanx and attack it in the rear, though some battles were decided by their impetuous charge alone. Cavalrymen of the time were given to recklessness and derring-do and felt superior to the plodding infantryman, a feeling that was borne out by their privileged position, higher pay and recruitment from the aristocracy. Light cavalry scouts and light infantry archers, slingers and javeliners were mostly recruited from non-Greek peoples and organised on an ad-hoc basis.

In peacetime, the armies and navies were garrisoned in cities and fortresses throughout the kingdom, ensuring the peace and keeping an eye on subjects of questionable loyalty. They often doubled as police, patrolling overland roads and seeking out the bands of armed robbers and tribal warriors that continued to pose a major problem to internal security throughout the period. Border garrisons and troops quartered on reluctant allies far from the king were often involved in fighting with the natives as well. The evidence suggests that Hellenistic armies in East Africa, Arabia, Central Asia, Southern Russia and the Balkans fought an endless row of small wars about which we know hardly anything. The navies were busy trying to stem the tide of piracy, another problem the kings of the time never managed to get the better of; sometimes, they even found themselves facing actual pirate fleets in set-piece naval battles. They also provided vital communication between the scattered pieces of kingdoms stretching along the coasts of the Red Sea and Persian Gulf or in the Aegean islands. Soldiers and sailors were sometimes sent on expeditions into Africa or Asia on behalf of their kings, and explorers of the period roamed as far as Somalia, the Bight of Benin, Norway, the Baltic, and China. India and Britain were regularly visited by merchant ships.

ARTISTS AND PHILOSOPHERS

Soldiers and explorers were not the only people travelling the length and breadth of the Mediterranean. The wealth and open-handed patronage of the royal courts and far-flung colony cities attracted artists, writers, poets, engineers and philosophers. Some settled permanently, content to make a living, while others kept moving, absorbing impressions, knowledge and techniques at the feet of many different masters in all parts of the world. The most famous even were head-hunted for philosophical schools and royal courts, sometimes earning considerable fortunes in the process. Travelling philosophers, artists or engineers can make interesting characters as a contrast to the common fighter stereotype.

Modern critics often think of Hellenistic art as sterile and repetitive. That is an oversimplification, though one with truth to it. Architecture and sculpture tended toward the monumental, frequently pursuing size at the expense of taste and quality. To many Hellenistic patrons, bigger was better. The colossus of Rhodes, the giant lighthouse at Alexandria and the garish altar of Pergamon bear witness to this attitude. Painting, of which we know next to nothing, seems to have followed similar lines. Other aspects of art, however, were vibrant and constantly developing. Mosaic saw its heyday, adorning public and private buildings with its wondrous designs. In many parts of the world, native traditions mixed with imported Greek art to produce unique blends. GMs and players who like art can develop entire plotlines around the theme of exploring this variety, not to mention the possibilities of royal patronage adding politics to the mix.

Philosophy was regarded highly by the educated classes of the age, and many

Primary Skills: Spear (P/A) DX+1 [4]-13, Shield (P/E) DX+2 [4]-14.

Secondary Skills: Shortsword (P/A) DX [2]-12, Tactics (Phalanx Drill) (M/H) IQ-1 [2] (Phalanx Drill)-14/(general)-8, Hiking (P/A) HT [2]-11.

Background Skills: a total of 4 points in Wrestling (P/A), Boxing (P/A), Carousing (P/A), Gambling (M/A), Survival (any) (M/A), Running (P/H) or First Aid (M/E).

Equipment: Bronze helmet (Boeotian or Corinthian) PD 3 DR 3, 5 or 7.5 lbs; Linen cuirass PD 2 DR 2, 8 lbs; Sarissa (long two-handed pike) thr+3 imp, 12 lbs; light shield, PD 3, 8 lbs; leaf-shaped shortsword, 2 lbs.

Arms and Armor

The basic equipment of the Hellenistic soldier differed little from that of classical Greece, though on the whole the troops got more and better gear. The heavy infantry, burdened down with their long **sarissa**, used a lighter shield than the classical hoplites and often wore a cuirass made from several layers of thick linen glued together rather than a bronze breastplate (use the numbers for heavy leather). Other than this the only protection commonly worn by the infantry were bronze helmets. Here the traditional Corinthian helmet covering the entire head and face was increasingly supplanted by the Boeotian type, a lighter pot-helm with a distinctive folded rim leaving the face and neck free. Arm and leg protection was available, but most foot-soldiers cared little for the added weight. Their main weapon was the **sarissa**, a long pike of cornelwood. What swords they wore were short, little more than daggers; treat as Shortsword for damage, with a -1 to parry and to cutting damage.

Cavalry troopers in contrast tended to wear all the armor they could get. Bronze breastplates or scale armor were nearly universal (only the poorest of horsemen wore linen armor), and cunningly-articulated bronze arm and leg protectors were built for the wealthy among them. Some also began wearing chain-mail, a newly developed armor made by Celtic and Italic smiths. Their helmets were the same as the infantry's, though the Boeotian was even more favored. Armed with lances, javelins and curved swords about two feet in length

they were trained to charge in wedge or square formation and then engage the enemy in single combat. Lacking stirrups, their lance attack was less effective than that of medieval knights, but infantry still feared it.

Light infantry wore little armor, though leather jerkins or linen cuirasses were probably owned by some. Oriental troops used composite bows, while Greek and Western light footmen were javeliners or slingers. The most famous archers came from Crete and Syria, the finest javeliners from Thrace and the best slingers from the Balearic islands. Many of them carried a sword or mace and a light wicker shield called pelta from which a type of light infantryman, the peltast, takes his name. Strangely enough, while the light troops held lower status than the heavy phalangite and were usually not decisive in battle. They were probably - man for man - better fighters than their Greek comrades. Mobile and independent, effective at range as well as close-quarters, trained in their peoples' traditional arms from childhood and obliged to think on their feet in battle, they probably also make better adventurers, though period tactics relegated them to a supporting role in warfare.

War Machines

Hellenistic kings loved machines, useful or not, and the creators of every new invention could expect at least a hearing. Many of the inventions made at the time were very useful, most of them in the field of warfare. The Hellenistic age was the first to systematically apply new technology to war and its signal achievements were legion. The most conspicuous advances were in naval and siege warfare.

Diodorus credits Dionysios I of Syracuse with the invention of the torsion catapult. Whether this is true or false, catapults quickly entered service and by the time of Alexander's death were standard in all Hellenistic armies. The designs were complex and sophisticated, and required constant attention by specialised engineers. Experimental engines were even powered by compressed air, though whether these actually worked is doubtful. Torsion engines powered by twisted skeins of sinew or horsehair were certainly more common. Unlike medieval siege engines they could not be improvised on site but had to be transported to the battlefield and

schools of thought existed side by side, vying for converts. Cynics taught their students to break their ties to the world, reneging their earthly property to live a life of contemplation free from care. Epicureans tried to achieve the same by creating sheltered environments for themselves - if they were wealthy enough. Sceptics looked for truth through doubting everything. Stoics preached steeling themselves against the vicissitudes of life and doing their duty regardless. Pythagorean mystics sought to fathom the mysteries of the universe through meditation, keeping their teachings secret from the outside world, while Neoplatonists developed an elaborate hierarchy of spirits and deities in which humans could rise towards unity with the One. Many schools turned to religion or mysticism, becoming something closer to cults than places of learning, while on the other hand increasing demand saw the rise of pseudo-philosophers who were little more than paid schoolmasters, teaching rhetorical devices rather than logic. True philosophers, however, would travel far to learn (or teach) the truth as they saw it, and between the intrigue of rivaling schools and the dangers of the open road adventuring opportunity is rife.

TECHNE AND MAGIC

Hitherto the frequently-neglected stepchildren of philosophy, science and technology came into their own in the Hellenistic age. Royal patronage made possible engineering projects far beyond what had been known before, and theoretical laws of geometry and mathematics were gainfully applied in the solution of the ensuing problems. Archimedes (p.WWii14), possibly the period's greatest engineer, researched the application of the lever and the physics of relative density, perfected the pulley and the Archimedian screw, and built war machines for his king. Aristarchus theorised that the Earth was round and that it revolved around the sun, and by an ingenious application of geometry calculated Earth's radius with remarkable precision. Heron built entertaining automatons and developed the first crude steam engine in Alexandria. All the while hosts of anonymous inventors built ever larger warships and siege engines, ever more impregnable fortifications, developed window glazing and floor heating, optical lenses, parabolic mirrors and thousands of little innovations that still surprise archaeologists today. To those fond of alternate histories, this is one of the best starting points for an anachronistic industrial revolution. However, as the kings of the age had already perfected such practises as industrial espionage, patent protection, production monopolies and headhunting (sometimes literally), adventure need not depend on such a scenario.

Along with science and often intermingled with it, most people of the Hellenistic period believed in - or at least conceded the possibility of - magic. Many practised it either for themselves or professionally, some of them being highly respected. Philosophers did not disdain such practises and even developed a system of their own, known as Hermetic magic after the god Hermes-Thoth, which laid the groundwork on which almost all of Europe's tradition of magic and alchemy stands. Contemporaries thought magicians capable of everything a proper RPG mage can do, and more, though most everyday magic was limited to blessings, healing, wishes and curses of the more pedestrian kind. A high-cinematic campaign can easily accommodate such staples as fireballs, flying carpets and animated corpses - contemporary fiction abounds with them. Another possible angle in a campaign with magic could be the confrontation - or grudging cooperation - of magicians from different cultures. The Greek philosophers were not the only ones to master arcane forces. The Babylonians were renowned foremost as astrologists and diviners, Egyptian priests and scribes had access to the deepest secrets of the universe and even the most primitive barbarians had their own mages in the form of druids and wisewomen. Different magic systems can be used to good effect here if the GM is willing to take the trouble.

BEYOND THE BORDERS

The Hellenistic world may have been ruled by Greeks, but it was inhabited by a multitude of peoples that - before the levelling influence of Rome had run its course - were as different as one could imagine them. Within the Greek kingdoms in Mesopotamia, Syria and Egypt, cultures far older than even Mycenae still survived. The ruling classes may have adopted Greek ways, but the common people lived as they always had. Sacrifices were brought to the altars of Egypt's gods under Ptolemy as they had been under Ramesses, and the ziggurats of Babylon continued to see the ancient ceremonies of worship to Marduk. The cities of Syria and Asia Minor kept up the rites of the Mother Goddess and their tutelary deities, kaftaned dancers castrating themselves before her altars in religious ecstasy. In Judea the faith of Jahwe - whose temple at Jerusalem no unbeliever might enter on pain of death, and whose worshippers were forbidden to eat at the same table with Greeks - flourished. The high mountain fastnesses and deep valleys of Anatolia were home to peasants living in servitude to temples of their native gods and wild noblemen of Persian stock. Right in the middle of Asia Minor, marauding Celtic warbands carved out their own kingdom, Galatia. The coasts of Cilicia were home to entire pirate fleets sheltered in its fishing villages, harrying the shores of the Mediterranean and hunting down shipping to capture goods and people for sale as slaves. The most successful were said to have oars covered in silver leaf and sails dyed with purple. In Thracia and Epirus the mountain tribesmen were hardly more civilised than their Celtic brethren farther north, and the hardy people of Persia, the Caucasus and Central Asia barely knew their Greek rulers and were happy to be left to their own devices. In deserts and mountains unsuited to cultivation, wild tribesmen eked out a living from their herds - supplemented by their precarious few fields and occasional raids into the richer lands - utterly beyond any kind of control by their nominal kings. Even the greatest cities of their day were a bare few days travel away from the untamed wilderness. In fact, it was a lot like AD&D.

The exotic allure of the outside world continued to fascinate the Greeks throughout the period. The Celts lived to the northwest, spread from Spain to the Balkans. A people feared for warrior prowess, they invaded Greece, Italy and even Asia Minor at times, plundering as they went. Kings throughout the Greek world valued them as mercenaries later. The steppes of Southern Russia and Central Asia were home to tribes of horse nomads, the warlike Scythians and Sarmatians who rode to war on armored horses and collected the scalps of their enemies. Greek authors write that among the Sarmatians the women went to war along with the men and no girl could marry until she had killed an enemy with her own hands. The Numidians of North Africa, too, were feared horse warriors, riding unarmored and armed only with javelins bareback on hardy desert horses they controlled without spurs or reins. On the western frontier of the **Koine Oikumene**, Italy was home to Greek cities living side by side with the Italian peoples, seen as barely civilised primitives whose settlement poorly imitated the Greek city states. Even as the rural Latin city of Rome rose to control much of the country, few Greeks were prepared to take it seriously. The true enemy here, after all, was Carthage, a colony of Phoenicians established in North Africa whose vast fleets and mercenary armies battled the Greek rulers of Sicily over control of the island. Despite claims to the contrary by the Sicilian Greeks, it was Carthage that ruled the western lands and the Western Mediterranean remained a Carthaginian lake until Rome destroyed its power for good. The kingdoms of Arabia and Africa, on the other hand, were fairly weak and gratifyingly primitive, and usually owed allegiance and tribute to some Greek king or other. Saba (yes, as in the Queen of Saba) in modern Yemen and the kingdom of Nubia south of Egypt were the greatest of these states, both continually beset by surrounding tribes. India, a country surrounded by myth and legend, always held a great fascination for the

assembled there. The lighter types shot bolts with tremendous force and were occasionally used against war elephants to good effect. Larger catapults threw stones weighing up to 120 lbs against fortifications or ships. See Appendix II for three sample weapons.

Sieges were conducted with sophisticated equipment and much engineering enthusiasm, though not always with consummate expertise. Siege-towers rising several hundred feet high, armored with sheet iron or bronze and bristling with catapults, battering rams manned by hundreds of soldiers and batteries of stone throwers were deployed against heavily fortified cities. Huge walls in sophisticated patterns and towers chock-full of catapults were built in place of earlier, more modest fortifications. Mining became an art. Some even more exotic weapons were used on occasion - Archimedes developed parabolic mirrors to set fire to Roman ships blockading Syracuse and Hannibal had the Bithynian navy throw pots of live snakes at attacking enemies.

Ships saw remarkable development, too. Throughout the Hellenistic world warships were oared galleys equipped with bronze rams, though they soon began carrying catapults. They were classified by the number of rowers in each crosswise section, independent of the number of oars. (A ship with three men in one section using one oar each would come into the same class as a ship with three men in a section sharing a single oar.) The standard warship of the classical age had been the triere or trireme, a ship with three rowers to the section. In the Hellenistic age, the quinquereme or pentere - a ship with five rowers to the section - became the standard. Unlike the triere, which regularly carried twelve fighting men, these vessels could be fitted with catapults and carry up to 100 soldiers. Larger ships were common, with anything up to the decemreme (ten rowers per section) being regularly seen in fleets. The king of Syracuse had a legendary ship with 42 rowers per section built, though this behemoth proved too large to be seaworthy. On the whole, bigger was thought to be better, and the trend was only reversed in the Roman empire.



The Library of Alexandria

The legendary library of Alexandria was really rather different from what it is commonly imagined to be. For one thing it was only part of a much larger complex that was technically a religious site, the sacred precinct of the Museion, the temple of the Muses at Alexandria. What the place looked like is uncertain, but it is fairly safe to say that it must have been grand, with white marble columns and opulent statuary. It was here that the Ptolemies maintained a school of philosophy through their patronage. Teachers of renown were drawn by the generosity of the Egyptian kings and the reputation of the place. Students flocked there to attend their public lectures and debates. Some philosophers demanded money from their audiences, others depended entirely on royal patronage for their livelihood.



Almost any conceivable area of study was pursued. Alexandrian grammarians laid the foundation of modern linguistics, physicians studied anatomy on dissected bodies, literary men read the most obscure classical texts and found a ready audience for their own works, and engineers built strange devices for the delectation of their king or the use of his army. Most famous among them is Heron who built automatons for show. His so-called "steam-engine" - a heated, water-filled hollow sphere revolving around its horizontal axis driven by the pressure of steam exiting through angled tubes in the side - has become the stuff of modern legend. It never saw any practical application (or would have been suited for any), and neither did his miraculous device for opening temple doors by lighting a fire on the altar in front of it, or the mechanical donkey with a detachable head. Speculating about the possibilities for a budding industrial revolution makes for wonderful roleplaying ideas, but it isn't realistic.

Greeks and though king Chandragupta and his successors barred any ambition of military conquest, contacts through trade and diplomacy were lively throughout the period. Sri Lanka and the Indonesian Islands were known to and regularly visited by traders from Egypt.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF INTERESTING TIMES

The history of the Hellenistic period is far too complex to be contained in a single article, but this overview should be good enough for most time-travelling campaigns. GMs looking for more detail should consult the books in the Further Reading section.

Diodorus reports that the dying Alexander (p.WWi24) left the throne to the best among his friends, predicting that they would "hold magnificent funeral games". Indeed, several of his closest entourage immediately began to compete for the kingship, taking control of vast territories and using the surviving family members of Alexander and even his embalmed body (which Ptolemy spirited off to Egypt for burial) to bolster their claims to legitimacy. From 323 to 301 BC the so-called **diadochoi** ('successors') fought in a bewildering flurry of alliances and betrayals over who would succeed to the greatest Empire the world had yet known. In 306 even the last pretense of loyalty to the old royal family fell when all major competitors declared themselves kings in their own right within months of each other. However, it was after the most successful of them, Antigonos Monophthalmos ('One-Eye') died at the battle of Ipsos in 301 that they gave up imperial ambitions and turned to the task of securing territory in which to build separate kingdoms and quell the local insurrections that had been flaring up all over the East. Out of years of savage fighting eventually crystallised the main powers of the period: Egypt under the successors of Ptolemy, also controlling Cyprus, Palestine and parts of the Aegean, the Seleucid kingdom in Syria and Asia Minor that nominally encompassed all of the East as far as India and the kingdom of Macedon, now controlling Thrace, Thessaly and big parts of Greece proper.

The situation in the early 3rd century BC was still fluid enough for many smaller kingdoms to come into being, some disappearing again, others holding on. The most notable figures of the time were Demetrios Poliorketes ('the Besieger') who failed spectacularly to carve out a kingdom in Asia Minor and Pyrrhos of Epirus who did the same in Italy, repeatedly defeating Roman armies in the process. Towards the middle of the century things had stabilised and wars, while still regularly fought, were now mostly over disputed borders between kingdoms. Seleucid Syria and Ptolemaic Egypt fought no less than six indecisive wars over Palestine. Kings continued to need victories, and ambitious officers and local chiefs kept seceding from kingdoms after a defeat to found states of their own. Between 212 and 205 BC, Antiochos III once more restored the Seleucid monarchy to its former splendor by leading his army east to the borders of India, a feat that earned him the epithet 'Great King' among the Greeks. However, on his return to the west he found another power had entered the scene: Rome.

During the 3rd century BC the Greek states had paid little attention to the upstart Italian city, even though it managed to defeat Carthage in two long wars. This changed as the Romans began to take an interest in events east of the Adriatic in Macedon. The Macedonians were the first to oppose them and were roundly defeated in several wars that ended in the destruction of the kingdom. The Roman Senate took a dim view of the prevalent political opportunism and punished betrayal savagely, laying waste Corinth in 146 BC as a grim example. All Hellenistic powers in their turn opposed the Italian peril, and all were defeated. At first, Rome was not looking for conquest and the Eastern states continued to exist under its watchful eye. However, resistance to the overbearing ways and exorbitant demands of the new Roman overlords led to new uprisings

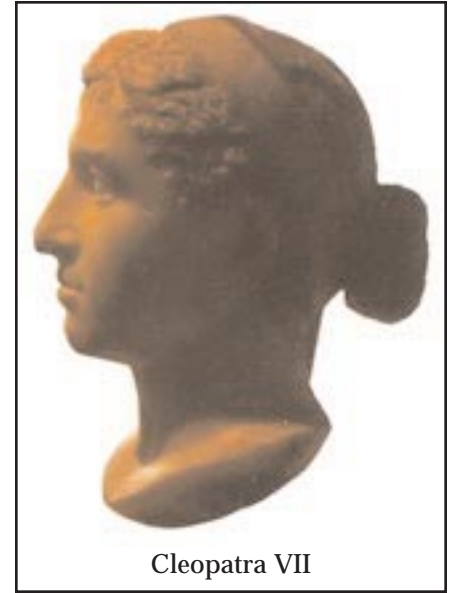
that were suppressed brutally, and eventually all of the Mediterranean lands came to be Roman provinces. Ptolemaic Egypt fell to Augustus in 30 BC as the last great Hellenistic queen, Cleopatra VII (p.WWi18), committed suicide after her defeat at Actium. The eastern conquests of Alexander had by then long dissolved, slipping out of the control of the Greek rulers and eventually falling under the sway of the Parthian kings, Central Asian horsemen establishing themselves as successors to the Persian kings of old in Babylon in 129 BC. The Hellenistic age petered out in tiny client kingdoms that Rome permitted to exist on its borders until they, too, were absorbed.

APPENDIX I: FURTHER READING

GMs planning to run a campaign in the Hellenistic age will have to piece their background together from several sources. Their first choice should be **GURPS Greece**, probably the best sourcebook on Ancient Greece out there. Like all of them it ends with Alexander the Great, but much of the material on society, culture and everyday life still applies. Ptolemaic Egypt is covered (briefly) in **GURPS Egypt** and **GURPS Imperial Rome** has sections on early Italy, Carthage and some of the late Hellenistic states. For a Celt-heavy campaign, **GURPS Celtic Myth** offers inspiration, though it is set in a later period.

The same goes for the section on Early Arabia in **GURPS Arabian Nights**. **GURPS China** covers some of the Central Asian cultures (and, of course, contemporary China), though anyone who wants to run a campaign on the theme of horse nomads is, with a little tweaking, best served with **GURPS Horseclans**. Once it comes out, **GURPS Low Tech** should also prove a valuable resource.

Accessible non-gaming related material is thin on the ground on this subject, but there are some books for nonspecialists that are helpful. The best historical overview is volume VII of the **Cambridge Ancient History**, which should be available in any good library. The second edition of 1984 is better and more up-to-date, but the first edition makes a far more entertaining read. War, always close to the heart of the roleplayer, is well covered in **John Hackett: Warfare in the Ancient World** (London 1989). Peter Connolly has written a number of beautifully illustrated books on life in the ancient world that are invaluable to historical role-players. **Greece and Rome at War** (London 1981) covers warfare while **The Ancient City** (with Hazel Dodge, London 1998) gives a picture of life in ancient Athens that applies to much of the Hellenistic age as well. **Living in the Time of Jesus of Nazareth** (London 1983), though treating a slightly later period, makes a good source on everyday life in the Hellenistic East.



Cleopatra VII

APPENDIX II: HELLENISTIC WAR MACHINES

20-mina Catapult: A light anti-ship and harrassment weapon, the 20-mina catapult is commonly used in Hellenistic armies. Named for the weight of its stone projectile, it is light enough to be mounted on walls, siege towers and large ships. It is not powerful enough to be much use against walls, but can do serious damage to civilian buildings and on a good hit will sink almost anything afloat.

1-talent Catapult: The 1-talent catapult is the heaviest catapult in common use. Its 58-lb projectile can smash through light masonry and damage even fortress walls. However, the huge weight and size of the weapon - not to mention its exorbitant price - limit its use to major siege operations, and transporting one can be a major logistical headache.

Bolt Thrower: A light bolt thrower to be mounted on ships, walls and siege towers, even carts and elephant howdahs. It shoots a 2-foot bolt with enough power to skewer several armored men in a row. Light and cheap enough to be taken almost everywhere, it served as the ancient equivalent of a company support weapon, to harrass troops during sieges and to shoot at enemy ship crews.

Naval Bolt Thrower: This is an extra-heavy bolt thrower intended for use on shipboard. It shoots heavy 8-foot bolts with barbed points that can kill almost anything alive and puncture even the hulls of ships. Its main use is to shoot **harpages**, harpoons that anchor themselves in hostile ships and allow them to be hauled in. Regular bolts are terrifying, but not really cost-effective.

Harpax: The **harpax** is a heavy bolt with barbs that unfold upon piercing a ship's hull. A strong rope is tied to an iron ring at the butt of the shaft to tow the harpooned ship, usually to within boarding range. (It could also be used against large marine animals, especially in a fantasy context.) Launching a **harpax** defaults to Gunner (Ballista) -3; it can be improved as a Hard Maneuver. Only a Naval Bolt Thrower can be used; see below. If it exceeds DR, the barbs deploy, and the ship can be towed. To break free, the stuck ship can destroy the **harpax**; the iron tip has DR 3 and 20 HP, the reinforced wooden shaft has DR 6 and 20 HP. The rope is fastened to the shaft 8' from the hull; it has DR 3 and 6 HP. Towing a ship is a roll against Shiphandling-2 (improved as a Hard Maneuver). On a failure, the rope is pulled taut suddenly and the **harpax** does 5d damage; if it defeats DRx2, it will break free. The harpooned ship can try to break free with a contest of Shiphandling vs. the enemy's Shiphandling -2; on a win, the **harpax** does 5d damage and breaks free if it defeats DRx2.

	Malf	Damage	1/2D	Max	Acc	Weight	SS	RoF	Cost	Crew	Projectile
20-mina Catapult	Crit	6dx3 cr	280	360	2	7,363	30	1/69	\$19,546	5	20 lbs, \$10
1-talent Catapult	Crit	6dx10 cr	480	600	2	66,355	30	1/120	\$137,510	14	58 lbs, \$29
Bolt Thrower	Crit	9d imp	450	560	6	392	20	1/41	\$5,548	2	3 lbs, \$6
Naval Bolt Thrower	Crit	17d imp	530	663	6	1,800	25	1/61	\$8,400	4	14 lbs, .28 cf, \$28
- with Harpax	-	10d imp	150	180	3	-	-	-	-	-	25 lbs, .5 cf, \$100