

Slide 8 Handout: Broader cultural attitudes of Greeks towards non-Greeks in the Hellenistic Period (ca. 323 – 30 BCE)

Though ‘Greekness’ was a contested construct well before the Hellenistic period, its parameters experienced a seismic shift after Alexander’s conquests & the rise of the Successor Kingdoms.

I. Warning: About the Macedonians and ‘Greekness’ ...

A. Macedonian ‘Greekness’ was hotly contested by other ancient Greeks: many considered Macedonians ‘barbarians’ because they lived far north in a ‘backwater’ ruled by monarchs (not by citizen assemblies, like ‘real’ Greeks). Macedonian customs & dialect were also different — so much so that Phillip II, King of Macedon, hired Aristotle (a Greek philosopher educated in Athens) to tutor his son Alexander (later called Alexander ‘the Great’) so Alexander could ‘perform’ his Greekness acceptably.

B. Even today, Greece and The Republic of Macedonia (part of the former Yugoslavia) quarrel over Alexander’s identity: is he Macedonian or Greek? This exemplifies how fluid, complex, and political identity can be.

II. During & after Alexander’s campaigns, ‘Greekness’ in the regions he and the Successor Kingdoms ruled was... complicated.

A. Alexander ‘the Great’ did not seem to embrace his tutor Aristotle’s belief that ‘barbarians’ were innately inferior to Greeks. He famously adopted local customs, dress, and ritual to make his “displays of power culturally legible” to his audiences (McCoskey 2012: 67). Hence, though Alexander kept Macedonians as members of his court:

1. In Egypt: he visited the oracle of Ammon at Siwah then claimed to be the son of Zeus/Ammon; he portrayed himself with horns on his coinage (marking his ties to Ammon); and he restored the great Egyptian Temple at Luxor, where he also installed a shrine including 52 images of himself in full Pharaonic regalia.
2. In Persia: he adopted the dress, rituals, and customs of the Persian court; he arranged a mass marriage ceremony in Persia’s capital city Susa, joining (roughly) 100 Macedonian officers to Persian wives (and marrying two Persian women, himself). Incidentally: were the Persian wives (and their children) now ‘Greek’? Persian? Both?
3. To this day, scholars debate whether Alexander was:
 - a) cynically (and, ultimately, disrespectfully) manipulating his audiences to stabilize his power;
 - b) over-indulging in exotic spoils/customs because he was succumbing to his appetites or to megalomania (so believing that normal rules did not apply to him);
 - c) genuinely accepting his role as the ruler of a multi-cultural empire, so adopting local customs out of respect/the belief that non-Greeks ‘counted’; or
 - d) a mix of the possibilities just listed.

e) What do you think Alexander's motivations might have been? Keeping in mind that he was already an 'unusual' Greek because of his Macedonian heritage: did taking on Egyptian and Persian customs 'hybridize' him, or was he still 'Greek'? If he could 'mix-and-match culture' yet still be 'Greek' enough, what about his subjects? Is it possible that his Macedonian heritage made him more open-minded or flexible about what being 'Greek' meant?

B. Though Macedonian 'Greekness' is debated, the Macedonian Successor Kingdoms *did* spread Greek language & culture into Africa, the Levant, & the 'East.' These kingdoms were "multicultural spaces" where "the meaning of Greekness — as well as the contexts in which being Greek mattered — became even more diverse" (McCoskey 2025: 5).

1. Performative 'Greekness' allowed Greeks to distinguish themselves from their new contexts. But ironically, it also led Greek culture to be shaped by local customs and reinforced the idea that 'Greekness' was a matter of education and cultural practice, not lineage. In time, 'Greekness' in the Hellenistic world did increasingly appear to mean 'practicing Greek culture' as much as it meant 'being of Greek descent' (McCoskey 2012: 62-4).

C. In Ptolemaic Egypt, we also have evidence for a 'racialized,' structural bigotry towards indigenous people who failed to adopt Greek language or customs.

1. "Documentary evidence from Egypt under the Greek Ptolemaic dynasty...suggests that Greek identity conferred a distinct financial advantage there, even as it was tied closely to cultural activities. Assigning a tax break to 'Hellenes', the Greek Ptolemaic government thus granted exemptions specifically to those who promoted and practiced Greek culture" (e.g., schoolteachers, athletic coaches, artists of Dionysus, and victors in the games of Alexandrian festivals). Such economic benefits "indicate the government's broader interest in transforming the racial identities of its subjects" and "seem designed to give 'dispensation to those prepared to 'go Greek'" (McCoskey 2025: 6).

In sum, previously 'not Greek' Macedonians were now 'Greek enough', and non-Greeks could "go Greek". Whether someone "going Greek" was equal to an ancestral Greek seems to have depended upon context. Regardless, many different groups in the Successor Kingdoms "went Greek", i.e., Hellenistic 'racial formations' were partially or wholly changeable.