

The cultural supremacy of Greece continues even after the Roman Conquest

Demetrios Kritsotakis,
Classics, OSU,

The destruction of Corinth by the Roman legionnaires in 146 BC shattered the last hope of the Greek world for continuous political hegemony. The Greek world would not be the protagonist in the political arena of the Mediterranean, but its **supremacy as the cultural center of the world** would never be challenged by the Roman conquerors. Interestingly enough most of the Roman Emperors were openly confessed Philhellenes, such as **Hadrian**, and even notorious **Nero**.

When a Roman by the name Maximus is appointed governor of Greece, his mentor the Stoic Roman intellectual Pliny urges him to treat the Greek cities with respect because of their great contributions to the **western civilization**: *“Consider that you are sent to the province of Achaia, that real, genuine Greece where politeness, learning, and even agriculture itself, are supposed to have first arisen. You will revere their ancient glory, and even their very age. Remember it was from this land we derived our legal code, that she gave us laws not by right of conquest, but as a favor. Remember it is Athens you approach; it is Sparta you govern”*.

But how did the Greeks of the Roman period manage to survive culturally? How did they preserve their “Greekness” and transmit it to the next generations? What made someone Greek?

The Greeks gave great importance to the good upbringing of an individual. This could only be achieved by **education**. The learning of the teachings of the great philosophers of the fifth and fourth century such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle became a first priority. An individual had to learn and recite the great poems of Homer, the tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and read the histories written by inquiring Herodotus and brilliant Thucydides. The great orators such as Demosthenes were studied, **Cicero** being a good example of that!

Learning and mastering the glorious achievements of the Greeks of the past were prerequisites of anyone who wanted to be a real Greek. And that meant one had to learn the **Greek language**. A Greek had to study the language, especially that of the Athenians of the fifth century. Many Greeks actually were able to master not only their native language but also that of the Romans, of Syria and the Jews. Anyone, both Greek and



barbarian, who could not speak pure, good Greek, was treated with contempt. Even the Roman officials who stayed among the Greeks communicated with the locals in Greek. Greek was the language of business and education. A third important component of Greekness was **origin**. With the exception of the cities of the Greek mainland, a city, or a people, who wanted to be catalogued among the Greeks, had to prove its Greek origin. The officials of a town either would advertise its Greek roots from a hero, such as Heracles or Theseus, or would claim their city to be the colony of a great city, especially of Athens, Sparta or Argos. Thus, in Anatolia cities such as Smyrna, Ephesus, **Tarsus** [see article on Apostle Paul page 4], Cyrene in **Africa**, were given local autonomy. Education, language, common origin, and even religion connected the Greeks of the Roman world and distinguished them from the others, the barbarians. This feeling of Greekness rose to new heights during the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, when a renaissance of the Greek spirit and culture reached new heights. The Roman intellectuals encouraged it. Its best exponent was **Emperor Hadrian**, called **Little Greek** by his fellow Romans, who financed the construction of temples, such as the magnificent Temple of **Olympian Zeus** in Athens [pic], theaters [pic] that are still in use, the Hadrian Library in Athens and organized festivals to celebrate Greek culture. Hadrian also helped the Greeks form the PanHellenion association, where all free

Greek cities would send delegates to meet and discuss issues affecting them, something like the [PanCretan](#), [PanLakedemonian](#), etc, associations here in the USA.

In the years from the sack of Corinth to the foundation of the Byzantine Empire, the Greeks of the Roman world lost their independence and political power but conquered everyone with their culture and the arts. Greeks of today's diaspora identify themselves as the continuators of a great civilization that began thousands of years ago when there was chaos everywhere else and continue to seek excellence [*αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν*]! However, if Jefferson and the other founders of America learned Greek, it behooves us Greeks of the Diaspora to master the **Greek language** to propagate its glorious culture!