



# MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

## Diversity in Antiquity

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

**T**he convergence of three continents on the Mediterranean basin creates a geographically unique landscape that occurs nowhere else on the planet. From very early, the region was a crossroads of cultural intermingling, with Greek culture eventually sprawling from the Atlantic to the Indus. As time progressed, interaction only increased, and the result was an astounding melting pot of cultural diversity by the time of the Roman Empire.

Interaction among the ancient Mediterranean's cultures began through trade, certainly on a wide scale by the Bronze Age (ca. 3000–1100 BCE). Such interaction brought about the necessity for political bonds and solidified relationships. Were these carried out through dynastic marriages, and thus ethnic mixing between nations? That might be difficult to ascertain with certainty in the Bronze Age, but some suggest, for example, that Queen Nefertiti of Egypt was a foreigner. After the Aegean Bronze Age cultures collapsed, Phoenicians came to prominence and interacted with Greeks on a regular basis. Mythological tradition tells us that Zeus himself seduced the Phoenician princess, Europa, who gave birth to “scepter-swaying kings” of note. Even more interesting, Europa, a non-European, gave her name to Europe. Europa's father, Cadmus, went on to found the Greek city of Thebes. In addition to Phoenician interaction, Greeks were also establishing colonies around the Mediterranean by the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and thus mixing with locals in what are now Egypt, France, Italy, Libya, Russia, and Turkey, among other places.

By the Hellenistic period (ca. 300–30 BCE), we have abundant evidence for the mixing of Greek and non-Greek. Alexander's campaigns brought Greeks as far east as India, and many were settled in new cities across Asia. One Greek king, Menander (ruled ca. 165–130 BCE), converted to Buddhism. Some residents of Pakistan and Afghanistan still allegedly claim descent from the Greeks of Alexander's time. Alexander himself



Portrait of a North African Man  
Ca. 300 BCE  
[The British Museum](https://www.britishmuseum.org)



Perfume Bottles in the Form of African Heads  
Roman, 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century CE  
Pottery  
Gift of Boss Partners (80.356)  
Gift of Andrew and Maeve Gyenes (81.274)

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took an Asian wife, and encouraged his Greek settlers to intermarry with locals. Alexander's policies thus established a network of "mixed" cities from the Levant to central Asia. The most famous of all those was Alexandria in Egypt, which became known for its multinational population and distinctive ethnic neighborhoods, including Greek, Egyptian, and Jewish. Although these neighborhoods were distinct, the citizenry invariably mingled, and evidence suggests the occurrence of intermarriage. We also have evidence for similar cosmopolitanism in other cities of the region. Gadara (modern Umm Qais, Jordan) was documented by the poet Meleager (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE) who also lived in Tyre (Lebanon). He described himself as both Greek and Syrian, but also as a cosmopolite, or "citizen of the world." Greek poetry rarely mentioned Jews, but one of Meleager's love epigrams has him regretting that "fair-cheeked Demo" (a Greek) prefers a "Sabbath-keeper." Jews of antiquity are often depicted as fiery zealots fighting foreign domination, but some, such as Demo's lover, apparently adapted themselves to Greek culture. Africans also have a presence in Greek art and literature, at least as early as Homer's *Iliad*, in which King Memnon of Ethiopia is an ally of the Trojans. Quality images of Africans elsewhere indicate their presence in the upper strata of Greek society. Some were clearly biracial (*above*, [British Museum](#)).

Cultural diversity continued in the Roman Empire, even reaching the throne itself. The emperor Hadrian, though raised in Rome, was the first emperor who was not from Italy, but rather had been born in Spain. Subsequent emperors came from Syria, Libya, and even Arabia. With regard to evidence from citizens, antiquities in the Museum's collection offer examples of cultural intermingling. A Syrian lady's tomb statue (*right*) depicts her in a "modest" pose typical for Roman women but her fringed shawl, twisted bracelet, and crescent pendant show her eastern roots. The root in Levitha's name (*levi-*, *below*) is probably Semitic, but her grave inscription is in Greek. It is often assumed that minorities in antiquity sought to better themselves by assimilating themselves into



**Aureus of Hadrian**  
Roman, 134–138 CE  
Minted in Rome  
Gold  
Museum purchase (60.32)



**Statue of a Woman**  
Roman, ca. 165–200 CE  
Probably Northern Syria  
Limestone  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. A.M. Adler (76.164)

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Greek culture, which remained dominant in the Roman Empire outside Italy. But did it ever go the other way? What do we make of Heliodora, a woman with a Greek name and Greek inscription on her gravestone, but styled like an Egyptian making an offering to an Egyptian god? Had she been born a Greek in Egypt but embraced Egyptian religion? Was she from a mixed family? We had occasion in an earlier feature to discuss the international appeal of the goddess Isis, whose worship spread throughout the Mediterranean and beyond. What do we conclude about Greeks and Romans who became devotees of Isis, or King Meander (*above*) who converted to Buddhism? We cannot ask those who made such choices but we can infer a “cross-pollinated” culture to some extent in the Graeco-Roman world.

The above evidence might imply the ancient Mediterranean was a happily bubbling melting pot, but we can also point to numerous instances of prejudice and xenophobia among Greeks and Romans. Both cultures could be fiercely nationalistic and often exhibited belief in their own superiority over minorities. One of the more well-known literary examples occurs in Euripides’ *Medea*, in which Jason (of Argonaut fame) denigrates Medea, his foreign wife, by asserting that she is inferior to Greeks. Alexander’s men were allegedly outraged when their leader donned Persian leggings, and they opposed his marriage to an indigenous woman. Historian Peter Green claims that Alexander’s attempts at racial unity ended with the ruler’s death and that many Greek foundations of the east were “governmental ghettos” that only served the ruling elite. On that subject, Roman author Livy reported that consul Gnaeus Manlius Vulso made the caustic observation that Greeks in eastern cities had “degenerated” into Syrians, Parthians, and Egyptians. A question we might ask is whether these opinions were confined to the conservative elite, perhaps including the authors who recorded the accounts? What we cannot know is the opinion on the street, the true heartbeat of the proletariat who may not have felt bound by such conservative norms. ■



**Funerary Stele of Levitha**

Northern Syria

97/98 CE

Limestone

Museum purchase (70.19)

Further discussion: [MUSE 43 \(2009\) 31–45](#)



**Funerary Stele of Heliodora**

Egyptian, Roman period, 2nd–3rd century CE

Terenouthis, Nile Delta region

Limestone with traces of pigment

Weinberg Fund and Gilbreath-McLorn Museum

Fund (2011.25)

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