

As the Ptolemaic government recognized only two kinds of people in Egypt—native Egyptians and Greeks—and distinguished them according to whether they used the Greek or Egyptian legal system, this meant that the privileged class of Greeks had expanded to include all persons of Greek culture. Greeks in Cleopatra's Egypt, therefore, were people who spoke Greek and who had received a Greek education, adopted a Greek lifestyle (and frequently a Greek name), and worshiped their old gods under Greek names. Greek-educated Egyptians as well as the children of mixed marriages qualified under this rule. Even Jews could sometimes be classified as Greeks—despite the religious differences separating them from other “Greeks”—if they were Greek speakers and used the Greek legal system.⁵

These developments were mutually beneficial for wealthy non-Greeks and the Ptolemaic state. For ambitious individuals, the value of being considered a Greek was considerable. Not only did they become eligible for high-ranking government jobs and contracts, but they paid lower taxes than Egyptians and were exempt from humiliating punishments such as being publicly whipped. It is not surprising, therefore, that upper class Egyptians and Jews sought Greek identification and the Greek education that made it possible. The benefit to the Ptolemaic state is equally clear. The Greek population of Egypt continued to expand after Aegean immigration dried up in the late third century B.C.E. Equally important, their acceptance as Greeks tended to alienate those who received such identification from the bulk of the native Egyptian population, thereby reducing the number of potential leaders for movements hostile to the Ptolemies. As a result, the increasing interaction of the Greek and non-Greek populations of second and first century B.C.E. Egypt—which Aegean Greeks and Romans condemned—far from leading to the ruin of Ptolemaic Egypt actually contributed to its survival.

Burstein, S.M. "The Reign of Cleopatra." University of Oklahoma Press. 2004/2007

CHAPTER 5

ALEXANDRIA: CITY OF CULTURE AND CONFLICT

BIRTH OF A CITY

The fate of rulers and cities are often closely connected. Thus, the fifth century B.C.E. statesman Perikles and the Roman emperor Augustus are inextricably linked with Athens and Rome. Similarly, Cleopatra VII is tightly connected to the city of Alexandria, where she spent most of her life and where many of the most famous events of her reign took place.

Located near the mouth of the Canopic branch of the Nile at the western edge of the delta, Alexandria was the first, most famous, and most enduring of Alexander's many city foundations. Alexander founded the city on the site of a small Egyptian town named Rhakotis just before leaving Egypt in the spring of 331 B.C.E. His motives for choosing this particular site were probably mixed. Located at one of the few good harbors in the Delta and possessing easy access to the Nile and the interior of Egypt, Alexandria was ideally situated to replace the nearby Greek city of Naukratis as the principal link between Egypt and Greece. Alexander's interest in the site, however, was also sparked by the fact that just offshore lay the island of Pharos, the site of one of the most famous episodes in the works of his beloved Homer—the struggle between Menelaos and the shape-shifting wizard Proteus in the *Odyssey*.

Alexandria occupied a unique place in the Hellenistic world. Although it was built around an existing Egyptian settlement and functioned as the capital of Egypt, Alexandria was not itself officially part of Egypt. It was, instead, a Greek city-state with its own territory, as its ancient name “Alexandria by Egypt” indicates. As in any Greek city-state, Alexandrian citizenship was limited to the Greeks and Macedonians

whom Alexander and the Ptolemies encouraged to settle in the new city. These groups, however, formed only a small portion of Alexandria's total population. A liberal immigration policy created a multiethnic population including Egyptians, Syrians, and Nubians, as well as a vibrant Jewish community that eventually occupied fully one-fifth of the city's area and whose great synagogue was considered second only to the temple in Jerusalem as one of the marvels of the Jewish world.

Alexandria flourished as a result of the patronage of the Ptolemies and its dual role of capital of Egypt and commercial link between the Mediterranean and Africa, Arabia, and the countries bordering the Indian Ocean. By the time Cleopatra came to the throne in 50 B.C.E., Alexandria had grown to a city of more than 500,000 inhabitants and was the premier city of the Mediterranean basin.

ALEXANDRIA: THE CITY

Although Alexander only had time during his stay in Egypt to lay out the general outlines of Alexandria, his plans were on a grand scale. The city was planned as a rectangle divided into four quarters by two wide boulevards that intersected at its center. He also ordered the building of a mole almost a mile long to connect Pharos to the mainland, thereby creating two sheltered harbors. Responsibility for embellishing the city, however, fell to the Ptolemies, who in the words of the geographer Strabo built "many fine public precincts and palaces, which occupy a fourth or even a third of the city's whole perimeter; for just as each of the kings added some adornment to its public monuments, so each added his own residence to those already existing."

Perhaps the clearest symbol of the dynamism and originality of Alexandria, however, was its signature monument, the Pharos lighthouse, which was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World and whose fame even reached China.¹ The Pharos lighthouse was built by the architect Sostratus of Knidos for Ptolemy II and was the world's first skyscraper. Containing three stages, its polygonal tower rose over three hundred feet above Alexandria and was topped by a statue of Zeus Soter (savior), whose beacon fire was visible far out to sea and guided ships to Alexandria.

Today little remains of Alexandria's ancient splendor on the ground. An earthquake toppled the lighthouse into the sea in the fourteenth cen-

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tury C.E., while continuous occupation of the site has eliminated virtually all remains of ancient Alexandria, allowing scholars to speculate that ancient visitors would have encountered a purely Greek city. As is its wont, however, archaeology has revolutionized our understanding of Cleopatra's and her predecessor's Alexandria.

As a result of tectonic changes in the Mediterranean since antiquity, the sea has encroached on much of the shoreline of ancient Alexandria and its suburbs. Thus, while little of the ancient city survives within modern Alexandria, much of the ancient royal quarter of Alexandria lies submerged in the shallow waters of Alexandria harbor. Underwater archaeologists began exploring this treasure in the 1990s and discovered not only the remains of Greek-style buildings and sculpture but also large amounts of Egyptian sculpture, which the Ptolemies had brought to their capital from all over Egypt. Instead of a purely Greek city, the Ptolemies had created an urban setting in which both Egyptian and Greek aspects of their kingdom were celebrated, providing a dramatic setting for the city's cultural and political life.

CITY OF CULTURE

The Ptolemies strove to make Alexandria the cultural center of the Greek world. Like Alexander—whose entourage had included artists and intellectuals such as Aristotle's nephew, Kallisthenes, his court historian—Ptolemy I and his immediate successors encouraged prominent Greek scholars and scientists to come to Egypt. With the enormous wealth of Egypt at their disposal, the Ptolemies could afford to subsidize intellectuals, encouraging artistic and scientific work by establishing cultural institutions of a new type.

Their principal cultural foundation was the Museum, which received its name because it was organized as a temple dedicated to the nine Muses, the patron goddesses of the arts. Because the Museum was organized as a religious institution, its director was a priest of the Muses appointed by the government. The model for the Museum was the Peripatos, the school Aristotle founded in Athens in the late 330s B.C.E. Like the Peripatos, the Museum was not a teaching institution but a research center containing gardens and residential quarters, where distinguished scholars, intellectuals, and technicians could pursue their studies in congenial surroundings.

The Museum's grounds included dormitories, dining facilities, and pleasant gardens in which its members could meet and talk about their projects. Like its director, the members of the Museum were appointed by the government and received stipends to enable them to devote their energies to their work. One envious rival sneered at the successful occupants of Ptolemy's "bird coop" with some justification, since subsidized intellectuals were expected to earn their keep. Doctors and writers receiving government stipends served as physicians and tutors to members of the royal family, and celebrated its achievements. Thus, in his poem *The Lock of Berenice*, the third-century B.C.E. scholar and poet Kallimakhos described the transformation into a comet of a lock of hair dedicated by Berenice II in 246 BC to commemorate the beginning of the Third Syrian War. In a similar vein, Theokritos' seventeenth *Idyll* extravagantly praised the first decade of Ptolemy II's reign.

Closely connected to the Museum was the famous Alexandrian Library, which Ptolemy I established with the aid and advice of Demetrios of Phaleron—an Athenian politician and student of Aristotle, who was living in exile in Egypt. Like the Museum, the Library was not open to the public but was intended to assist the members of the Museum in pursuing their studies. To that end, it was meant to contain copies of every book written in Greek. By the time of Cleopatra, the Library is estimated to have contained 700,000 papyrus rolls in its collection.

The Ptolemies' passion for expanding the royal Library's collections was legendary. The Greek translation of the Jewish Bible, the *Septuagint*, was supposedly produced on order of Ptolemy II, and the official Athenian copy of the works of the three canonical tragedians was allegedly stolen by Ptolemy III. Even the books of visitors to Egypt were scrutinized and seized—the owner receiving a cheap copy as a replacement—if they were not part of the Library's collection. However its books were acquired, the Library offered unprecedented resources for scholarly research in every field of intellectual endeavor, provided, of course, they were reliable copies.

Already in antiquity there were rumors that unscrupulous book dealers provided the Ptolemies with forged copies of unknown letters and works by famous Greek writers. Kallimakhos began the process of authenticating the Library's holdings by creating a monumental catalogue of the Library in 120 books that laid the foundation for the history of Greek literature. Later scholars and librarians concentrated their efforts

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on identifying the authentic works of the major Greek writers including Homer, the lyric poets, the Athenian tragedians, and orators.

Although the goal of Kallimakhos and his successors—and the rulers who supported them—was to produce reliable texts of the works of major Greek writers for the Alexandrian Library, their work quickly gained an audience beyond the walls of the Museum and Library. How this happened is not known in detail, but a growing book trade catering to both Greeks and non-Greeks who desired to acquire a Greek education was certainly a factor. In any event, study of papyrus copies of Greek literary works has revealed that within a few hundred years of the establishment of the Museum and Library, the texts of the works of the major authors had been standardized in forms that are the ancestors of the versions we still read today.

Alexandrian Literature

The work of Alexandrian intellectuals was not limited, however, to satisfying the whims of their royal patrons. Alexandrian writers made important innovations in Greek literature. In his *Idylls*—brief dialogues or monologues set in an idealized countryside—Theokritos introduced the pastoral mode into western literature. Kallimakhos inaugurated the tradition of "learned" poetry in works such as his *Hymns* and *Aetia*, in which he retold in elegant verse obscure myths and the origins of strange customs and festivals collected from all over the Greek world. Kallimakhos' younger contemporary and rival the librarian Apollonios of Rhodes reinvigorated the old epic genre with his acute psychological portraits of Jason and Medea in his vivid retelling of the story of Jason and the Argonauts, the *Argonautica*. Another contemporary of Kallimakhos—Euhemerios, an ambassador of Cassander to Ptolemy I—put forward a radical and important theory about the origins of mythology: he invented the utopian travel romance in order to propound in his *Sacred Tale* the notion that the gods were great rulers worshiped after their deaths for their gifts to humanity.

The literary language of Ptolemaic Alexandria was Greek, but the creation of literary texts was not limited to Greeks; instead, it was multicultural like the city's population. The most active of the city's other ethnic groups was Alexandria's large Jewish community. The most important Jewish work produced in Ptolemaic Alexandria was the Greek

translation of the Old Testament known as the *Septuagint* (version of the seventy). Pious legend claimed that it was created by seventy divinely inspired translators at the instigation of Ptolemy II, who wished to include a copy of the Jewish scriptures in the Library; in actuality, it took almost two centuries to complete the translation. Its importance, however, cannot be overestimated, since it was the existence of the *Septuagint* that made possible the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire.

The *Septuagint* was not, however, the only literary work produced by Jewish writers living in Alexandria. They also wrote epic poems, dramas, histories, and short stories using themes drawn from the Bible. Although only fragments of these works survive, we can see that two themes characterized them: the need to provide Jewish readers with religiously appropriate reading material that was comparable to pagan Greek literature and the desire to rebut Greek and Egyptian claims that Jews had not played an important role in the development of civilization. Some Jewish writers went even further in their attempt to find a bridge between Jewish and Greek thought. Thus, the philosopher Aristoboulos argued in a work addressed to Ptolemy VI that the god of the Jews and the Greek philosophers were the same, and that Plato and other Greek philosophers were influenced by the ideas of Moses in developing their ideas—a theory that early Christian thinkers would use later to justify the preservation of pagan literature.

The Jews were not the only non-Greek writers in Alexandria. There were also Egyptian writers, who similarly tried to emphasize the great role Egypt had played in history. The most famous of these Egyptian writers was the priest Manetho, who had helped Ptolemy I create the god Sarapis. Manetho's most famous and important work was a history of Egypt in three books based on Egyptian temple records. Unfortunately, most of Manetho's history is lost, but his list of the Egyptian kings survives and is still used by Egyptologists today. Another important Egyptian writer is the anonymous author of a romantic biography of Alexander the Great known as the *Alexander Romance*, in which Alexander fights monsters and has other fantastic adventures. The author also claims to reveal the truth about Alexander's birth. According to this author, Alexander was not a Macedonian but an Egyptian and the son of Nektanebo II, the last king of Egypt, who deceived his mother Olympias with his magic into believing that she was having intercourse with Philip II of Macedon. This version of Alexander's birth had little influence in antiquity, but in the

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Middle Ages it became widely known throughout Eurasia as a result of the *Alexander Romance* being translated into numerous languages, including Persian, Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin.

Scholarship and Science

The greatest achievements of Hellenistic intellectuals, however, were in the areas of literary scholarship and applied science. Although few of their works survive in their original form, their discoveries and achievements were incorporated into the works of later scholars and provided the foundation for much of European and Islamic intellectual activity until the scientific revolution. Thus, in addition to founding the critical study of Greek literature and preparing standard texts of Homer and numerous other writers, Alexandrian scholars prepared essential tools for studying and teaching, including the first Greek grammars, dictionaries, and scholia—that is, notes accompanying a text that explained unusual words and historical and literary allusions found in it.

Important advances were also made in geography and mechanics. The third century B.C.E. librarian and royal tutor Eratosthenes of Kyrene established the principles of scientific cartography, creating the first relatively accurate map of the world known to the Greeks, and produced a strikingly accurate estimate of the circumference of the earth by applying basic principles of plane geometry to evidence he found in explorers' reports contained in the Library. About the same time, the physicist Ktesibios pioneered the study of ballistics and the use of compressed air as a source of power for various types of machines, including musical instruments and weapons such as repeating crossbows. Other scientists experimented with the use of steam power, creating the prototype for a simple steam engine and a device to automatically open the doors of small religious shrines. These studies also found practical applications. Thus, an unknown Ptolemaic technician invented the saqqiyah, an animal-powered waterwheel that is still used today in Egypt and the Sudan, while the application of principles of hydrology enabled Ptolemy II to build a canal linking the Nile to the Red Sea—the ancestor of the modern Suez Canal.

Equally important advances were made in medicine, particularly by the two third century B.C.E. doctors Herophilos and Erasistratos. They made fundamental discoveries concerning the anatomy and functions of

the human nervous, circulatory, optical, reproductive, and digestive systems by dissecting corpses, and even vivisectioning criminals whom the government provided for the advancement of science. Alexandria also offered them opportunities for profitable collaboration with Egyptian and other non-Greek doctors. Herophilos applied the Egyptian discovery of the pulse to diagnosis and prognosis of fevers by recognizing that the pulse rate was also the heart rate and developing a technique for timing it with a water clock. He also introduced numerous drugs already in use in Egypt and elsewhere in the territories conquered by Alexander into the Greek pharmacopia. Although the heyday of Alexandrian medicine was the third century B.C.E., Alexandria remained an important center of medical activity and instruction throughout the Hellenistic period and beyond. Cleopatra's court physician even produced the earliest known detailed description of bubonic plague.

The importance of royal patronage in Ptolemaic cultural activity did, however, have a drawback. Areas that did not receive royal largess tended to stagnate. Thus, apart from the works of the mathematician Euclid, whose *Elements* was still used to introduce students to geometry in the early twentieth century, the Alexandrian contribution to the theoretical sciences and philosophy, which were of limited interest to the Ptolemies, was undistinguished in quality and limited in quantity.

CITY OF CONFLICT

Modern historians view Alexandria primarily as the capital of Egypt and as a cosmopolitan center of commerce and culture. Ancient scholars agreed but they also emphasized the turbulence of its population and its potential for violence. Examples are numerous, but perhaps the clearest statement of this negative view of Alexandria and its inhabitants is that of the second century B.C.E. historian Polybius,² who observed that "the savagery of the inhabitants of Egypt is terrible when their passions are aroused."

The earliest known example of this violence occurred in 204 B.C.E. when the Alexandrians rose in support of the boy king Ptolemy V after the death of his father, Ptolemy IV. When the rioting finally ceased, the clique that had ruled Egypt in the name of Ptolemy IV was dead, having been literally torn apart in the city's stadium, and Ptolemy V was king. Similar cataclysms occurred throughout the rest of Ptolemaic history.

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Thus, the populace drove out Ptolemy IX at the instigation of his mother, Cleopatra III, and killed Ptolemy XI after the death of Cleopatra Berenike III; and, of course, they forced Ptolemy XII into exile and almost defeated Julius Caesar and destroyed Cleopatra's dreams of power.

Ancient explanations of the volatility of the Alexandrians focused on the negative effects of living in Egypt with some justification, since the crowded conditions in which the populace lived combined with the tensions between the various ethnic groups living in the city lowered the threshold for public unrest. It was the peculiar political situation created by Alexandria's role as capital of Egypt, however, that repeatedly sparked riots as the various court factions sought to build popular support for their goals. In this political game, the kings courted the Alexandrians by providing spectacles and festivals and benefactions such as gifts and free food in times of shortage, while other groups played on the populace's prejudices to advance their goals. Thus, the murder of the popular queen mother Arsinoe III set off the riots that accompanied the accession of Ptolemy V, while Ptolemy XII's and Cleopatra's enemies exploited the Alexandrians' hatred of the Romans in their bid for power.

Just as the death of Cleopatra VII and the end of the Ptolemaic dynasty did not end Alexandria's role as a commercial and cultural center, this political dynamic survived the Roman conquest. Riots as fierce as any during the reign of the Ptolemies punctuate the history of Roman Egypt, reaching their climax in 391 C.E. when the Christian bishop Theophilos incited the Alexandrians to destroy the Serapeum—the great complex of temples and catacombs where the cult of Serapis had its home—and its library, the greatest surviving monument of the city's pagan past.