

Hypatia of Alexandria

A famous example of this persecution by Christians is the murder of the philosopher Hypatia of Alexandria in AD 415. She was one of the most learned thinkers of the time, and lectured in mathematics and philosophy in both Athens and Alexandria. It was her popularity and intelligence, as well as her lack of interest in Christianity, that caused her downfall. Cyril, the Patriarch of Alexandria, launched a series of attacks on her that ended with her brutal murder by a band of fanatical monks.

Socrates Scholasticus, in his *Ecclesiastical History*, gives the following account:

SOURCE 17.9

On account of the self-possession and ease of manner, which she had acquired in consequence of the cultivation of her mind, she not infrequently appeared in public in presence of the magistrates. Neither did she feel abashed in going to an assembly of men. For all men on account of her extraordinary dignity and virtue admired her the more. Yet even she fell victim to the political jealousy which at that time prevailed. For as she had frequent interviews with Orestes [the Prefect of Alexandria who had fallen out with Cyril, Bishop of Alexandria], it was calumniously reported among the Christian populace, that it was she who prevented Orestes from being reconciled to the bishop. Some of them, therefore, hurried away by a fierce and bigoted zeal, whose ringleader was a reader named Peter, waylaid her returning home, and dragging her from her carriage, they took her to the church called **Caesareum**, where they completely stripped her, and then murdered her with tiles [roof tiles shaped like oyster shells]. After tearing her body in pieces, they took her mangled limbs to a place called Cinaron, and there burnt them. This affair brought not the least opprobrium, not only upon Cyril, but also upon the whole Alexandrian church. And surely nothing can be farther from the spirit of Christianity than the allowance of massacres, fights, and transactions of that sort.

<http://cosmopolis.com/alexandria/hypatia-bio-socrates.html>

For further investigation

There are accounts of Hypatia's death that differ from that given by Socrates Scholasticus. Some of them can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypatia_of_Alexandria. The version given by John, Bishop of Nikiú, in the 7th century AD draws different conclusions from the evidence, portraying Hypatia as a witch!

- Read as many versions as you can and decide for yourself what probably happened and why. Remember to assess the reliability of each source by considering who wrote it, when, why and for what audience.
- What does this event tell us about the politics of religion in Alexandria in the 5th century AD and later?

PUBLIC ENTERTAINMENT AND SPECTACLES

Alexandrians were very fond of entertainment, both private and public, as well as spectacles of all kinds. Such pursuits were cosmopolitan in nature, reflecting the varied interests and customs of the city's inhabitants. The theatre, hippodrome, stadium, amphitheatre and various *gymnasia* were all well patronised. Particularly popular with the Alexandrian crowds were the **citharodes**, poet performers who played the harp and sang.

Equally popular was the theatre, where audiences flocked to watch **mimes**. Herodas, writing in the early Ptolemaic period, devised a new genre of mime, using old material and presenting it in a new way considered to be wholly Alexandrian. These dramatic pieces characteristically dealt with marriages plagued by jealousy and adultery, the world of prostitutes and pimps, vulgar tradesmen and naughty schoolboys.



FIGURE 17.14 This **faience** statuette shows an actor wearing the mask of a comic slave.

The following diagram indicates the origins of some of the favourite pastimes in Alexandria.

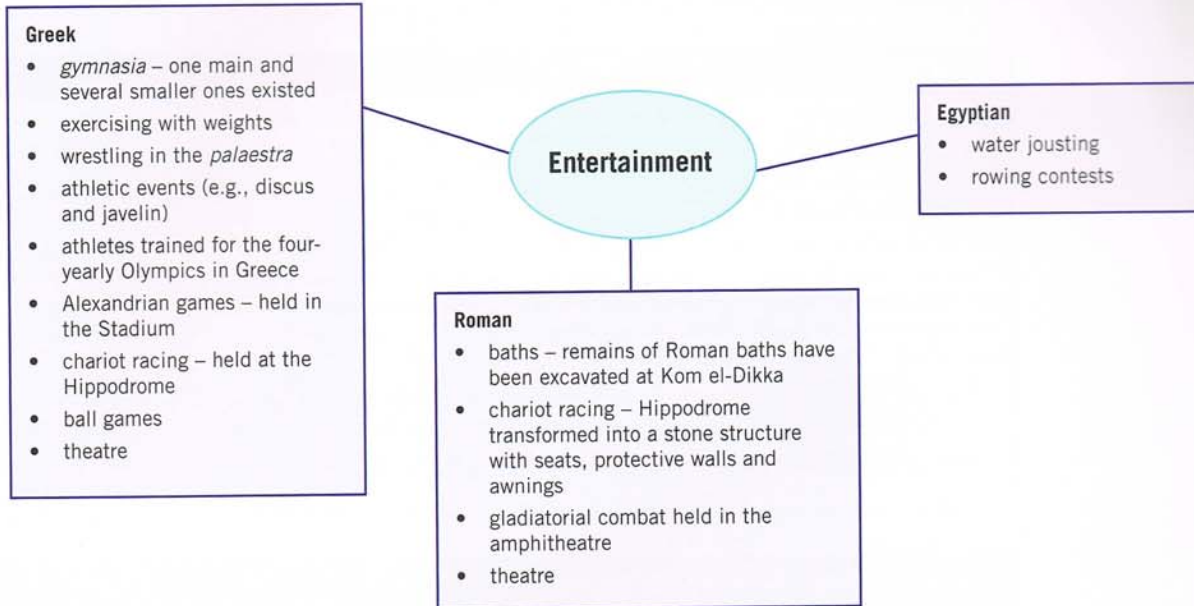


FIGURE 17.15 Alexandrian entertainments



FIGURE 17.16 The Roman Theatre at Kom el-Dikka dating from the 4th century AD is the only Roman theatre (**odeon**) to have been found in Egypt. It had a seating capacity for 88 and was surrounded by columns of Aswan granite and Anatolian marble.

The ancient Christian orator and writer Dio of Prusa (also known as Dio Chrysostom) visited Alexandria in the 2nd century AD. In a speech delivered to the crowds in the theatre he outlined his opinions on a number of their popular entertainments.

SOURCE 17.10

On *citharodes*:

...a potpourri of effeminate ditties and music-hall strummings of the lyre and the drunken excesses of monsters which, like villainous cooks with an itch for novelty, they mash together to form their arias and thus excite an ignorant and avid [greedy] audience.

On Alexandrian audiences:

...you sit dumbfounded, you leap up more violently than the hired dancers, you are made tense with excitement by the songs...song is the occasion of drunkenness and frenzy...if you merely hear the twang of a harp-string, as if you had heard the call of a bugle, you can no longer keep the peace.

On chariot races in the hippodrome:

...not a man keeps his seat at the games; on the contrary, you fly faster than the horses and their drivers, and it is comical to see the way you drive and play the charioteer, urging the horses on and taking the lead and—getting spilled.

Dio of Prusa, *Discourses XXXII*, *Dio Chrysostom*, translated by J. W. Cohoon, Loeb, Vol. III, Harvard University Press, 1961, pp. 225, 231, 233, 251

Understanding and using the sources

Source 17.10

- List the complaints Dio of Prusa makes about the behaviour of Alexandrians.
- What do you think of his opinions?

For further investigation

- Find out some biographical information about Dio of Prusa.
- How would you explain his perspectives on Alexandrian popular entertainments?
- What else did he say in his speech to the Alexandrian crowds?
- Is he a reliable source?
- You could start your research at the following website: <http://san.beck.org/AB8-Rome96-180.html#2>.

Festivals and pageants

Throughout the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, Alexandria was the setting for numerous festivals and pageants, designed to promote both the rulers and the gods, as well as to entertain the people. These were huge, splendid events that attracted participants and tourists from around the Mediterranean world. They proclaimed Alexandria not only as a festival city, but a capital whose monarch was prepared to spend lavish amounts on public works, displays and military might.

The Ptolemaia

An outstanding example is the great Ptolemaia, established in 285 BC by Ptolemy II to mark his accession to the throne and the deification of his father, Ptolemy I. This festival was to take place every four years in honour of his father and the dynasty itself, and would consist of dramatic contests as well as gymnastic and equestrian events. The aim was clearly to rival events of classical times such as the **Great Panathenaea** or the Olympic Games.

The festival began with a *pompe*, or 'great procession', which assembled in the stadium before the king and invited dignitaries, then proceeded through the streets of the city. Callixenus of Rhodes provides us with the following description of the magnificent spectacle that was attended by crowds from as far away as Athens, Thebes, Crete and Ionia.

SOURCE 17.11

And first of all went the procession of the Morning Star. For it began at the time when that star first appears. After that came the procession which bore the name of the parents of the kings. And next came the processions sacred to all the gods respectively, each having an arrangement appropriate to the history of each separate deity...

After them was a four-wheeled wagon...drawn by a hundred and eighty men; and in it was placed an image of Dionysus...pouring libations of wine out of a golden goblet...And the wagon was followed by priests and priestesses, and newly initiated **votaries**, and by companies of every nation...And next to that another four-wheeled wagon was drawn along...by three hundred men. And on it there was a [huge] wine press...full of grapes; and sixty **satyrs** were trampling on the grapes, singing a song in praise of the wine-press, to the music of a flute...and the new wine ran out over the whole road...there was a figure of Dionysus, riding upon an elephant, [with] golden trappings; and on his neck he had a crown of ivy-leaves made of gold; and he was followed by five hundred maidens dressed in purple tunics, with golden girdles...

And after them came twenty-four chariots drawn by four elephants each, and sixty chariots each drawn by a pair of goats, and twelve chariots by antelopes, and seven by oryxes, and fifteen by buffaloes, eight by pairs of ostriches, and seven by gnus, and four by pairs of zebras...And next to them came some Ethiopians bearing presents, some of whom carried six hundred elephants' tusks, and others carried two thousand **fagots** of ebony, and others carried sixty gold and silver goblets, and a quantity of gold-dust...After them came a hundred and fifty men carrying trees from which were suspended birds and beasts of every imaginable country and description; and then were carried a lot of cages, in which were parrots, and peacocks, and guinea-fowls, and pheasants, and other Ethiopian birds in great numbers...

And there were images of Alexander and of Ptolemaeus, crowned with **chapelets** of ivy leaves made of gold...And on the throne of Ptolemaeus Soter lay a crown which had been made of ten thousand pieces of gold money...This was the crown which was placed at the door of the temple of Berenice...

And after all these things came a procession of troops, both cavalry and infantry, all armed and appointed in a most superb manner: infantry to the number of fifty-seven thousand six hundred; and cavalry to the number of twenty-three thousand two hundred. And all these marched in the procession, all clad in suitable apparel, and all having their appropriate armour...And first of all Ptolemaeus and Berenice were crowned...standing on golden chariots...But Ptolemaeus Philadelphus, their son, was crowned with twenty golden crowns.

Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, Book 5, translated by C. D. Yonge (1854), pp. 193–203f

Understanding and using the sources

Source 17.11

- List the elements in the *pompe* that relate to the god Dionysus. Why do you think he figured prominently in the festival? (See the information on Dionysus in the section on 'Religious Life' on the next page.)
- List the commodities of the kingdom that are displayed. What message do they give to those watching the spectacle?
- What does the presence of exotic animals reveal about Ptolemaic contacts with foreign lands?
- What does the procession reveal of Egypt's military might?
- Identify the elements of the procession that suggest the dynastic ambitions of the Ptolemies.

For further investigation

You can read the entire text of Callixeinus of Rhodes' account at <http://www.attalus.org/old/athenaus5a.html>. The description of the banquet tent alone is worth reading.

The Adonia

The cult of Adonis, originally a Syrian deity, was popular with Alexandrian women in the Ptolemaic period. Their annual celebrations of his divine marriage, funeral and resurrection offered opportunities for processions and rituals on a large scale. The *Adonia*, organised by Queen Arsinoe II, is the subject of a mime, the *Adoniazusae*, written by Theocritus, a Sicilian poet. Through the experiences of two young women, Gorgo and Praxinoe, we are given a glimpse of the festival that included a military parade, tours of the palace, viewing of a statue of Adonis reclining on a silver couch and a ritual re-enactment of the god's funeral.

The Festival of Sarapis

The annual festival of the god Sarapis on the 25th of April was a celebration open to all and involved the sacrifice of bulls and other animals. Achilles Tattius, describes the spectacle in his novel *Leucippe and Clitophon*.

SOURCE 17.12

It chanced to be the time of the sacred month of the great god whom the Greeks call Zeus, and the Egyptians Sarapis, and a torch procession took place. And this was the greatest spectacle I ever saw; for it was evening and the sun had set, but night was nowhere to be seen—rather, another sun had arisen, refracted into countless fragments. For then I thought the city was competing with the heavens for beauty...So praying to the great god and beseeching that our troubles might at last come to an end, we retired to our lodgings.

Achilles Tattius, *Leucippe and Clitophon*, 5.2, in A. Hirst & M. Silk, *Alexandria Real and Imagined*, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 2006, p. 88

The cult of Sarapis also appears to have involved a particularly clever spectacle for the crowds of worshippers. Rufinius, a Christian writer of the late 4th century AD, gives an account of the 'miraculous' kissing of the colossal statue of Sarapis by a sunbeam, giving it sacred solar energy.

SOURCE 17.13

A very small window had been installed on the side where the sun rises in such a way that on the day on which it was customary to bring the statue of the Sun to greet Sarapis (the time having been carefully calculated), just as the statue was coming in, a sun beam shining straight through this window lit up the mouth and lips of Sarapis, so that it seemed to the watching crowd that Sarapis was being greeted with a kiss by the sun.

Rufinius, cited in Jean-Yves Empereur, *Alexandria: Rediscovered*, George Braziller Publisher, NY, 1998, p. 92

Activity

Imagine that you are a visitor from Athens who has come to Alexandria to attend one of its great festivals, the *Ptolemaia*, the *Adonia* or the Festival of Sarapis. Write a letter home commenting on what you have seen and what the festivals reveal about Alexandria, its rulers and its people.

RELIGIOUS LIFE

Unlike many features of Alexandrian life where we are dependent on written sources for information, the material evidence for the religious life of the city is more plentiful. The native Egyptian population, though large, has left little trace of its religious beliefs and practices, possibly because Alexandria, unlike other Egyptian cities, had no **patron deity** to serve as a focus for traditional worship.

The most common archaeological sources from Ptolemaic Alexandria are small, rectangular limestone plaques dedicated to specific deities. These contained brief offering inscriptions naming the deity, the person making the offering and usually began with the words: 'On behalf of King Ptolemy and the Queen'.

In the late 2nd century BC, these plaques changed in design to reflect the curved top stela common in Pharaonic Egypt. The syncretism of the Greek and Egyptian cultures can be clearly seen in this change.

Other archaeological evidence comes from the terracotta figures found in the city's necropoli. Most represent the Graeco-Egyptian deities favoured by the people (such as Isis/Aphrodite, Bes and Horus), while others are completely Roman. Worthy of special mention are the figurines known as 'Tanagra', after similar funerary figurines from Tanagra in Greece. These 'dolls of death', dressed like elegant Alexandrian ladies, were designed to accompany the dead to the afterlife.

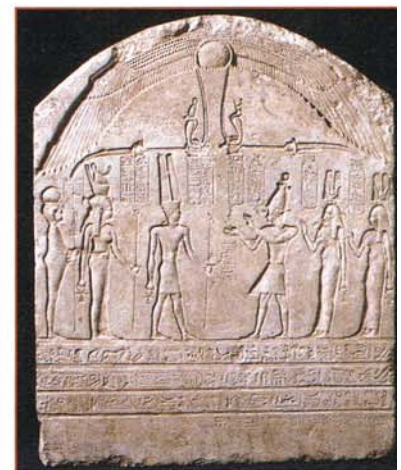


FIGURE 17.17 This limestone stela shows Ptolemy VIII, with his sister-wife Cleopatra I and his niece-wife Cleopatra III, making an offering to the gods.