

**The Great Revival of Egypt:**

**An Exploration of Ptolemaic Egypt Through its Illustrious Capital**

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In the third millennium BC, Egypt stood as a power resurrected from decline several times over, enduring three phases of pharaonic kingdoms and occupations under the Persians and Alexander the Great. Following the death of the latter conqueror, a new Ptolemaic dynasty arose and with it came an intellectual and cultural prosperity that shone as brightly across the Mediterranean as the Great Lighthouse that towered in its cosmopolitan capital of Alexandria. Yet, for all its prosperity, Egypt experienced an equal measure of tumultuousness in the form of infighting, diminishing funds, and scholarly decline all in the shadow of the growing presence of Rome. Through an analysis of Alexandria's political, cultural, and religious innerworkings, a clearer picture of Ptolemaic Egypt's rise and fall can be divined.

A full understanding of Egypt at the time of Ptolemy I's rise to power is impossible without assessing the inextricable context of the historical Pharaonic Egyptian identity as well as the permeation of Greek culture across the Mediterranean world. As J. G. Manning states in *The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305–30 BC*, “the Ptolemaic state, within its core territory, was neither an *Egyptian*, nor a *Greek* state.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, each culture must be briefly understood before a synthesis can be clearly seen.

For nearly 3,000 years before the Ptolemaic dynasty, Egypt existed with a highly religious foundation upon which every other facet of society was built.<sup>2</sup> Egyptian pharaohs served a dualistic role of king and high priest as the incarnations of Horus, their pagan god. The citizens themselves were submissive in partial fear of rejection from the afterlife, as most existed in lower classes reliant on the wealth of upper-class citizens to prosper beyond death. Thus, the Egyptian pharaoh was a gatekeeper to which most were willing to submit. With every range of

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Gilbert Manning. *The Last Pharaohs Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), xvi.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Kenneth Orosz, *Honors 201: Africa to 1800 Class Lecture*. (9/9).

activities from daily labor to artwork under the looming presence of the afterlife and its ruler, Osiris, there was little separating any aspect of life from religion. Though the power of the pharaoh waned in the public consciousness as the kingdom passed from Old to New, the pagan religion remained nonetheless as a deeply engrained portion of Egyptian lives, a fact not forgotten by its conquerors.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the pharaoh, these engrained beliefs allowed a wealthy priestly class to develop with a status near to, and sometimes exceeding, that of pharaoh himself.<sup>4</sup> By the dictates of their religion, pharaoh always maintained a level of divine status that was not surmountable by any other. Nevertheless, as the handlers of religious offerings, keepers of flood cycles, and providers of divination, priests held a significant leverage of the population that allowed them to, at the height of the Old Kingdom, own one-third of farmland and maintain heavy sway over lines of succession. Among the priestly class existed the vizier, a secondary leader under pharaoh in charge of day-to-day tasks, regional governors titled nomarchs, and a nobility class primarily composed of family members who, while acting in senior and advisory capacities, also had a proclivity for lavish lifestyles.<sup>5</sup>

In day-to-day life, Egyptians followed a concept of morality known as “ma’at” (this concept was eventually personified as the goddess of wisdom Ma’at) and concerned themselves constantly with the afterlife.<sup>6</sup> Adherence to this code gave a sense of security to Egyptians, allowing them to farm and engage in leisure with a sense of purpose and a knowledge that they were pleasing the gods so long as they carried out the desires of the pharaoh and Ma’at. Those with sufficient wealth erected elaborate tombs decorated with funerary goods such as carvings

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. (9/21); Günther Hölbl. *A history of the Ptolemaic empire*. (London: Routledge, 2001), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Orosz, *Class Lecture*. (9/9).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid; Joshua J. Mark, *Ancient Egyptian Government*. (World History Encyclopedia, 2016). [https://www.worldhistory.org/Egyptian\\_Government/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Egyptian_Government/).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. (9/9); Joshua J. Mark, *Ma’at*. (World History Encyclopedia, 2016). [https://www.worldhistory.org/Ma’at/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Ma'at/).

and artwork portraying the afterlife, although those in greater poverty still labored to be included in the paintings of upper-class tombs in order to receive roles as serfs in the afterlife.<sup>7</sup> Other activities of citizens included monument and temple building projects, which were consistently ordered by the pharaoh, as well as bartering for goods using the portion of crops untouched by government taxes.<sup>8</sup>

As the New Kingdom faded and five centuries of Libyan and Assyrian rulers reigned, Egypt eventually fell into the hands of the Persians who offered an admiration of Egyptian culture and traditions despite receiving disdain from a weary population discontent with continued subjugation.<sup>9</sup> By the time of the spread of Greek influence across neighboring regions, Egypt had been repossessed by a Libyan pharaoh and enjoyed nationalistic prosperity for nearly 100 years before being reconquered by Darius III, who would only hold Egypt for four years before Alexander the Great claimed the territory as one of his many spoils.<sup>10</sup>

In 331 BC, the foundations of a new Egyptian capital were laid in accordance with the lofty plans of its conqueror and there Alexandria was born, though it would only mature after the death of Alexander during the reign of Ptolemy I.<sup>11</sup> Yet, Greek culture and even Greeks themselves had been placing their imprint upon Egyptian soil prior to the start of the Ptolemaic Dynasty. Over the course of the Classical Period of Greece, the Greek people (males specifically) received representation in government through the establishment of democracy and

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<sup>7</sup> Orosz, *Class Lecture*. (9/9).

<sup>8</sup> Joshua J. Mark, *Daily Life in Ancient Egypt*. (World History Encyclopedia, 2016).  
<https://www.worldhistory.org/article/933/daily-life-in-ancient-egypt/>.

<sup>9</sup> Hölbl. *Ptolemaic empire*. 2-4; Joshua J. Mark, *Late Period of Ancient Egypt*. (World History Encyclopedia, 2016).  
[https://www.worldhistory.org/Late\\_Period\\_of\\_Ancient\\_Egypt/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Late_Period_of_Ancient_Egypt/).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Justin Pollard and Howard Reid, *The rise and fall of Alexandria: birthplace of the modern mind*. (New York: Viking, 2006), 2-3.

science and philosophy flourished under numerous individuals such as Pythagoras, Xenophanes, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.<sup>12</sup> Greek art mirrored, in some instances, the same religious intentions as the Egyptians, visible in the architectural works of the Parthenon and Temple of Artemis as well as a host of statues such as the Statue of Zeus that was counted among the wonders of the ancient world. While tales of Greek culture and influence had been spread throughout the Mediterranean and beyond, the growing expansion of the Greek empire cemented them as transformative components of hybrid cultures under Greek control.

Alexandria was perhaps the clearest example of these hybrid cultures, from the diversity of its people to the pantheon of religions and cultures that dwelled within its borders. From the time of the Saite Period in the 6<sup>th</sup> century onward, Egyptians “increasingly had begun to take on ‘two faces’... the Hellenistic element became ever stronger in Egypt; Greeks could even penetrate into the administrative bureaucracy.”<sup>13</sup> Upon his ascent to the pharaonic throne, Ptolemy I, one of Alexander’s greatest generals, assumed control of a civilization culturally blended for hundreds of years. The groundwork of this co-existence was set by Alexander, who saw the enduring pharaonic framework as suitable within his greater empire. As such, he set a tradition of tolerance for Egyptian religion and the practices associated with it, partaking in the sacrificial offerings presented in Heliopolis and receiving the blessing of the Oracle at Siwah as the son of Amun.<sup>14</sup> In an extension of Alexander’s efforts, Ptolemy I started his leadership of Egypt with a temporary continuation of Memphis as capital, a city with traditional significance.<sup>15</sup> However, in time as Alexandria became the new royal center, Ptolemy I and his successors

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<sup>12</sup> Joshua J. Mark, *Ancient Greece*. (World History Encyclopedia, 2013). <https://www.worldhistory.org/greece/>.

<sup>13</sup> Hölbl. *Ptolemaic empire*. 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 9-11.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 25-26.

gradually implemented Greek elements into the existing politics, culture, religion, and economy, a transformation that led to Alexandria's rise as the most illustrious city in the ancient world.

Political structuring was fairly undisturbed from the institutions of the New Kingdom prior to Ptolemy's ascent: a central head reigned with advisors at their side and religious leaders and nomarchs beneath them, albeit with a bureaucracy populated predominantly by Greeks.<sup>16</sup> In part under Ptolemy I but most certainly under Ptolemy II, the role of deified god-king was preserved and wielded as a device for maintaining Egyptian loyalty through tradition and, later, a royal cult.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the nomarch system continued with the addition of *strategos*, generals who worked alongside the existing nomarchs, treasurers, and scribes in each nome and even fostered greater power than the nomarchs at times.<sup>18</sup> The nomes themselves retained their duties in handling "agricultural production, religious practices, tax collection, and the legal system."<sup>19</sup> In regards to royal policy, Joseph Manning notes parallels between the Ptolemaic dynasty and two other stable Egyptian dynasties (the 12<sup>th</sup> dynasty and the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty, during which Amenemhet I and Amenhotep III ruled respectively, among others) in their political strategies: all three kingdoms emphasized state and infrastructure building, international trade, and military expansion. Nevertheless, Manning notes that strategic diplomacy with Rome involving obedience to the Senate and the maintenance of a comparatively weak military were also key factors in the political success of the Ptolemaic empire.<sup>20</sup>

Originating in the seventh century BC and reaching a head at the time of Ptolemy I's ascension, Egyptian culture developed into a complex balance of pharaonic-era traditions and

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>17</sup> Walter M. Ellis, *Ptolemy of Egypt*. (London: Routledge, 1994), 55-56.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 62.

<sup>19</sup> Manning. *The Last Pharaohs*. lxvii.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. lxix.

new Greek philosophies and advancements over which Ptolemaic rulers had to carefully preside.<sup>21</sup> Evidence of this ethnic blending is visible in the tomb of Siamun where a painted man dressed in Egyptian clothing sports Greek hairstyling, a feature unlikely to have been depicted without some degree of assimilation given the sacred nature of tomb paintings to the pagan Egyptians.<sup>22</sup> However, for all of the lengths Ptolemy I and II went to preserve the structures and religious veins of the Egyptian culture, it was the intellectual culture of the Greeks that thrived during the Ptolemaic dynasty. Counter to the philosophies of most conquerors and, to an extent, his formidable predecessor, Ptolemy I had less interest in “building armies and war machines” but instead “a vast body of knowledge.”<sup>23</sup> The permeating culture of the Greeks since the days of Socrates had been a fascination with intellectual thought, transforming Athens into a radiant center for scholars pursuing any variety of subjects concerning the physical and spiritual world. Aristotle, a pupil of Plato who himself had been a student of Socrates, served as the personal tutor of Alexander from the time he was fourteen and held a near-fatherly role in the conqueror’s life until his pupil’s consuming ambition led them to drift apart.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the core ideas and philosophies of these Greek thinkers undoubtedly left an impact of Ptolemy I. In short order, Alexandria became an academic center parallel in greatness to Athens, driven by Ptolemy I’s ambition and Ptolemy II’s execution of his father’s plans after his death. Indeed, Ptolemy I paralleled Alexander’s father, Philip II, in his commissioning of Theophrastus, a colleague and friend of Aristotle, to be Ptolemy II’s personal tutor, an effort that no doubt ensured the continuation of Ptolemy I’s vision in his son.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. xxxvi.

<sup>22</sup> Susan A. Stephens, *Seeing Double: Intercultural Poetics in Ptolemaic Alexandria*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 23.

<sup>23</sup> Pollard and Reed, *The rise and fall*. 60.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 55-56.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 60-62.

Among the many grand institutions produced in Alexandria during the reign of Ptolemy I and II, none encapsulates the flourishing of human thought that occurred better than the Museion and, within it, the Great Library. As a spiritual sister to the Academy in Athens, the Museion, situated in the center of the city, was designed as a center for the subjects embodied by the Greek Muses to be taught and discussed freely.<sup>26</sup> The building was subdivided into a number of sections which served to support academic exploration, including botanical gardens, observatories, lecture halls, a dining hall, a zoo, and the Great Library itself, among others.<sup>27</sup> One of the most prominent figures to develop within this environment was Euclid of Alexandria, a mathematician whose examination of geometry was utilized for two millennia, including by NASA in the Apollo missions.<sup>28</sup> Euclid's advancements elevated the Museion as more than a playground for philosophers but also a hub for sciences such as mathematics in addition to medicine, a field long advanced by Egyptians through their mummification techniques and built upon by Alexandrians fueled with the curiosity of the Greeks. Furthermore, the introduction of camels to the Middle East, the water wheel, and multicropping all came through the ingenuity of Ptolemaic Egypt.

For all its diversity of subjects, however, the Museion is perhaps overshadowed by the enduring legacy of one of its parts: the Great Library. Set by Ptolemy I, the aim of the Library was, like the Museion as a whole, to procure as large an assembly of knowledge as possible. This vast target was certainly achieved with success as the Library became the largest collection of written works in the ancient world with an estimated total inventory between 500,000 and

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 63.

<sup>27</sup> Roy M. MacLeod, *The Library of Alexandria: Centre of Learning in the Ancient World*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 42; Pollard and Reed. *The rise and fall*. 64.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



700,000 books.<sup>29</sup> While some of these works were published by the scholars studying and working at the Museion, it is believed that the immense assortment of past works was accumulated through a citywide tactic to search every ship that came into port for books and either return the discovered items or seize them until a copy could be produced and given to the owner.<sup>30</sup> Despite the diminishing enthusiasm of later rulers and eventual destruction of the Library, its legacy of greatness lies in its role in growing the concept of an intellectual hub devised by Ptolemy I into the fully-formed cornerstone of Alexandria's significance in the ancient world.

Though academic achievement composed a large portion of the Greek culture imported into the Egyptian land, religion shaped an equal part of the blended culture in the same ways it always had driven the Egyptians. During the early construction of the city, Ptolemy I recognized the dominance of the Egyptian gods Osiris and Apis and sought unification of the Egyptian and Greek peoples through religion. In this pursuit, Ptolemy fused the two Egyptian gods with the Greek god Zeus, creating the multicultural god Serapis and a cult to accompany it in a temple erected for worship of the new deity.<sup>31</sup> Embodied in Serapis was an assembly of traits valued by Greeks and Egyptians alike, a god that was “all things to all men and women” as promoted by the philosophers of the city.<sup>32</sup> The temple constructed in Serapis' honor, the Serapeum, was connected to the Museion and was viewed with renown as a reconciliation of not just Greek and Egyptian religions but the art and architecture of the cultures as well.<sup>33</sup> Just as in the pharaonic

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<sup>29</sup> Joshua J. Mark, *Alexandria, Egypt*. (World History Encyclopedia, 2018). <https://www.worldhistory.org/alexandria/>; MacLeod, *Library of Alexandria*. 64.

<sup>30</sup> Lorna Oakes and Lucia Gahlin. *Ancient Egypt*. (London: Hermes House, 2008), 230; Brian Haughton, *What happened to the Great Library at Alexandria?* (World History Encyclopedia, 2011). <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/207/what-happened-to-the-great-library-at-alexandria/>

<sup>31</sup> Pollard and Reed, *The rise and fall*. 39-41.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 42-43.

<sup>33</sup> Joshua J. Mark, *Serapis*. (World History Encyclopedia, 2021). <https://www.worldhistory.org/Serapis/>

kingdoms of Egypt, so too did the priests of Serapis possess great power within Alexandrian society in their overseeing of rituals and sacrifices as well as in their state-ordained promotion of the religion. Critically, the establishment of the cult of Serapis gave Ptolemy I and his heirs a dual status as “a king in Greek eyes but a god in Egyptian ones.”<sup>34</sup>

Finally, one remaining aspect of Alexandrian society contributed to its great success under the Ptolemaic dynasty (and indeed served as the undercurrent responsible for all other components): the Hellenistic economy. Taxes in pharaonic times had chiefly been exacted from the grain production of citizens and such a system continued with vitality in the Ptolemaic economy.<sup>35</sup> The pharaoh remained the solitary owner of all lands with subjects simply borrowing property from the sovereign state while simultaneously receiving royal encouragement in pursuing private capital, another enduring practice from the days of the pharaonic kingdoms.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, Ptolemy II was the key instigator of Alexandria’s commercial success through his policies of centralized banking, coinage, open markets, and enhanced international trading.<sup>37</sup> Though attempts at centralized banking and the establishing of an official coin-based currency were made by his father and were already present in other contemporary states, it was Ptolemy II who formed the central bank in Alexandria and its network of branches across the sporadic Egyptian villages, allowing the economy to maintain finer records and possess greater unity than before.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Ptolemy leveraged the ample grain production cultivated through annual Nile floods to build up open markets and private enterprise while using monetary gains for

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<sup>34</sup> Pollard and Reed, *The rise and fall*. 40.

<sup>35</sup> Manning. *The Last Pharaohs*. 43.

<sup>36</sup> Hölbl. *Ptolemaic empire*. 61-62.

<sup>37</sup> Pollard and Reed, *The rise and fall*. 77-80.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 77.

exports from Saharan, Arabic, and Asian nations.<sup>39</sup> Without the pharaoh's skillful economic governing, the thriving state of institutions such as the Museion would have been impossible.

Even amidst the monumental achievements of Alexandria and the skillful leadership of its rulers, there were still flaws that ensured its demise to the growing power of Rome, namely the presence of infighting, expulsion of scholars, and declining wealth. From the death of Ptolemy II to the death of the Ptolemaic dynasty, the throne was plagued with internal failures, fractures, and plots within the royal family.<sup>40</sup> Alexandria and the Hellenistic society overall experienced diminishing returns from its involvement in the Syrian Wars under Ptolemy III and IV, leading to a financially weak state reduced by territorial losses and afflicted with unrest following a palace coup until the ascension of Ptolemy V.<sup>41</sup> However, Ptolemy V was far from a great unifier and ultimately lost Palestine, Aegean territory, and Thebes during his reign.<sup>42</sup> Beginning with Ptolemy VI, Ptolemaic Egypt exhibited increasing reliance on Rome for support while experiencing a host of familial assassinations and civil wars, culminating in Ptolemy XII's reign as a functional puppet of Rome that squandered much of Alexandria's remaining resources on bribes.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Alexandria incurred the loss of many of its scholars under Ptolemy VIII who sought to purge suspected opponents during a civil war, diminishing the greatest strengths of Alexandrian society amidst a time of already-present decline.<sup>44</sup> Yet, Ptolemaic Egypt resisted its demise under the famed rule of Cleopatra, the final pharaoh who garnered

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 78-80.

<sup>40</sup> Donald L. Wasson, *Ptolemaic Dynasty*. (World History Encyclopedia, 2016).  
[https://www.worldhistory.org/Ptolemaic\\_Dynasty/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Ptolemaic_Dynasty/)

<sup>41</sup> Michel Chauveau, *Egypt in the age of Cleopatra: history and society under the Ptolemies*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 11.

<sup>42</sup> Wasson, *Ptolemaic Dynasty*. [https://www.worldhistory.org/Ptolemaic\\_Dynasty/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Ptolemaic_Dynasty/)

<sup>43</sup> Chauveau, *Cleopatra*. 11-19.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 59; Wasson, *Ptolemaic Dynasty*. [https://www.worldhistory.org/Ptolemaic\\_Dynasty/](https://www.worldhistory.org/Ptolemaic_Dynasty/)

Egyptian admiration through festival participation and her learning of Egyptian.<sup>45</sup> With hunger strikes, widespread poverty, and depleting tax funds, Cleopatra co-inherited a land at the side of her brother and spouse Ptolemy XII with a course charted for decline and, in the midst of her desperate state, she turned to a series of gambles that sealed the death of Hellenistic Egypt.<sup>46</sup> First, the queen sought the allegiance of her territories, a tactic which eventually led to her exile from Egypt in Palestine until Julius Caesar's decision to appoint Cleopatra sole ruler of Egypt after being romantically persuaded by her.<sup>47</sup> Though this close allegiance allowed some degree of prosperity in Alexandria to continue (aside from the burning of the Great Library), the assassination of Julius Caesar as a result of his crossing of the Rubicon put Cleopatra, her son with Caesar, and the nation of Egypt in jeopardy once more. In her final gamble for preservation, Cleopatra allied herself with Mark Antony, a prominent Roman general and potential claimant of the Empire who found admiration from Alexandrians despite.<sup>48</sup> Even so, for all of Antony's skill and potential, he eventually failed to seize the throne as Octavian, adopted heir of Caesar, shifted the Roman civil war to Alexandria, leading to the suicides of Marc Antony and Cleopatra as he all potential heirs from their bloodline. Though Alexandria found renewed life under the Romans and eventually served as a haven for Christians, the greatness of the city as it had been under the peak of Ptolemy I and II had faded.

During the Ptolemaic dynasty, Egypt was revived to experience some of its greatest highs and deepest lows through the blend of two distinctly grand cultures which, for a moment in history, found a thriving harmony. All of history after the Hellenistic period of Egypt is indebted

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid; Pollard and Reed, *The rise and fall*. 159.

<sup>46</sup> Hölbl. *Ptolemaic empire*. 231; Chauveau, *Cleopatra*. 23.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid; Pollard and Reed, *The rise and fall*. 162.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 169.

to its accomplishments in the intellectual, scientific, and artistic realms as well as to its example as a state undone by the plagues of unstable successions and the shifting sands of empires. A great revival it was, if only for too brief a time.