

By the fourth century B.C. no longer were Athens, Thebes, Sparta, Corinth, and Argos to be considered the greatest cities of the Greek world. New cities, created as a result of the massive conquests of Alexander the Great, arose to contest the primacy of the older, tired cities. A jewel among them was the capital of Ptolemaic Egypt, Alexandria. It was founded personally by Alexander while he was consolidating his control of Egypt in 331. Either through lack of imagination or modesty he named the city after himself.

According to Arrian, who followed the account of Ptolemy, Alexander's officer who later became king in Egypt, Alexander was circling Lake Mareotis with a body of troops near the Canopic mouth of the Nile when he was struck by the excellence of the site, a spit of land between the marshy lake and the sea. Orders were given on the spot, in typical Alexander fashion, to found a city there, the Macedonian monarch even using grain from the soldiers' packs to mark off the walls. A close, off-shore island, Pharos, promised a good harbour, and access by land was given only from the eastern and western approaches. Following sound principles of town planning, the streets were directed to be laid out at right angles, the main street, the Mesion Pedion, (c. 100 feet wide) laid out parallel to the cooling, north-west, etesian winds of summer. Alexandria consequently enjoyed a most salubrious climate, and was naturally chosen by Ptolemy to be his capital when that general established himself in the land of the pharaohs. His last great descendant, Cleopatra, was to die here, leaving the city in Roman hands.

The town was about five miles long, but only c. two miles wide. Alexander was said to have ordered the creation of a long breaker wall which ran 3/4 mile to the off-shore island of Pharos, the effect of which was to create a double harbour. At the tip of the island Ptolemy II built the amazing lighthouse of Pharos, a first of its kind. With a third harbour on Lake Mareotis to receive Nile traffic, the city was to be well-served for commerce. To the south of the eastern harbour lay the royal quarter, the Brucheion. In this district the spaciouly impressive royal palace was built. Ptolemy I had appropriated the body of Alexander and housed the heroic corpse in a magnificent mausoleum in this district. Nearby there was constructed by Ptolemy I, called Soter, the famous Museum, the temple of the Muses. In

this building well-paid scholars did their research, gave lectures, and discussed profundities with the enlightened king, thus making Alexandria the intellectual capital of the Greek world, a position she held until c. 146 B.C., when rival centres such as Athens, Rhodes, Antioch, and Pergamum began to vie with her in prestige. Attached to the Museum was a fine, public Library containing c. 1/2 million books, begun by Ptolemy I but expanded by his son. Its first director was Demetrius of Phaleron, an ex-tyrant from Athens, who was followed by other illustrious men such as the great, Hellenistic poet, Callimachus.

Alexandria was a richly variegated city under royal control. It contained a mixed population, privileged Macedonians, Greeks organized into a separate politeuma, Jews subject to the royal governor, and finally the least-privileged, native Egyptians who lived in the western quarter of the city. The population in the 3rd century grew to c. 300,000, making it one of the largest cities in the Greek world. Great were the city's accomplishments in literature, mathematics, and geography, rich was its commerce and beautiful were its temples, palaces and public buildings. Perhaps the entire city, and not just Alexandria's famous lighthouse, should have been reckoned as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.