

Ancient Alexandria:  
Centre of Hellenistic Culture

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One of the great cities of antiquity was Alexandria. Located on the western rim of the Nile Delta, this city was founded by Alexander the Great in 331 BC. Upon conquering Egypt the ambitious general wished to forge a central link in the great chain he was spanning from Macedonia to Persia; that link was Alexandria. In the middle of east-west trade routes, the city quickly became administrative headquarters for the world's largest empire, and was to be its capital. When Alexander died in 323 his general Ptolemy I (Soter), who gained control of Egypt, established his residence in Alexandria and made it the seat of government for his new kingdom. Thus, although the man after whom the city was named died shortly after its creation, Alexandria remained a strategically important city. Not only was Alexandria a centre for the military and bureaucracy, it was also a cosmopolitan city which nurtured Hellenistic culture.

Alexandria was a multicultural community. Although the Ptolemies were not Egyptian, they strove to accommodate Egyptian customs and religious beliefs. Yet many of the administrators of Ptolemaic government were Greeks and Macedonians, who comprised a visible portion of the population. Greek was the *lingua franca*, and Greek culture was imitated by many. Besides Macedonians and Greeks, Jews, Syrians and native Egyptians inhabited the capital. This racial diversity was common to major cities in the Hellenistic Age. Just as the population was mixed, so too was government. On the surface Alexandria was run like a Greek democratic city-state, while the Ptolemies kept close watch over the economic and social activities by means of a highly centralized government.

In order to lend credence to their new dynasty, and in order remain in favour with the diverse population of the city and kingdom, the Ptolemies lavished one beneficence after another upon Alexandria, with the consequence that the city became a cultural capital. The city sparkled with parks, boulevards, and public spaces. And even at a distance of 32 kilometers the visitor coming by ship to Alexandria could marvel at the lighthouse which towered 120 meters into the sky, built at the expense of the Ptolemies. There were other architectural marvels which reinforced the world-class status of the city: the Palace, the Mausoleum of Alexander, and the zoo are but three.

Besides sponsoring building projects, the Ptolemies promoted scientific

research and the fine arts. We are painfully aware in 1993 that government patronage is crucial to the development of these disciplines; yet for antiquity the Ptolemaic dynasty was the first to grant money and opportunities for the sciences and arts. Tyrants in Greek city-states of the Archaic period had supported art and literature to some extent, but the Ptolemies gave money "with no strings attached". So it was that the royal coffers were opened to build a stellar observatory. This observatory contributed to the many discoveries and advancements of astronomers from east and west alike. It was at this time first noted that we live in a heliocentric solar system. And it was at this time that Aristarchos of Samos maintained that the earth rotated on its axis.

A world-famous medical school was also established in Alexandria under the Ptolemies. This school became so famous that it surpassed the venerable medical school on the island of Cos. Many advances were made in the knowledge of human anatomy, and it is said that vivisection on human beings was practised by Herophilos and Erasistratos, two medical doctors associated with the school in Alexandria. The former is frequently credited with the discovery of nerves and the observation that the brain is the centre of the nervous system. Manuals on poisons, animal bites, illnesses, etc. increased in number.

It is not surprising, therefore, that some of the brightest minds in the empire moved to Alexandria. During the reign of Ptolemy I Euclid composed the *Elements*, a textbook on geometry. The mathematician Archimedes of Syracuse (c.280-212) was associated with the court of the Ptolemies; it was he who described the ratio of a circle to its diameter ( $\pi$ ) more accurately than his predecessors. He is credited with the invention of integral calculus. The geographer Eratosthenes of Cyrene (c. 285-205 BC) also worked in Alexandria. He was particularly interested in chronography, and established the reckoning of Greek history by means of Olympiads. His book, *Concerning the Measurement of the Earth*, came surprisingly close to describing the circumference of the world; its fame lasted until the days of Christopher Columbus.

What most attracted scholars from other parts of the world to Alexandria, however, was the Mouseion. This "shrine to the Muses" was built close to the palace of the Ptolemies. Formally it was a cult centre of a religious organization dedicated to the Muses, and presided over by a priest. Not unlike the Academy and the Peripatetic community in Athens, the Mouseion was an institution of learning and culture. But philosophy was not a dominant pursuit here; rather, history, literature, and science were the interests of those who visited the Mouseion. Indeed, Ptolemy I himself was an historian of sorts, and he recorded the exploits of Alexander the Great.

Established to facilitate research, the "library" provided accommodation and free meals for those who enjoyed the king's patronage. The list of Chief Librarians still exists, and it includes some of the best researchers, writers, and poets of the time. Zenodotos was the first head, and such famous scholars as Apollonios of Rhodes and Aristophanes of Byzantion were his successors.

One of the many noble goals of the library was to collect and classify the whole of Greek literature. The historian Galen tells us that Ptolemy III (Euergetes) was so eager to build up a collection that he ordered all books found on ships docking in Alexandria to be seized and copied. It is said that the library's holdings amounted to perhaps 500,000 papyrus rolls. The poet-scholar Callimachus produced a 120-volume catalogue (called *Pinakes*) of the library holdings. Scribes were hired to spend their lives copying manuscripts of frequently consulted works, and the Ptolemies spent much money acquiring rare works. It is these scribes we must thank for preserving so much Greek literature. It is all the more unfortunate that so many papyri burned when Julius Caesar was besieged in the city in 48 B.C. Nevertheless the library was an important centre for the preservation and dissemination of classical literature and for the promotion of cultural activity.

As a final example of the cultural life of Alexandria one could mention the many festivals and religious processions in the city. Ptolemy "Philadelphos" established the *Ptolemaia*, a festival modelled upon the Olympic games. During this festival competitions in gymnastics and other sports were held; there were performances of music and recitals of poetry. And numerous pageants were staged to honour both Greek and Egyptian gods. Thanks to the patronage of the Ptolemies, this city in North Africa typified the Hellenistic ideal: striving to be Greek in a modern age.