

Such was the description of the city by Aelius Aristides, a second century A.D. rhetorician. The city of Rhodes was created in 408 B.C. as a result of a political accommodation among the three earlier cities on the 420 sq. mile island, Lindos, Cameiros and Ialysos. Rhodes, built on the N.E. corner of the island at the site of an excellent natural harbour, was from its inception marked for greatness as the city of the rose (Greek rhodon). Driving out its Macedonian garrison after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C., the city was to become one of the lights of the new Hellenistic world.

In 305 - 304 B.C. Demetrius the City-Sacker, son of the great Macedonian marshal Antigonus One-Eye, came against Rhodes in one of the most spectacular sieges of antiquity. With courage and ingenuity the city resisted successfully and, to commemorate its victory, a splendid statue of the sun god (110 feet high), the famous Colossos of Rhodes, was erected in the harbour area. This statue became one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. In 227 the statue was toppled and the city wrecked by a devastating earthquake, yet so valuable had Rhodos become as an international centre that most of the leading states of the area contributed freely to the rebuilding. Rhodos, along with Pergamum, supported the rising power of Rome in her wars in the east, for which the city was rewarded. From c. 200 B.C. the Rhodian navy swept the Aegean clear of pirates, but when the Romans set up Delos as a free port Rhodes was financially ruined. Caesar's murderer, Cassius, sacked the city in 43 B.C., though it recovered to become a leading Greek centre under Roman rule during the Empire.

At the height of Rhodes' prosperity, enlightened aristocracy was blended with a limited democracy (the franchise was restricted to men of property) to provide a workable and balanced form of government that was the envy of other states. The upper class had their privileges and prestige, but they also had their obligations. Rhodes was one of the first cities to see the need for public education at state expense and a system for feeding its own poor (something which the Romans would eventually also see the need for). The rich undertook these duties along with the state, the state drawing its revenues from a 2% harbour tax which in 170 B.C. was bringing in 1,000,000 drachmae a year. Both rich and poor were conscripted for a stint in the Rhodian navy, a small but highly effective force with good morale and congenial relations between officers and men. The Rhodians made their money in transshipping goods from Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean to the Aegean world, grain and wine being their usual cargoes. As a result Rhodes became a brilliant centre of finance and banking, attracting rich foreign merchants to the island. When the Romans, to punish Rhodes for pursuing its own interests in the 3rd Macedonian War, liberated Delos as a free port, the port revenues at Rhodes fell to a mere 150,000 drachmae, thus subverting her naval efforts and leaving the Aegean open to the growth of piracy.

Famous artists, philosophers, poets and rhetoricians continued to find Rhodes an attractive place to live and indeed Cicero's teacher of oratory was a Rhodian called Molon. Though the Romans put a blight on the Rhodian rose, the rose did not wither until the general failure of the urban centres of the Classical World in the later Roman Empire.