



The Ptolemaic Dynasty

By Bennett Sherry

In 305 BCE, one of Alexander the Great's generals built an empire that dominated the Mediterranean for 200 years, carefully controlling vastly different cultures under Greek rule.

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Background

The Greek king, Alexander the Great, was one of history's greatest conquerors. Egypt was one of the lands he conquered. After Alexander died in 323 BCE, the Greeks remained in Egypt. They were then led by one of Alexander's favorite generals, Ptolemy. He and his heirs built a rich and powerful empire based in Egypt. That empire controlled the eastern Mediterranean for 200 years.

Formation of the Ptolemaic dynasty

After Alexander's death, much of his empire quickly fell apart. In Egypt, however, Ptolemy continued to rule. In 305 BCE, he declared himself Pharaoh Ptolemy I Soter and established the Ptolemaic dynasty. Under the Ptolemies,¹ Egypt became the center of an empire that stretched from Libya to the Arabian peninsula.



Map of lands claimed by the Ptolemaic Empire. Much of the Ptolemies' power came from their navy, with which they could defend their far-flung territories. By Thomas Lessman, CC BY-SA 3.0.

¹ Male Egyptian rulers in this time were always named Ptolemy, so the plural is Ptolemies. Also, don't confuse them with another famous Ptolemy from the second century CE. That Ptolemy was an important astronomer and geographer. His ideas were widely accepted for many centuries. However, Copernicus and Galileo eventually proved him wrong.

The Egyptian city of Alexandria was founded by Alexander in 332 BCE. It became the capital city of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Located on the Mediterranean coast, Alexandria was the largest of the many cities Alexander founded. It had a population of more than a half-million people.

Administration

In Ptolemaic Egypt, only those of Greek ancestry held powerful positions in government and society. The Ptolemies built upon existing Egyptian systems when possible. However, the descendants of Alexander's soldiers held themselves apart from Egyptians. Greek Egyptians were governed by a different set of laws. The Ptolemies avoided marrying Egyptians, choosing instead to marry from within their own family.

The Ptolemies faced danger from other empires, particularly the Seleucid Empire to the east. The two empires battled repeatedly over their borders. These wars were expensive, which led to higher taxes. They also forced the Ptolemies to draft Egyptians into their army. Repeated wars and higher taxes caused unrest among the Egyptian population. That unrest sometimes erupted into revolts against Greek rule.



Bust of Ptolemy I Soter in the Louvre Museum. By Jastrow, public domain.



The Library of Alexandria, built by the Ptolemies, was a center of learning, employing dozens of scholars and holding up to 500,000 scrolls. Public domain.

Religion

The Ptolemies did not try to make Egyptians change their own culture. On the contrary, they paid for temples to Egyptian gods and supported Egyptian priests. They did, however, introduce new forms of worship to Egypt. Ptolemy I created a new god, Serapis, to blend elements of Greek and Egyptian religion. The Ptolemies' blending of different religious practices and beliefs was a clever move on their part. It helped to make Greek rule more accepted.

The Egyptians considered the pharaohs who had ruled Egypt to be living gods. The Ptolemies adopted this tradition when Ptolemy I's son, Ptolemy II, declared himself a living god. Again, this helped to make Greek rule more acceptable.

Trade

Alexandria sat at the crossroads of major trade routes. It linked the Mediterranean Sea, the Indian Ocean, Africa, and Asia. Its enormous harbor was capable of holding more than 1,000 ships. Under the Ptolemies, Egypt increased its influence in regional trade. Much of this trade centered around agricultural goods. The Ptolemies owned almost half of Egypt's rich farmland. Egyptian exports of grain, linen, and other goods helped to pay for the empire's growth. They also made the royal family and the ruling class very, very rich.

Because Alexandria was a key port, all kinds of goods were funneled through Egypt. These goods came from Arabia, China, India, and Africa. From Egypt, they were distributed across the Mediterranean. Frankincense and myrrh² arrived in Egypt aboard caravans from Arabia. Silk came from China and cotton from India. Indian Ocean spices came from the east aboard ships sailing the Red Sea. Ivory and gold traveled down the Nile River from inland parts of Africa.

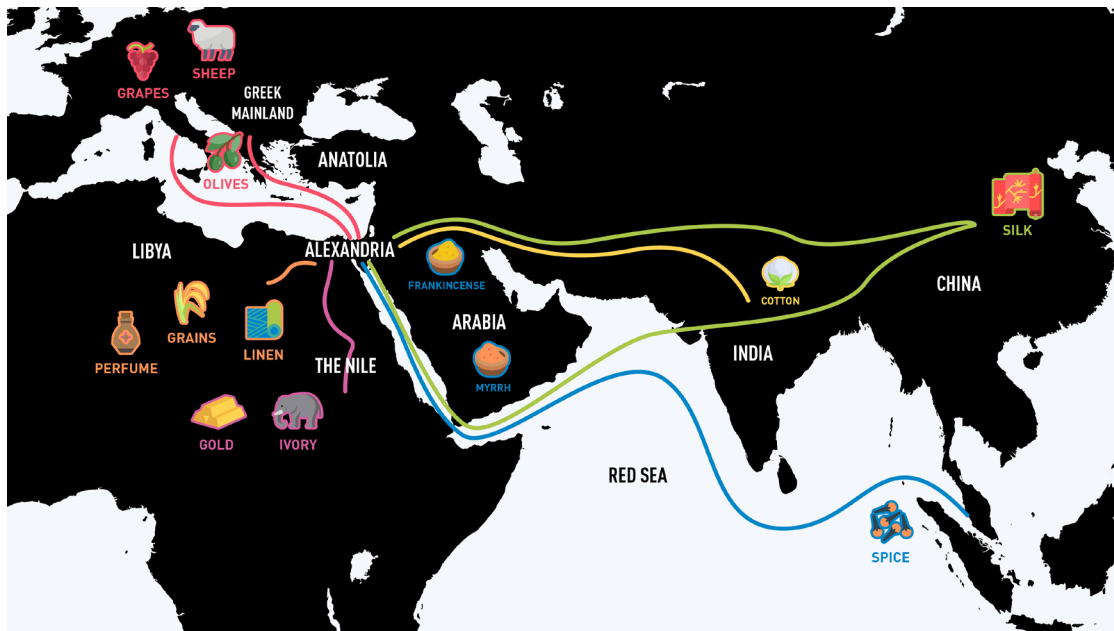


The ruins of the Serapeum of Alexandria, a temple built to honor the god Serapis. By Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, CC BY 2.0.



Gold coin featuring the busts of Ptolemy II and his sister/co-ruler, Arsinoe II. By MatthiasKabel, CC BY-SA 3.0.

² Both frankincense and myrrh are resins from trees. They are used to make perfumes and incense.



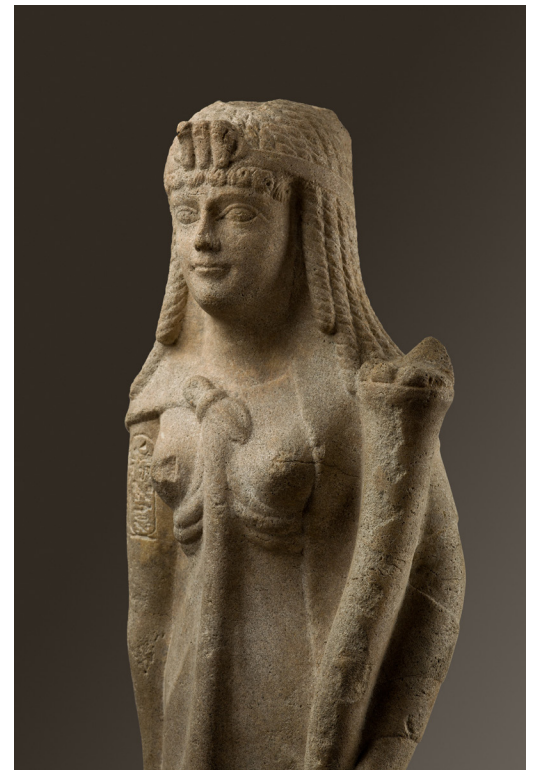
Trade networks of the Ptolemaic Dynasty. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0.

Women in society

Like women in other ancient societies, Ptolemaic women did not have as much power as men. However, they often took part in religious ceremonies and cults.³ Usually, only rich women received an education.

Women at the upper levels of society generally had the most power. Queens had almost as much power as kings. The Ptolemaic kings often married many women. In some cases, they even married their full sisters to avoid mixing with Egyptians. For example, Ptolemy II married his sister, Arsinoë II. Both were declared pharaohs, meaning they both had power over the empire. Other future pharaohs and queens would also share power on the throne. Back in Greece, this arrangement would have seemed very strange.

The most famous pharaoh of this period was Cleopatra VII. Her reign marked the shift from Ptolemaic Egypt to Roman Egypt. Cleopatra had a great deal of power. Her downfall came after she got involved in a struggle between two powerful Roman leaders.



Statue of a Ptolemaic queen, possibly Cleopatra VII. By the Metropolitan Museum of Art, CCO.

³ The word “cult” sometimes has a bad meaning. Here, it simply means a smaller religion or belief system.

Decline and fall

Grain ended the Ptolemaic dynasty. By the time Julius Caesar rose to power in Rome, Egypt had become one of Rome's main grain suppliers. The Ptolemies allied themselves with the Roman Republic. They handed over large amounts of grain in return for Roman military support against Egypt's enemies in the east. However, a quarrel between Cleopatra VII and her brother, Ptolemy XIII, endangered Rome's supply of wheat.

Because Egypt produced so much of the food that Rome needed to supply its growing empire, Julius Caesar stepped in to help Cleopatra hold on to her throne. Roman involvement increased and the Ptolemy dynasty came to an end. Egypt then became a part of the Roman Empire. Its importance to trade networks increased as it was integrated into the Roman Empire.

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Image credits

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