

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. One of the lands he conquered was Egypt. After Alexander died in 323 BCE, the Greeks remained in Egypt. They were now led by one of Alexander's favorite generals, Ptolemy. He and his successors built a rich and powerful empire based in Egypt. That empire controlled the eastern Mediterranean for two centuries.

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 city of Alexandria on Egypt's Mediterranean coast was founded by Alexander in 332 BCE. It became the capital city of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Home to more than a half-million people, it was the largest of the many cities Alexander founded. Its population included Greeks, Egyptians, Persians, Syrians, Jews, and others.

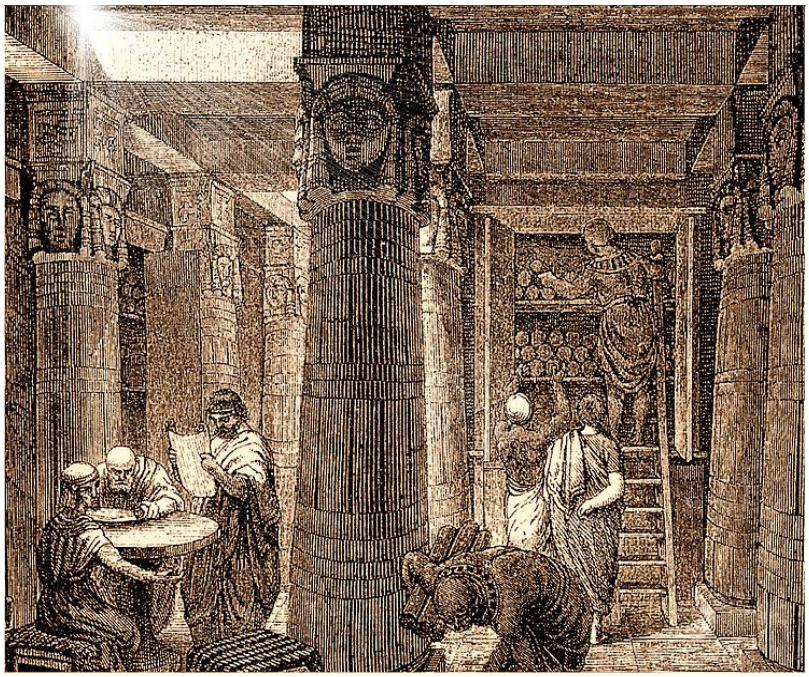
Administration

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

The Ptolemies faced threats 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 required the Ptolemies to draft Egyptians into their army. Repeated wars and higher taxes caused unrest that 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 sponsored 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 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.



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.

Trade

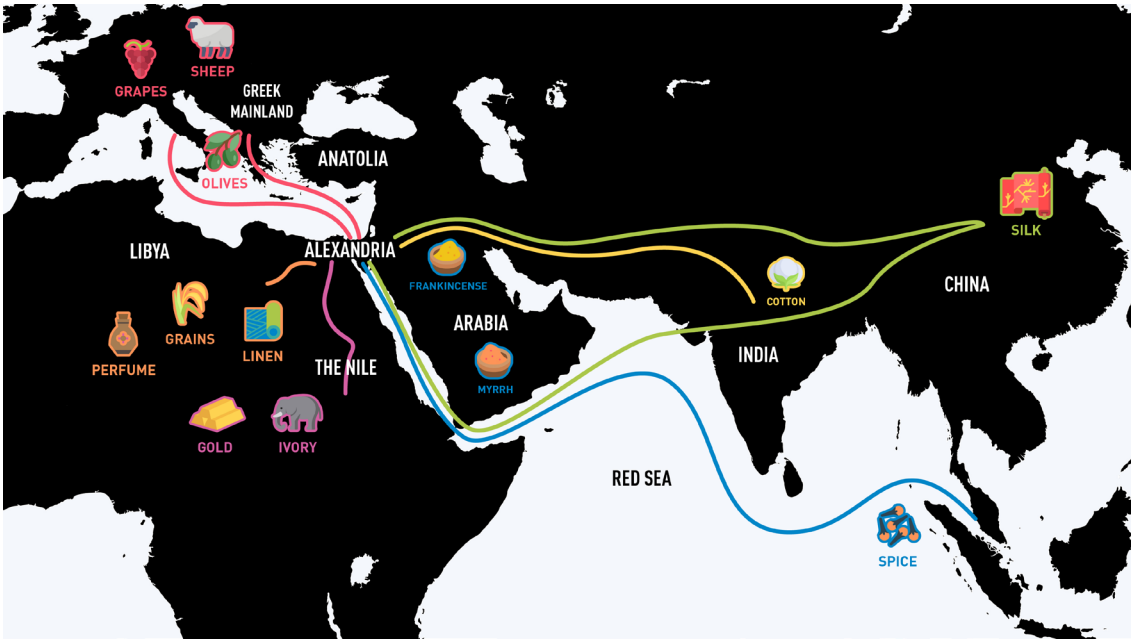
Alexandria sat at the crossroads of trade routes linking the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, Africa, and Asia. Its enormous harbor was capable of holding more than 1,000 ships. The Ptolemies oversaw the growth of Egyptian influence in regional trade networks. Much of this trade centered around agricultural goods. The Ptolemies directly owned almost half of Egypt's rich farmland. Egyptian exports of grain, linen, and other goods helped to fund the empire's growth. The income from trade, along with tax revenues, made the royal family and the ruling class very, very rich. Much of this new wealth was used to purchase luxuries from around the world.

Alexandria was a key point in many trade networks. As a result, luxury goods were funneled through Egypt as they made their way to the Mediterranean. Frankincense and myrrh[2] arrived in Egypt aboard caravans from Arabia. Chinese silk, cotton from India, and Indian Ocean spices from the east arrived aboard ships sailing the Red Sea. Ivory and gold traveled down the Nile River from inland parts of Africa. But wealthy Greeks in Egypt also wanted a taste of home. They imported Greek grapevines and olive trees. They also imported sheep, for their wool.



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 were active participants in religious ceremonies and cults.[3] In general, only wealthy women received an education.

Women at the upper levels of society generally had the most power. The queens of the empire exercised almost equal power with the kings. The Ptolemaic kings of Egypt often married numerous women. In some cases they even married their full sisters, just to preserve the bloodline. For example, Ptolemy II married his sister, Arsinoë II. Both were declared pharaohs, meaning they both had power over the empire. Future pharaohs and queens would also share power on the throne, an arrangement that would have seemed pretty strange in Greece.

Perhaps the most famous pharaoh of this period, male or female, was Cleopatra VII. Her reign marked the transition from Ptolemaic Egypt to Roman Egypt. Cleopatra exercised a great deal of power. Her downfall came after she got involved in a struggle between two powerful Romans.



Statue of a Ptolemaic queen, possibly Cleopatra VII. By the Metropolitan Museum of Art, CC0.

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 rivals in the east. However, a quarrel between two of the last Ptolemies, Cleopatra VII and her brother, Ptolemy XIII, endangered Rome's supply of wheat. This provided an excuse for the Romans to become directly involved in Egyptian affairs.

Because Egypt produced so much of the food that Rome needed to feed its growing empire, Julius Caesar stepped in to help Cleopatra secure her throne. Following a period of increased Roman intervention in Egyptian politics, the Ptolemy dynasty came to an end. Egypt then became a Roman province.

Egypt remained a major source of grain for the Roman Empire. Its importance to long-distance trade networks only increased as it was integrated into the Roman Empire.

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