



## *Standing on the Shoulders of Giants Curriculum*

### From Ptolemaic and Roman Rule to the Arab Conquest (332 BC - 646 AD)

Ptolemaic Egypt began when a follower of Alexander the Great **Ptolemy I Soter** declared himself Pharaoh of Egypt in 305 BC and ended with the death of **Queen Cleopatra VII** and the Roman conquest in 30 BC. The **Ptolemaic Kingdom** was a powerful **Hellenistic** state, extending from southern Syria in the east, to Cyrene to the west, and south to the frontier with Nubia. Alexandria became the capital city and a center of Greek culture and trade.

To gain recognition by the native Egyptian populace, they referred to themselves as successors to the Pharaohs. The later Ptolemies took on Egyptian traditions, had themselves portrayed on public monuments in Egyptian style and dress, and participated in Egyptian religious life. Hellenistic culture continued to thrive in Egypt well after the Muslim conquest.

Eventually the Ptolemies faced rebellions of native Egyptians often caused by an unwanted regime and were involved in foreign and civil wars that led to the decline of the kingdom and its annexation by Rome.

**The groundwork for Ptolemaic rule began in 332 BC, the year Alexander III of Macedon conquered Egypt with little resistance as part of his campaign to defeat the Persians.** He was welcomed by the Egyptians as a deliverer. He visited Memphis, and went on pilgrimage to the oracle of Amun at the **Oasis of Siwa**. The oracle declared him to be the son of **Amun-Re**. He conciliated the Egyptians by the respect which he showed for their religion. While Macedonians commanded military garrisons, including at Memphis and Pelusium, Alexander left the civil administration in local control; initially there were two, later one governor. Alexander founded a new Greek city, **Alexandria**, to be a major commercial port, Egypt's commercial and administrative capital as well as its intellectual center. With Egypt as part of his realm, its wealth and agriculture could be harnessed for Alexander's conquest of the rest of the Persian Empire. Early in 331 BC he was ready to depart, and led his forces away to Phoenicia, leaving **Cleomenes** as the ruling **nomarch** to administer Egypt in his absence.

**Following Alexander's death in Babylon in 323 BC, a succession crisis erupted among his generals.** Initially, **Perdiccas** ruled the empire as regent for Alexander's half-brother Arrhidaeus, and then as regent for both Philip III and Alexander's infant son **Alexander IV of Macedon**, who had not yet been born at the time of his father's death.

Perdiccas appointed **Ptolemy**, one of Alexander's closest companions, to be satrap of Egypt. Ptolemy ruled Egypt from 323 BC, nominally in the name of the joint kings Philip III and Alexander IV. However, as Alexander the Great's empire disintegrated, Ptolemy soon established himself as ruler in his own right.

Ptolemy successfully defended Egypt against an invasion by Perdiccas in 321 BC, and consolidated his position in Egypt and the surrounding areas during the **Wars of the Diadochi** (322 BC-301 BC). In 305 BC, Ptolemy took the title of King. As **Ptolemy I Soter** ("Saviour"), he founded the Ptolemaic dynasty that was to rule Egypt for nearly 300 years. All male rulers of the dynasty took the name "Ptolemy", while princesses and queens preferred the names Cleopatra and Berenice. Ptolemy II instituted a new practice of brother-sister marriage when he married his full sister, Arsinoe II. They became, in effect, co-rulers, and both took the epithet Philadelphus ("Brother-Loving" and "Sister-Loving"). The notion that this was based on Egyptian precedent has been popular in the literature but has no historical basis. This custom made Ptolemaic politics confusingly incestuous, and the later Ptolemies were increasingly feeble.

**Cleopatra V** did co-rule, but it was with another female, **Berenice IV**. **Cleopatra VII** officially co-ruled with **Ptolemy XIII Theos Philopator**, **Ptolemy XIV**, and **Ptolemy XV ("Caesarion")**, but effectively, she ruled Egypt alone.

The early Ptolemies did not disturb the religion or the customs of the Egyptians, and indeed built magnificent new temples for the Egyptian gods and soon adopted the outward display of the Pharaohs of old.

During the reign of **Ptolemy II** and **Ptolemy III**, thousands of Greek veterans were rewarded with grants of farm lands, and Greeks were planted in colonies and garrisons or settled themselves in the villages throughout the country.

Upper Egypt, farthest from the center of government, was less immediately affected, though Ptolemy I established the Greek colony of **Ptolemais Hermiou** to be its capital, but within a century Greek influence had spread through the country and intermarriage had produced a large Greco-Egyptian educated class.

Nevertheless, the Greeks always remained a privileged minority in Ptolemaic Egypt. They lived under Greek law, received a Greek education, were tried in Greek courts, and were citizens of Greek cities, just as they had been in Greece.

The Egyptians were rarely admitted to the higher levels of Greek culture, in which most Egyptians were not interested in any case.

**Effect of Ptolemaic Rule.** Ptolemy I, perhaps with advice from **Demetrius of Phalerum**, founded the Museum and **Library of Alexandria**. The Museum was a research center supported by the king. It was located in the royal sector of the city. The scholars were housed in the same sector and funded by the Ptolemaic rulers. They had access to the Library. The chief librarian served also as the crown prince's tutor. For the first hundred and fifty years of its existence, this library and research

centre drew the top Greek scholars. This was a key academic, literary and scientific center.

The Greeks now formed the new upper classes in Egypt, replacing the old native aristocracy. In general, the Ptolemies undertook changes that went far beyond any other measures that earlier foreign rulers had imposed. They used the religion and traditions to increase their own power and wealth.

Although they established a prosperous kingdom, enhanced with fine buildings, the native population enjoyed few benefits, and there were frequent uprisings. These expressions of nationalism reached a peak in the reign of **Ptolemy IV Philopator** (221–205 BC) when others gained control over one district and ruled as a line of native "pharaohs." This was only curtailed nineteen years later when **Ptolemy V Epiphanes** (205–181 BC) succeeded in subduing them, but the underlying grievances continued and there were riots again later in the dynasty.

Family conflicts affected the later years of the dynasty when **Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II** fought his brother **Ptolemy VI Philometor** and briefly seized the throne. The struggle was continued by his sister and niece (who both became his wives) until they finally issued an Amnesty Decree in 118 BC.

**Roman Aegyptus.** In 30 BC, following the death of Cleopatra VII, the Roman Empire declared Egypt a province (**Aegyptus**) that was to be governed by a prefect selected by the Emperor to prevent interference by the Roman Senate.

The main Roman interest in Egypt was the reliable delivery of grain to the city of Rome. To ensure continued delivery, Roman administrators made no change to the Ptolemaic system of government other than replace the Greeks in the highest offices. But Greeks continued to staff most of the government while under Roman rule, and Greek remained the language of government at all but the highest levels.

Since Romans did not settle in Egypt in large numbers, culture, education and civic life largely remained Greek throughout the Roman period. And the Romans, like the Ptolemies, respected and protected Egyptian religion and customs, while gradually introducing the cult of the Roman state and the Emperor into the panoply of deities that the Egyptians recognized.

**Christian Egypt.** While no records suggest when Christians first migrated to Egypt, present-day Christians believe that **Saint Mark** founded the **Patriarchate of Alexandria** and **Church of Alexandria**, one of the original four main sees of Christianity, about 41 AD. With persecution of Christians raging across most of the Roman world, the Christian population in Egypt steadily grew, making Alexandria one of the principal centers of the Christian world by 200 AD.

With the **Edict of Milan** in 313, the Roman emperor **Constantine I** ended the persecution of Christians. But once the Egyptian Church had achieved official freedom, long-simmering internal conflict (known as **schism**) erupted, which at times descended into civil war.

The first great split in the Christian world occurred at Alexandria in 326 AD after the First Council of Nicaea rejected the views of a Alexandrian priest named Arius, favoring orthodox Christians represented by another priest named Athanasius. This so-called "Arian Controversy" caused riots and rebellions the rest of the fourth century and the repeated expulsion of (now Archbishop) Athanasius from Alexandria (at least five and perhaps as many as seven times).

Amid such strife, and other competing factions (such as Gnosticism and Manichaeism) competing for attention, most Egyptian Christians took up Monasticism, exported the practice to other parts of the Christian world and actively developed Coptic, a form of ancient Egyptian language written with the Greek alphabet and various symbols to represent Egyptian words and sounds which cannot be reproduced in Greek.

Coptic was invented by early Christians to spread the gospel to native Egyptians and has remained the liturgical language of Egyptian Christianity to this day. The **Cathedral of St. Mark in Alexandria**, the historical seat of the Coptic Orthodox Church, dates back to 321 AD.

Source: United States Department of Defense: Cultural Property Training Resource  
Link: <http://www.cemml.colostate.edu/cultural/09476/egypt02-07enl.html>