

"Hellenistic Rule in Egypt." *World History: Ancient and Medieval Eras. ABC-CLIO.*

One of the best-known rulers of ancient Egypt to modern audiences is Queen Cleopatra VII. This legendary beauty, reclining on her boat on the Nile River, has provided one of the most persistent images in Western culture of the mysteries of Egypt. However, an argument could be made that Cleopatra was not Egyptian at all. Her name was Greek, and ethnically, she was a Macedonian, the last in a line of Ptolemaic rulers who had governed Egypt since the conquests of Alexander the Great. Her ancestor, Ptolemy I Soter, accompanied Alexander when he set out from Macedonia in 334 BCE, and after Alexander's death, he managed to carve out a kingdom for himself in Egypt. The Ptolemaic dynasty ruled Egypt for almost three centuries and created a culture that was simultaneously Greek and Egyptian that we now call "Hellenistic." Hellenistic means Greek-like, and it refers to the civilizations along the Mediterranean coast and the Near East that adopted Greek language and culture in the wake of Alexander's conquests.

The Ptolemaic Dynasty

By the time Alexander's Greek and Macedonian troops entered Egypt in 332 BCE, Egypt was in the late stages of a long period of decline as a national power. During the Third Intermediate Period (ca. 1080–525 BCE) and the Late Dynastic Period (ca. 525–332 BCE), Egypt had undergone extended periods of outside rule by the Libyans, Nubians, Assyrians, and Persians. The Egyptians offered essentially no resistance to Alexander's invasion, since they hoped he might prove a more lenient ruler than the Persian king. During his brief stay in Egypt, Alexander reorganized the kingdom under Macedonian rule and set out plans for the founding of a new city, Alexandria, near the mouth of the Nile River. He then went on to his historic conquests in Asia and died in 323 in Babylon.

Immediately after Alexander's death, his Macedonian generals began a struggle for power over the vast empire. One of his chief lieutenants, Ptolemy, seized Alexander's body and brought it back with him to Egypt for burial. Ptolemy recognized that the Egyptians placed a great deal of importance on burial rituals, and by being the one to bury the king, he established his own kingly status. He took control over the Macedonian troops in Egypt and founded his own

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kingdom, in opposition to the kingdoms being set up by his chief rivals, Seleucus I Nicator in the Near East and Antigonos I Monophthalmus in Greece and Macedonia. Those three successors to Alexander, known as the *diadochoi*, established the three main kingdoms that would define the Hellenistic era for the next two centuries.

During the reigns of Ptolemy I and his son and grandson, Ptolemy II and Ptolemy III, the Ptolemaic kingdom expanded to include Cyrenaica, Gaza, Palestine, Cyprus, and many islands in the Aegean Sea, although most of those possessions outside of Egypt would soon be lost under the following Ptolemies. The Ptolemies frequently fought wars with the Seleucid kingdom in Syria, but those wars rarely resulted in any lasting territorial changes. In 168 BCE, the Seleucid king Antiochus IV threatened to overrun Egypt, but he was halted by the intervention of Roman troops. From that point on, Ptolemaic Egypt came increasingly under the influence of Rome. Rome eventually conquered Egypt and made it into a province after the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE. The last of the Ptolemies to rule Egypt were Cleopatra VII and her son, Ptolemy XV.

Alexandria: Queen of the Mediterranean

One of the most lasting of Alexander's accomplishments was his founding of the city of Alexandria, which was to serve as a cultural and economic center for the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine worlds for the next 1,000 years. The Ptolemies chose Alexandria as their seat of power. Its location near the mouth of the Nile River provided an ideal location to control both maritime trade in the eastern Mediterranean Sea and the export of Egyptian agricultural products shipped down the Nile. To make the harbor safer for shipping, Ptolemy II constructed the famous Lighthouse of Alexandria on the nearby island of Pharos. That extraordinarily tall tower (for the time) was considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Alexandria also controlled the manufacture of papyrus, a high-quality paper made from a plant that grows in the region. Control of the papyrus supply both enriched the city and made it a natural center for scholarship, which the Ptolemies encouraged.

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The Ptolemies sought to increase their status in the Greek-speaking world by making Alexandria a center for science and literature. Ptolemy I and Ptolemy II established two great institutions of learning, the Museum of Alexandria and the Library of Alexandria. In order to meet his goal of having the most extensive library in the world, Ptolemy III passed a law that all ships arriving in Alexandria carrying books (technically scrolls, since modern books had not yet been invented) had to turn the books over to the library for copying; once the scribes had finished copying the books, they returned the copies and kept the originals for the library. The Alexandrian Library and Museum attracted some of the finest scholars of the Hellenistic world, including Zenodotus of Ephesus, Apollonius of Rhodes, and Aristarchus of Samothrace. The library burned down in antiquity—some say that Julius Caesar was responsible, while other sources place the date of the destruction in the fourth or seventh centuries CE. Whenever it happened, the loss of the collection of scrolls in Alexandria was one of the great cultural losses in world history.

Hellenistic Religion in Egypt

One of the hallmarks of Hellenistic culture was the combination of Greek religious traditions with the traditions of the local populations. This phenomenon of combined religious traditions is called "syncretism." Alexander initiated the phenomenon of Hellenistic syncretism in Egypt by encouraging the Egyptians to worship him as a god; while this was common practice in Egypt, Alexander's launching of a Hellenistic ruler cult was considered scandalous in Greece and Macedonia. Ptolemy I, recognizing that the Egyptians would follow a leader more willingly if they considered him a god, actively encouraged ruler worship. He also sought to gain favor with the Egyptian people by respecting their religious traditions and supporting Egyptian religious shrines. The early Ptolemies established the Serapeum, an important religious shrine to Sarapis, in Alexandria so that their capital could replace Memphis as the spiritual capital of the kingdom.

The Macedonians and Greeks in Egypt were polytheists, and they often responded to the Egyptian religious tradition by adopting the Egyptian gods, but with a Greek flair. The chief Egyptian god Amon, for example, was honored by Greeks as Zeus-Amon; they believed that he

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was the same deity as the Greek sky god Zeus, but that he had a different name in Egypt. The Greeks also honored the god Sarapis, which was a Hellenized form of a combination of two Egyptian gods, Osiris and Apis. A number of Egyptian deities inspired popular religious cults throughout the Greek-speaking world. Sarapis was initially very popular throughout the Greek world, but his cult was soon surpassed in devotees by the cult of Isis, an ancient goddess who had held many roles in traditional Egyptian religion. In the Hellenistic world, Isis represented fertility, marriage, childbirth, and healing. The image of Isis was often accompanied by that of Harpocrates, the form of her son Horus as a child.

Change and Continuity in Egyptian Culture

For the Egyptian upper classes and urban population, the rule of the Ptolemies brought many changes. Educated Egyptians were exposed to Greek philosophy, science, and literature, and Greek became their primary language. Egypt became part of an economic and cultural world that spanned the eastern Mediterranean. While Hellenization brought great changes for the inhabitants of Alexandria, it did not substantially alter the lives of all, or even most, Egyptians. The majority of Egyptians worked as farmers or fishermen along the floodplain of the Nile. They had experienced foreign rulers before, and they would experience them again. For rural Egyptians, their language, religion, and culture remained largely the same, and their lives, like those of their ancestors, revolved around the annual cycle of the Nile.

Homework Assignment:

On a separate piece of paper, answer each of the questions in one complete paragraph each:

1. Why were the Ptolemies successful in controlling Egypt?
2. Define the term “syncretism” and explain how Egyptian and Greek faiths merged.