

058: Ptolemaic Egypt – Two Lands, Two Peoples, One Ruler

Under the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus and his son Ptolemy III Euergetes, the 3rd century BC saw the glory days of Hellenistic Egypt. Though their domain was not as large as the contemporary Seleucid kings of Syria or the Mauryan emperors in India, the Ptolemies were easily the wealthiest people on Earth.¹ Their intensive cultivation of the Nile River and facilitation of trade networks had created a kingdom of unparalleled splendor and luxury. Yet, much of this wealth was largely centered on the Nile Delta and their great capital of Alexandria-by-Egypt. Alexandria was home to some of the most brilliant intellectual and artistic minds to come out of the period and considered one of the greatest cities in history. Thanks to the vast output of literary works and extensive archaeological and papyrological evidence, we can reconstruct the inner workings of the Ptolemaic state to such a degree that is unmatched by any contemporary society at the time. I want to spend several episodes guiding you through the world of Hellenistic Egypt, and today we will discuss the Ptolemaic monarchy and its attempts to legitimize their rule with both Greeks and Egyptians alike.

King Cambyses' conquest of Egypt and its subsequent incorporation into the Persian Empire during the late 6th century ushered in a time of great unrest for its native inhabitants. While archaeological evidence and surviving inscriptions run counter to Herodotus' writings, which claim that the Persian occupation resulted in tight-fisted despotism and particularly egregious acts of sacrilege against the Egyptian pantheon, there were a number of rebellions that indicated a deep resentment of these occupants.² In about 404 the Egyptians threw off the Persian yoke, and the 28th-30th dynasties ruled independently for an additional 60 years down to the final indigenous pharaoh Nakhthorheb, known as Nectanebo II to the Greeks. His fate is uncertain following Egypt's reconquest by Artaxerxes III, but he lived on through his connection to his eventual avenger: Alexander the Great. The creation of the Ptolemaic Kingdom was tied very closely to Alexander. After all, Ptolemy I was Alexander's close companion and assumed the title of Satrap of Egypt when the latter died in 323. But when compared to the other Successors Ptolemy stands apart: the city of Alexandria became the dynastic capital, Alexander's image was circulated through coinage and cults.³ The stand-out piece was the body of Alexander himself, entombed in a great mausoleum in Alexandria following Ptolemy's "interception" of the funeral train in 321, and followed a Macedonian custom of new kings burying their predecessors.

In effect, the Ptolemaic monarchy is one of duality, in one part derived from the dynasty's Macedonian origins and in the mold of Philip II and Alexander. The other part was taken from the Pharaonic model that had dominated Egyptian life for the better part of 3,000 years. The question that is often posed by scholars is how we should view the Ptolemies in the context of being the heads of a small Greek population ruling over a larger indigenous Egyptian population. For sure, the matter of exploitation and taxation is something that will be addressed later in this and future episodes, but for the time being I want to focus on how the Ptolemies presented themselves as both Hellenistic kings and legitimate

¹ Manning, J.G. *"The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC"* Pg. 125

² Wilkinson, T. *"The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt"* Pgs. 424-443;

³ Stewart, A. *"Faces of Power: Alexander's Image and Hellenistic Politics"*, Pgs. 229-262

pharaohs of Egypt. They must have been successful to some extent; they were the longest reigning dynasty in all of Egyptian history, and the longest lasting of the Hellenistic kingdoms. Let's start by looking at a piece of literature that sort of encapsulates the Ptolemaic mindset.

The Alexander Romance, a collection of popular oral and vulgate traditions and tales based on a heavily sensationalized life of Alexander the Great, contains an interesting tidbit. In it, Nectanebo II is said to have fled to the court of Macedonia in the guise of an astrologer. While there he bewitched Queen Olympias into believing he was the ram-horned god Zeus-Ammon, she slept with him, and Alexander was born nine months later.⁴ The exact origin of this re-telling is unknown, but what is certain is that the story had circulated in Egypt during the early period of Ptolemaic rule.⁵ In turn, this worked to the benefit of the dynasty: it reworked Alexander into being a legitimate successor to Nectanebo rather than just another foreign conqueror, and it is quite possible that it created by the Egyptians to better internalize Greek rule and "claim" the king as one of their own. Since Ptolemy emphasized his connection to Alexander, this would by extension make the Ptolemies part of that legitimate line of dynastic succession from the perspective of Egyptian history.

There are many other examples of the Ptolemaic dynasty being worked into the Egyptian framework. Like all their pharaonic predecessors, the name of each king was written in hieroglyphs and enclosed within an oval-shaped *cartouche*, a nickname given by the French troops and savants of Napoleon Bonaparte's Egyptian expedition since they resembled their paper-cartridge bullets. These cartouches only reflected two out of at least five royal names bestowed upon each king, and they were often extremely long-winded.⁶ Ptolemy V, immortalized upon the Rosetta Stone, has the most egregious example of all:

*"Horus Youth Who Has Appeared (in Glory) on the Throne of His Father, (He of) the Two Ladies Great of Valor, Who Has Reestablished the Two Lands and Made Perfect the Beloved Land, Whose Heart Is Pious Toward the Gods, Horus of Gold Who Has Improved the Life of the People, Lord of Jubilee Feasts like Ptah and Sovereign like Ra, King of Upper and Lower Egypt Heir of the Gods Who Love Their Father, Chosen of Ptah, Power of the Ka of Ra, Living Image of Amun, Son of Ra Ptolemy, Living Eternally, Beloved of Ptah, God Who Appears, Master of Kindness"*⁷

Ptolemaic queens were also able to receive such titularies and honors, and many of them are bestowed cartouches of their own. Some of the more independently-minded or especially powerful women could also be given royal titles signifying their prestige, though it would be framed in masculine terms – Arsinoe II is described as "King of Upper and Lower Egypt" in an admittedly posthumous depiction, but others like Cleopatra II and Berenice II were listed as "female" pharaohs within their lifetimes.⁸

⁴ Pseudo-Callisthenes, *The Alexander Romance*, 1.1-13

⁵ Jasnow, R. "The Greek Alexander Romance and Demotic Egyptian Literature", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 56(2), Pgs. 95-103; Stoneman, R. "

⁶ Chaveau, M. "Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra" Pgs. 45-46

⁷ BM EA 24; Translation taken from Beckerath, J.V. "Handbuch der ägyptischen Königsnamen", MAS 20, Pg. 119, and Chaveau, M. "Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra" Pg. 46

⁸ Pomeroy, S.B. "Women in Hellenistic Egypt: From Alexander to Cleopatra" Pgs. 19-24; Carney, E. "Arsinoe of Egypt and Macedon: A Royal Life" Pgs. 114-115

In terms of royal headwear, the Ptolemies could be depicted wearing the Greek cloth diadem or the various crowns of Egypt, like the double-crowned Pschent or the Nemes (the stereotypical striped headcloth most famously depicted on Tutankhamun's sarcophagus).⁹ Likewise, the queens and royal ladies were depicted with a traditionally Greek hairstyle, held up in sort of melon shape and tied with a diadem as popularized by Arsinoe II and later reincorporated by Cleopatra VII.¹⁰ Yet they could also be seen with the Egyptian tripartite wig, or essentially act as stand-ins for Egyptian goddesses. Royal sculpture work tends to be rather homogenous in style and craft, and usually one can guess the intended audience and maker of each piece. Of course, like any simplification, there are plenty of examples indicating a more complex gradient of Egyptian artisans adapting Greek styles and vice versa.¹¹ A fabulous golden ring of Ptolemy VI shows the profile of the king with typical Hellenistic realism, but he is wearing the Pschent, a traditional crown of pharaohs that represent the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt.¹² In contrast the Raphia and Pithom Stele of Ptolemy IV are almost identical to any previous pharaonic monument in terms of its art style, but the king himself is shown rearing on horseback while equipped with Macedonian arms and garb, and is more reminiscent of contemporary statues and paintings of Alexander the Great.¹³

We have quite a bit of documentation of the Ptolemies' relationship with the traditional religious landscape of Egypt, thanks to considerable records written by the priesthood and from many of the magnificent temples dating to the Ptolemaic period which survive. Part of the role of pharaoh was to act as the main bridge between earthly and divine matters, responsible for overseeing all rituals and religious holidays. Now given the huge number of temples and festivals in Egypt this was not actually practical, and so the king delegated such tasks to the priesthood, who held extensive power and wealth both before and during the reign of the Ptolemies. One of the most important religious roles that the Ptolemies assumed was as caretakers of the Apis Bull. Residing within Memphis, the divinely marked bull was viewed as an avatar of the city's patron god Ptah and represented Egypt's fertility. Upon its death, it represented an aspect of Osiris, lord of the underworld. The king was supposed to ensure that the bull had a life of comfort and was responsible for its burial in an elaborate ceremony. This is why Herodotus' story of Cambyses murdering the Apis Bull was meant to represent the height of Persian sacrilege and tyranny, however doubtful it actually is.¹⁴ In contrast, the Ptolemies were prompt and respectful in their duties.¹⁵ In the Canopus Decree dating to 238 BC, Ptolemy III and Berenice II are showered with praise for their involvement with the bull's entombment, having burnt offerings and

⁹ Compare the Ptolemy II bust from the Naples Archaeological Museum ([Link](#)) with the diadem versus a contemporary bust housed in the Brooklyn Museum wearing the Nemes ([Link](#))

¹⁰ A bust thought to have been made during Cleopatra's lifetime ([link](#)) is one of the main examples, though the general lack of identifying features in other busts of earlier Ptolemaic queens make it challenging to determine which one is being represented as per Carney, E. "Arsinoe of Egypt and Macedon: A Royal Life" Pgs. 116-117

¹¹ An extensive catalogue and analysis of Ptolemaic Royal Sculpture can be seen in Ashton, S.A. "Ptolemaic Royal Sculpture from Egypt: the Greek and Egyptian Traditions and their Interaction", (1999), King's College London

¹² Seen [here](#)

¹³ The Raphia Stele image of Ptolemy IV ([Link](#)), compare to this to a coin of Alexander celebrating his defeat of King Porus ([Link](#))

¹⁴ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 3.27-3.29

¹⁵ Chaveau, M. "Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra" Pgs. 121-123; Kampakoglou, A. "Danaus βουγενής: Greco-Egyptian Mythology and Ptolemaic Kingship" *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 56 (2016) Pgs. 111-139

purified themselves in addition to their very physical presence and patronage of the cult.¹⁶ Overseeing the wellbeing of Egypt's sacred animals was an important requirement for a Pharaoh for the divine stability of the kingdom itself, and as such is celebrated in many inscriptions. For instance, the praise lauded upon Ptolemy V as recorded in the Egyptian verse on the Rosetta Stone:

"[Ptolemy V] did many favors for Apis and Mnevis, and the other sacred animals that are honored in Egypt, more than what those who were before him used to do, he being devoted to their affairs at all times, and giving what is required for their burials, although it is great and splendid, and providing what is dedicated in their temples when festivals are celebrated and burnt offerings made before them, and the rest of the things which it is fitting to do; the honors which are due to the temples and the other honors of Egypt he caused to be established in their (proper) condition in accordance with the law..."¹⁷

The Ptolemies held a special regard for Ptah, who was identified with Hephaestus, who was the patron god of Memphis. Memphis is where the Ptolemy's first set up shop as Alexandria was under construction, and the Memphite priesthood received special treatment by the dynasty. The Temple of Ptah in Memphis is also where Ptolemaic rulers would go to be coronated in traditional Egyptian manner. Ptolemy V was the first documented member to have undergone such a ceremony, though it is highly likely that others had done so before him.¹⁸

Temple building and royal benefaction on the part of the Ptolemies allowed for the construction of traditional Egyptian centers of worship. It would not be far-fetched to say that were it not for their patronage we would be amiss of many finely preserved examples that help illuminate our understanding of temple culture. The most splendid example is the Temple of Edfu, dedicated to Horus. It took several generations to build, starting with Ptolemy III in the 230s and finally completing construction in the time of Cleopatra VII during the 50s BC. Inscriptions from the priests there report the progress being made on the temple, demonstrating how the kings and queens would visit the temples to observe their progress and make sacrifices and consecrations.¹⁹ They were also willing to build upon or renovate pre-existing structures. We have a relief on the Bab el Amara gate on the Temple of Khonsu, the Egyptian moon god, located within the Karnak complex in the city of Luxor. Originally constructed by Nectanebo I, Ptolemy III and Berenice II are incorporated into the traditional framework of receiving their crowns from Khonsu.²⁰

In part, the worship of the Apis Bull would inspire the Ptolemies to establish a cult dedicated to a god of their own make: Serapis, an amalgamation of the names of Osiris and Apis (which are Greek renditions of Egyptian names to begin with) introduced in the time of Ptolemy I.²¹ Serapis was quite distinct when compared to other deities. While Ptah could be identified as Hephaestus and Amun recognized as an incarnation of Zeus, Serapis was intended to be a Ptolemaic creation that fused Egyptian and Greek

¹⁶ OGIS 56.9–10

¹⁷ BM EA 24 ([Link](#))

¹⁸ Chaveau, M. "Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra" Pg. 46

¹⁹ Examples ([Link](#))

²⁰ Clayman, D.L. "Berenice II and the Golden Age of Ptolemaic Egypt"

²¹ Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.83-84

imagery and motifs in order to provide some sort of common ground between the two ethno-cultural groups.²² Statues show a god with long curly hair and a beard that was reminiscent of contemporaneous depictions of Zeus, wearing a cup-shaped headdress known as a modius. Often seated at his side was Cerberus, the three-headed guard dog of the Underworld. Serapis initially represented the fertility of Egypt, but also became associated with the afterlife and oracular powers. The Ptolemies patronized the god with temples being installed in major cities like Memphis, but the most famous of these was the Serapeum in Alexandria. Though Serapis was never too popular with the Egyptians, he proved to be a smash hit with the Greeks and came to be widely worshipped outside of Egypt.²³ The Egyptian goddess Isis would also be repurposed by the Ptolemies to share a similar role with that of Aphrodite, though still adorned with a lunar crest signifying her Egyptian origins.²⁴ The most famous appearance of Hellenized Isis can be found in books 17 and 18 of the Roman novel *"The Golden Ass"*, written by a professed worshipper of the goddess named Lucius Apuleius, who paints her as a benevolent deity that restores the human form of the protagonist after he had been transformed by a witch into a donkey.

Though many royal cults were established throughout the Hellenistic world, none would be as successful or enduring as that of the Ptolemies.²⁵ Certainly, they could have taken inspiration from Egypt's own past - the position of Pharaoh straddled the line between mortal and divine, and we have explicit evidence of ruler cults being established as early as Mentuhotep II in the Middle Kingdom, and those of Amenhotep III and Rameses II in the New.²⁶ As already discussed, the Ptolemies were more than capable of appropriating the religious functions and imagery of the Pharaoh, but it is more likely that they were following developments that had been occurring in the Greek-speaking world. Alexander had undergone an apotheosis within his own lifetime, and the Lagid family claimed divine ancestry. It wouldn't be until the reign of Ptolemy II when the dynasty was fully integrated into the religious landscape of both Egypt and the Mediterranean. In life they would be bestowed epithets and honors that seem to imply divine status: Savior, Benefactor, God Manifest. Ptolemy XII was even given the title *Neos Dionysos*, the new Dionysus. However, they were not considered walking talking divinities, and were instead given honors and treatment *like* those of the gods.²⁷ When they died, they would be incorporated into the larger family cult. Ptolemy I and Berenice I were inaugurated into the realm of the divine by their son Ptolemy II Philadelphus, who established a festival known as the Ptolemaia that was to be celebrated in Alexandria every four years. Games and competitions were to be held as cult statues were carried in procession, with representatives across the Greek world making an appearance.²⁸ The events were even

²² Pfeiffer, S. *"The God Serapis, His Cult and the Beginnings of the Ruler Cult in Ptolemaic Egypt"* in *"Ptolemy II Philadelphus and his World"* Pgs. 387-408; Naether, F. *"New Deities and New Habits"* in *"A Companion to Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt"* Pgs. 439-440

²³ Wilkinson, T. *"The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt"* Pg. 452; Peacock, D. *"The Roman Period (30 BC – AD 311)"* in *"The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt"* Pg. 438

²⁴ Example ([Link](#))

²⁵ For the relative impact of the other Hellenistic royal cults, see Chaniotis, A. *"The Divinity of Hellenistic Rulers"* in *"A Companion to the Hellenistic World"* Pgs. 431-445; Sherwin-White, S.M. *"Shami, the Seleucids, and Dynastic Cult: A Note"* Iran, Vol. 22 (1984) pp.160-161; For the royal cult in Egypt, see Pfeiffer, S. *"A Successful Ruler and Imperial Cult"* in *"A Companion to Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt"* Pgs. 429-438

²⁶ Shaw, I. *"The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt"* Pgs. 151-152, 261-263,

²⁷ Grainger, J.D. *"Kings & Kingship in the Hellenistic World, 350-30 BC"* Pgs. 28-31

²⁸ Iossif, P.P. *"Ptolemaia"* in *"The Encyclopedia of Ancient History, First Edition"* Pgs. 5624-5625

carried outside of Alexandria in places like Athens.²⁹

Cults dedicated to Ptolemaic queens were especially widespread and long-lived. In the Greek-speaking world associations with Aphrodite were commonplace, but worship and veneration of the family was not limited to Greeks either. Ptolemaic women were routinely identified with Egyptian goddesses like Isis or Hathor – the depiction of Bab el Amara shows a visibly pregnant Berenice (who had given birth to at least five children for Ptolemy III) wearing the crown and cow-ears of Hathor, who was herself was a goddess of motherhood and fertility.³⁰ Cleopatra III held the title “Isis, Great Mother of the Gods”, and Cleopatra VII styled herself as the “New Isis”.³¹ Arsinoe II was the first to receive a cult in her honor. Her statue was formally instituted in Egyptian temples alongside that of the native gods, which functionally allowed the Ptolemies to place a dynastic stamp on the religious landscape of Egypt. We have a funerary dedication by an Egyptian named Pasherentah III, a high priest of Ptah in Memphis, who is eager to tell visitors of how King Ptolemy XII proclaimed him the head of the Ptolemaic royal cult.³² Egyptian priestly families would oversee the cult for generations, with many of their daughters being named after the goddess in her honor.³³ A papyrus fragment from the reign of the Emperor Hadrian in the 2nd century AD still casually refers to the holy days of the divine Berenice II Euergetes over 300 years after her death.³⁴

For what can be said, Ptolemy and his successors understood that in order to be able to rule Egypt they needed to be viewed a legitimate dynasty, and they did commit to it with certain zeal and appreciation for the customs of the land.³⁵ However, neither they nor their Egyptian subjects ever truly forgot the dynasty’s Greco-Macedonian origins. Plutarch alleges that the first Ptolemy to actually learn and speak the Egyptian language to any significant degree was Cleopatra VII herself after nearly two and a half centuries of their rule.³⁶ Surprisingly few classical authors actually refer to the Ptolemies’ Macedonian ancestry, though Plutarch mentions that the Macedonian dialect was still in use by later rulers.³⁷ An inscription dating to the year 238 was recovered from a temple in Grecian Aetolia, and they explicitly describe the Ptolemies as “Kings of Macedonia”.³⁸ Though he clearly respected and venerated the Ptolemies, Pasherentah’s inscription notably refers to them as “Ionian Kings”.³⁹ A more hostile response to Ptolemaic rule can be seen with the native-led revolt from 205 to 186 BC, which saw the brief installation of rival indigenous Pharaohs in Upper Egypt. The origins of the revolt have been extensively debated – whether it was born out of some sort of ethno-nationalist resentment to foreign

²⁹ SEG 43.66–8

³⁰ Pomeroy, S.B. “Women in Hellenistic Egypt: From Alexander to Cleopatra”, Pg. 39; Clayman, D.L. “Berenice II and the Golden Age of Ptolemaic Egypt” Pg. 162

³¹ Chaveau, M. “Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra” Pg. 37; Suetonius, *The Divine Augustus*, 17.5

³² Stele BM 886 ([Link](#))

³³ Carney, E. “Arsinoe of Egypt and Macedon: A Royal Life” Pgs. 107-108

³⁴ Sel. Pap. II 311

³⁵ Mittleman, R.J. “Macedonian, Greek, or Egyptian? Navigating the royal additive identities of Ptolemy I Soter and Ptolemy II Philadelphus” in “Community and Identity at the Edges of the Classical World”

³⁶ Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, 27.4

³⁷ Edson, C. “Imperium Macedonicum: The Seleucid Empire and the Literary Evidence” *Classical Philology* Vol. 53, No. 3 (Jul., 1958), pp. 164-165; Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, 27.4

³⁸ ([IG 9.1.2.56](#))

³⁹ Stele BM 886

occupiers, or abuses inflicted by the rigorous taxation program of the regime. But we can clearly see that many of the Egyptian populace continued to recognize their rulers as, if not Greek, then definitely non-Egyptian at their core.

The locus of their power remained in Alexandria, a pet project which was for all intents and purposes a Greek city grafted onto the Egyptian landscape. Egyptian authority had traditionally resided to the south in cities like Memphis, the temporary capital of Ptolemy I as Alexandria was under construction, or 100-gated Thebes, the Egyptian Waset. The Nile Delta was comparatively underdeveloped, and the choice to make a city with direct access to the Mediterranean was very unusual – the Egyptians never had as great of a sailing tradition as the Greeks, and instead preferred a closer proximity to the Nile instead of the “Great Green”. Alexandria also held significant ties to Alexander the Great. The cult of Alexander *Ktistes* (“the Founder”) was established shortly after his death by Ptolemy I, and his body was interred in a grand mausoleum, which added a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of his Greco-Macedonian subjects.⁴⁰ Even the city’s name, Alexandria-by-Egypt, reflects this notion that they were somehow distinct from Egypt rather than one with it. For sure, the populace living within Alexandria was culturally and ethnically diverse. There were also quite a few Egyptian-styled temples and monuments incorporated within the city’s fabric. But it was designed specifically in mind to become the center of the Greek world, at least its intellectual and cultural center, for countless artists and thinkers would flock to Alexandria under the patronage of the Ptolemies.⁴¹ Some of the Lagid rulers displayed an affiliation for learning and intellectual endeavors on their own accord, though sadly their works do not survive for the most part. Ptolemy I and VIII wrote extensive memoirs, the former of which Arrian of Nicomedia would base his history of Alexander the Great upon.⁴² The Library of Alexandria was the brainchild of Ptolemy II, who is frequently depicted in anecdotes and stories engaging in conversation with philosophers and poets. The Jewish tradition paints him as a respectful admirer of the teachings of the Talmud, and the sponsor behind the Greek translation of the Old Testament.⁴³ Cleopatra VII could speak up to eight languages and wrote a work dedicated to cosmetics, which later writers like Galen would use for its pharmacological knowledge.⁴⁴ Their patronage was not limited to Egypt either, as many Greek cities throughout Asia Minor and the Aegean would recognize the Ptolemies as benefactors. Rhodes had been the one to originally give the title of “Savior” to Ptolemy I following his assistance during their siege by Demetrius Poliorcetes, and they even dedicated a building in his honor named the Ptolemaeum.⁴⁵

While we will dedicate more time to the Ptolemy’s fiscal policy later, the coinage that they introduced was invariably Greek in nature. Unlike statues or royal iconography, coins never deviated from their intended cultural audience in the larger Mediterranean world. You never see Egyptian elements emblazoned upon the coin portraits, which communicated power and royal authority through Greek

⁴⁰ Stewart, A. “Faces of Power: Alexander’s Image and Hellenistic Politics”, Pg. 243-252

⁴¹ Murray, O. “Ptolemaic Royal Patronage” in “Ptolemy II Philadelphus and his World” Pgs. 9-24

⁴² Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander*, Preface

⁴³ Aristaeas, *Letter to Philocrates*, 28-300; Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 12.34-102; Bickerman, E.J. “The Jews in the Greek Age” Pgs. 101-103

⁴⁴ Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, 27.3-4; Roller, D.W. “Cleopatra: A Biography” Pgs. 49-51

⁴⁵ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 20.100.1-4

language (both literally and symbolically).⁴⁶ It also symbolized the brilliant wealth of the Ptolemies, which could be weaponized into a power piece of dynastic propaganda.

The idea of Egypt's fertility, whether in reference to agriculture, wealth, or literal childbirth, was tied directly into the presentation of the dynasty. Most especially this can be found with their queens: artistic depictions of those like Arsinoe II and Berenice II are often paired with overflowing cornucopias, and the royal ladies of the household were patrons of festivals and temples dedicated to the goddess Aphrodite.⁴⁷ Dionysus also held a prominent position within the Ptolemaic pantheon given the sort of joyful abundance and pleasure that is associated with him.⁴⁸ The concept of royal excess and abundance could be a powerful propaganda tool to show the wealth and power of the dynasty.⁴⁹ Perhaps the most ostentatious example was the Grand Procession of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, which we discussed all the way back in episode 035. Hosted in the Alexandria, the parade was a cacophony of sights and sounds: artwork and exotic goods brought from all corners of the known world were carried by thousands of lavishly dressed attendants along with golden statues of the royal family, and a military parade with elephants and 80,000 troops.⁵⁰ The event cost an extraordinary 2300 talents, nearly a 1/3rd of the annual income of Athens at the height of its power in the 5th century, and this is without taking into consideration the actual value of the goods and treasure itself.⁵¹

Though not as prolific in their building program as their Seleucid neighbors, the Ptolemies were more than able to compensate by possessing Alexandria, almost universally regarded as the greatest city of the Hellenistic world. It was a spectacle of a city that captured the imagination of all who visited, staffed with technological wonders and monuments such as the great Lighthouse of Pharos. It certainly was the crown jewel of their collection, but cities bearing dynastic names like Ptolemais or Arsinoe were also founded in places like Libya, Ethiopia, and Syria. The reclamation of the Fayum Oasis (a subject of significant importance in the next episode) was an incredible engineering feat, one that rivaled the Seleucid transformation of North Syria.

The Lagids did not limit themselves to mere terra firma either, as they also possessed the greatest naval fleet of the 3rd century numbering at about 336 ships in the time of Ptolemy II. Building and maintaining a navy came at an enormous cost: never mind the salaries of the thousands of crewmembers, Egypt historically has needed to import timber at inflated rates since the landscape is devoid of great forests like those in either Macedonia or in nearby Lebanon and Cyprus. There are also two stand-out examples of waterborne craft serving the Ptolemaic image. The first is Cleopatra's "pleasure barge" which sailed up the Tarsus River in an elaborate display of silver and gold, presenting herself as the incarnation of

⁴⁶ Manning, J.G. *"The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC"* Pg. 134.

⁴⁷ An example of; Pomeroy, S.B. *"Women in Hellenistic Egypt: From Alexander to Cleopatra"* Pgs. 28-40

⁴⁸ J. Tondriau, *"La dynastie ptolémaïque et la religion dionysiaque"* ChrEg 50 (1950) Pgs. 283-316

⁴⁹ Ager, S.L. *"The Power of Excess: Royal Incest and the Ptolemaic Dynasty"* Anthropologica, 48 (2006), Pgs. 165-186

⁵⁰ An extensive account is recorded by Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 196a-203b

⁵¹ Cartledge, P., E.E. Cohen, and L. Foxhall. *"Money, Labour and Land: Approaches to the economies of ancient Greece"* (2002); Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 2.13

Aphrodite attended to by servants dressed up as other mythological figures, a sight quite shocking to a dumbstruck Mark Antony.⁵² Second is what is known as the *Tessarakonteres*: built in the reign of Ptolemy IV, this was easily the largest ship ever constructed in antiquity. From surviving descriptions, it was about 420 feet or 128 meters in length, about the equivalent of one and a half American football fields, with 4,000 rowers stationed on 40 rows of oars and staffed with an additional 3,000 sailors and troops.⁵³ Whether it was one large hull or two tied together, the ship's very size made it unsuitable for warfare and only for spectacle, but that was precisely the point.⁵⁴ The fact that the Ptolemies could pull off such an operation – possessing the necessary funds and having access to some of the greatest engineers and construction teams at the time – for a ship that had no military or economic purpose was proof of just how exceptional they were.

In some ways this abundance proved to be a bit of a double-edged sword when it came to the perception of the Ptolemies by the writers of antiquity, who often used these monarchs as the textbook examples of luxury leading to corruption and vice. Magas of Cyrene and Ptolemy VIII *Physkon* (literally “the Fatty”) were said to be so corpulent from overeating that they were almost incapable of walking on their own, and Plutarch describes Ptolemaic banquets of nearly unimaginable variety and size even for small gatherings.⁵⁵ Lust and ravenous sexual appetites were failures particularly associated with the Ptolemies. Cleopatra VII was famously vilified as a seductress of otherwise virtuous Roman men in the propaganda of Augustus Caesar and others, while Arsinoe II was said to have used her beauty and charm in order to wrap her several husbands around her finger, though not always successfully.⁵⁶ To a lesser extent the men were targets of this criticism as well: Ptolemy II especially was looked down upon by Athenaeus for having at least nine named mistresses, never mind the fact that it was under his direction that he introduced the concept of sibling incest into the monarchy by way of his marriage with Arsinoe II.⁵⁷ Like we talked about in episode 034, royal incest was probably instituted out of practicality rather than out of deviancy, and also functioned as a way to add a degree of “untouchability” and divinity to the dynasty.⁵⁸ But to the wider Greek world, this practice was the subject of scorn and mockery – one poet named Sotades allegedly had the audacity to attack Ptolemy and Arsinoe to their faces, and was promptly executed for his transgressions.⁵⁹

An emphasis on wealth by the ancient authors also obscures the martial ethos of the dynasty. When speaking about military matters, the Ptolemies do not engender the same image of militarism as their

⁵² Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, 26.1-3

⁵³ Plutarch, *Life of Demetrius*, 43.7; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 5.203e-204b; Pliny, *Natural History*, 7.208

⁵⁴ For a discussion on the *Tessarakonteres*, see Murray, W. “*The Age of Titans: The Rise and Fall of the Great Hellenistic Navies*” Pgs. 178-188

⁵⁵ Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, 28.1-4

⁵⁶ Pliny, *Natural History*, 9.119-21 blatantly calls her the “prostitute-queen”; Memnon, *History of Heracleia*, 5.3-6; Justin, *Epitome*, 24.2-3

⁵⁷ Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 13.576 e-f; Herodian, *History of the Roman Empire*, 1.3.3; Pausanias, *Guide to Greece*, 1.7.1; For the role and traditional accounts of the mistresses of the Ptolemies, see Ogden, D. “*Bilistiche and the Prominence of Courtesans in the Ptolemaic Tradition*” in “*Ptolemy II Philadelphus and his World*” Pgs. 353-385

⁵⁸ Ager, S.L. “*The Power of Excess: Royal Incest and the Ptolemaic Dynasty*” *Anthropologica*, 48 (2006), Pgs. 165-186; Gkikaki, M. “*The royal sibling marriage of Ptolemy II and Arsinoe II – incestuous and yet holy*” *HEPHAISTOS* (34); Bursaleis, K. “*The Problem of Ptolemaic Sibling Marriage: a Case of Dynastic Acculturation?*” in “*Ptolemy II Philadelphus and his World*” Pgs.291-302

⁵⁹ Plutarch, *Moralia*, 11A; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 14.620f-621a

Antigonid or Seleucid rivals. There just aren't as many examples of Ptolemaic kings personally taking command on the field of battle - though given the casualty rate of Hellenistic kings who died while on campaign, this may have ultimately worked to their overall stability.⁶⁰ Polybius is somewhat responsible for this view, painting Ptolemy IV as an ineffectual king against the backdrop of the contemporaries Philip V and Antiochus III, preferring the comforts of home rather than seeking glory from conquest.⁶¹

But it cannot be forgotten that their hold over Egypt and parts of the wider Hellenistic world was built and maintained on the back of a strong and well-funded military, and they were just as imperialistic as their rivals. A willingness to engage in six costly Syrian Wars was almost a rite of passage for any new Egyptian king, and Ptolemy III was so successful in his war against Seleucus II as to personally carry his army to the gates of Babylon itself.⁶² Ptolemy II launched a series of campaigns into Africa to subdue the Meroitic Kingdom of Kush, and established military bases along the Red Sea as distant as modern Somalia in order to secure a steady supply of war elephants.⁶³ For much of the 3rd century the eastern Mediterranean remained under the hegemony of the Egyptian fleet, the largest out of all the Hellenistic powers. Even a few of the queens played substantial roles in military engagements as well, at least when compared to their Hellenistic and Roman contemporaries. Cleopatra commanded some 60 vessels from her flagship the *Antonias* during the decisive Battle of Actium, and Arsinoe III was at least present alongside Ptolemy IV at the Egyptian battle line of Raphia.⁶⁴ There are also multiple mosaics of Berenice II showing her wearing a crown or headdress that is quite literally the prow of a warship, symbolizing the might of the Ptolemaic navy.⁶⁵ Militarism was not unique to the Greco-Macedonian kingship either. One only needs to look at the Narmer Palette or the reliefs of Ramesses to see celebratory examples of the pharaoh smiting his enemies throughout the ages.⁶⁶ In fact, there are many inscriptions written in hieroglyphic which celebrate Ptolemaic military campaigns while couched in terms and expressions that are very Egyptian.⁶⁷ The Raphia Decree, composed following Ptolemy IV's victory at Raphia in 217, emphasizes the king's role in recovering the gods of Egypt from the lands of Syria and beyond.⁶⁸ Such dedications stretched back to the time when Ptolemy I was still listed as a mere satrap, reflecting

⁶⁰ Grainger, J.D. "Kings & Kingship in the Hellenistic World, 350-30 BC" Pgs. 137-141; For comparison, see the Seleucids mortality rates: Walbank, F.W. "Monarchies and Monarchical Ideas" in "The Cambridge Ancient History 2nd Ed., Vol 7 Part 1" Pg. 63

⁶¹ Polybius, *The Histories*, 5.87.3; 5.34.9 emphasizes how Ptolemies I-III were more capable rulers given their willingness to maintain interests outside of Egypt, something their successors lacked.

⁶² Appian, *Syrian Wars*, 65; OGIS 54; Polyaeus, *Stratagems*, 8.50; BCHP 11

⁶³ For the Meroitic kingdom, see Török, L. "The Kingdom of Kush: Handbook of the Napatan-Meroitic Civilization"; For the problems of reconstructing the Nubian campaigns of both Ptolemy I and especially Ptolemy II, see Burstein, S.M. "Elephants for Ptolemy II: Ptolemaic Policy in Nubia in the Third Century BC" in "Ptolemy II Philadelphus and His World"; For Ptolemaic Elephant Hunting, see Casson, L. "Ptolemy II and the Hunting of African Elephants" Transactions of the American Philological Association (1974-2014), Vol. 123 pp. 247-260; Burstein, S.M. "Ivory and Ptolemaic Exploration of the Red Sea, the Missing Factor". *Topoi* 6 (1993), Fascicule2, pp. 799-807; Strabo, *Geography*, 16.4.7

⁶⁴ Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, 66.3-67.7; Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 50.32-33 is much more hostile to Cleopatra's role, accusing her of cowardice; Polybius, *The Histories*, 5.83

⁶⁵ Example: ([Link](#))

⁶⁶ The Narmer Palette, for instance ([Link](#))

⁶⁷ Quack, J.F. "Innovations in Ancient Egypt? Hieroglyphic Texts From the Time of Ptolemy Philadelphus" in "Ptolemy II Philadelphus and His World" Pgs. 281-282

⁶⁸ CM 31088 ([Translation](#));

themes and imagery that are nearly identical to Ramesses II's recounting of the Battle of Kadesh nearly 1,000 years before.⁶⁹

Though they are traditionally viewed as the last dynasty of Ancient Egypt, the success of the Ptolemies in adapting and perpetuating Egyptian culture and customs would form the template for the later Roman Emperors. Rulers like the Emperor Caracalla would continue to be portrayed in much the same manner as their Ptolemaic predecessors all the way down to Late Antiquity. The cult of Serapis and Isis would spread throughout the Roman world in military camps and in private homes – even the Emperor Vespasian sought to receive a blessing in the Serapeum while residing at Alexandria before embarking on the civil war of 69 AD.⁷⁰ For all their work, it must be remembered the practices of the Ptolemies were primarily intended to keep the peace while they sought their main pursuit: making money. It is here we will briefly leave off, and in the next episode we will continue our discussion and focus on the administration of the kingdom itself, in order to see how the Ptolemies oversaw the wealthiest state in the Hellenistic world.

⁶⁹ Ptolemy I Satrap Stelae ([Translation](#)); For an analysis, see Ockinga, B.G. "The Satrap Stele of Ptolemy: A Reassessment" in "Ptolemy I and the Transformation of Egypt" Pgs. 166-198

⁷⁰ Tacitus, *Histories*, 4.82

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