

Ancient Egypt: The Ptolemaic Period

The Ptolemaic period is so-called because at this time Egypt was ruled by a series of kings all named Ptolemy. The period began with the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great. On Alexander's death in 323 BC his empire was divided among his generals; Egypt fell to one named Ptolemy, who later declared himself king. Greek became the state language and the capital moved to the newly founded Alexandria. This city became one of the most important in the Hellenistic world.

The fusion of existing Egyptian culture and Hellenistic influences was designed to support the new administrative system imposed on the Egyptians and was completely intentional. The Ptolemies tried to stress their desire to support things 'Egyptian' and many temples were built during this period. The Egyptian gods, Osiris, Isis and Horus became symbolic of the ideal family but the cult of the goddess Isis was particularly popular, and spread outside Egypt.

Other aspects of art showed the new Hellenistic influence, both in clothing and the more realistic representation of facial features. This can be particularly seen in some of the coffins of the time, which were provided with mummy portraits. Literature flourished, focusing on the Library at Alexandria. It was at this time that Manetho composed his history of Egypt, and the tri-lingual decree was inscribed on the Rosetta Stone.