

# PTOLEMAIC EMPIRE



## Ptolemaic Empire (tall-ah-may-ick) 323-30 BCE

**Background** After conquering as far east as the Indus River valley, Alexander the Great returned to Babylon in today's Iraq, where he died in June 323 BCE. After his death, his generals fought among themselves for power, and his empire was split into three smaller empires: the Seleucid empire centered in what is now Iran and Iraq, the Antigonid monarchy centered in today's Macedonia and Greece, and the Ptolemaic empire centered in Egypt.

**Founding** Ptolemy, a former general of Alexander, led a force that got control of Egypt, perhaps the richest prize in Alexander's former empire. Ptolemy, and leaders who followed him, also gained control of the island of Cyprus and coastal lands of Anatolia and the Levant (today Syria, Lebanon, and Israel). During the 300 years of their reign, none of the Ptolemies spoke Egyptian except for

Cleopatra VII, the last one, who died in 30 BCE.

**Administration** The Ptolemies ran Egypt as though it were a private estate. Non-Egyptian soldiers (Greek, Macedonian, and Anatolian) were hired to fight their wars and keep the Egyptian subjects in line. Greeks had been in Egypt as traders for several centuries. Now they became part of a Greek ruling class, which excluded even upper-class Egyptians. The Ptolemy's divided their kingdom into provinces, each of which was subdivided into areas and villages. Because the Ptolemies' wanted to get as much wealth as they could from the kingdom, the financial administrator (the guy in charge of money, taxes, tribute, etc.) became very powerful. Pretty much anything you could tax was taxed—houses, goods people bought, goods they sold, farmlands, vineyards, orchards, and gardens.

Furthermore, licenses were required for fishing and trading as well as for keeping bees and pigs. In addition, the government controlled trade, mines, quarries, salt production, and any commodity which produced oil—linseed, safflower, and castor. They also increased the amount of land being farmed and improved irrigation to get more crops. Alexandria, on the Mediterranean, was the major Egyptian city and port. Founded by Alexander, it was the heart of the Ptolemaic administration. Its population was a mix of Greeks, Macedonians, Jews, and native Egyptians. It was one of the intellectual centers of the Hellenistic, that is, Greek-like cultural world. It was here that Ptolemy I, who collected scrolls, founded a great museum and library. Eventually, the library had some 500,000 scrolls. The Ptolemies recruited the best minds of the day, creating the first "think tank". It was

here where early discoveries were developed, like the idea that the sun was the center of the universe and the first accurate calculation of the earth's circumference. It was at Alexandria that Ptolemy I began construction of the gigantic Pharos lighthouse, which became one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

### Trade

Trade expanded under the Ptolemies. They brought in timber, metals, pitch, and wine from the lands they controlled along the Mediterranean Sea. In addition, they built roads from the Nile to new ports on the Red Sea. The new ports were designed to facilitate the importation of elephants, major military weapon in that era. These ports also brought in spices from the Arabian Peninsula and India.

### Religion

Although the Greeks brought their gods with them to Egypt, the Ptolemies carefully respected the traditional Egyptian gods. Ptolemy I became the Pharaoh, the god-king. He called himself Ptolemy I, Sotor, or Savior. After his death, his son Ptolemy II established a joint religious cult for his father and mother as savior gods. Cults were established for subsequent Ptolemaic rulers as well, sometimes even while they were alive. At death, the bodies of these Hellenistic pharaohs were mummified and buried in sarcophagi (coffins) covered with Egyptian hieroglyphs.

At the same time, those following other religions were not harassed. While the Ptolemies controlled Palestine, the Jews, for example, enjoyed a period of peace. Only under the vicious Ptolemy IV (221-203) were they persecuted.

### Decline/Fall

By 200 BCE, the glory days of the Ptolemaic Dynasty were fading. When facing a struggle in 217 with the Seleucid king, Antiochus III, the Ptolemies found themselves in financial trouble. They did not have enough money to hire soldiers from outside, so they had to arm some 200,000 Egyptian troops. The cost of the war led to increasing money problems and peasant unrest. Between 207 and 186 BCE, Upper Egypt broke away and was governed by separate Pharaohs of Nubian origin. The Ptolemies' lack of concern for the population, widespread corruption, civil unrest, a disastrous foreign policy, and near economic collapse contributed to the decline of the empire. It had no resources to ward off the growing power of Rome to the west. It is not surprising that the Roman Emperor, Octavian, seized Egypt from Cleopatra, the last of the Ptolemies, in 30 BCE.



Bust of Ptolemy I  
Louvre, Paris, France.



Ptolemy I on a silver coin.  
British Museum.

## EXPERT GROUP NOTE TRACKER: **PTOLEMAIC** EMPIRE

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Significant information about this empire related to this characteristic:</b>
Background/ location	
Founding	
Organization	
Religion	
Trade	
Decline/Fall	
Summary description / categorization of this empire	

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