

## **GREEK TOWNS IN EGYPT**

Long before the conquest of Alexander the Great, Greeks had come to Egypt as merchants, soldiers, and settlers during the era of the “Greek colonization” (seventh century B.C.). As a result, NAUCRATIS, in the Delta, was established under the Twenty-sixth Dynasty as a Greek town complete with the traditional set of *polis* (city) institutions and destined to focus and control Greek commercial activities in Egypt. It was to remain for a long time the only Hellenic town on Egyptian soil.

When Alexander conquered Egypt in 332 B.C., he founded the famous city bearing his name. Alexandria was to become, under Ptolemy I, the capital of Egypt (replacing Memphis), and the leading economic center of the eastern Mediterranean. Its organization included many of the [characteristic](#) features of a Greek *polis*, but as capital of the Ptolemies and, later on, as residence of the Roman prefect of Egypt, Alexandria was not free to develop full *polis* autonomy. Only in A.D. 200 did it recover its town council, probably abolished by Octavian (Augustus), but at that late stage the restitution of this body was no exceptional privilege because the nome metropolises were granted town councils at about the same time.

The Ptolemies, content to develop Egyptian resources and their own income along the lines of [pharaonic](#) traditions and Hellenistic planning, did nearly nothing to further the spread of *poleis* in Egypt. Ptolemy I founded only one Greek city commemorating his name, Ptolemais in Upper Egypt. His successors did not add a single Greek city, probably not wishing to establish more “autonomous” centers in a country where monarchic absolutism prevailed. After the conquest of Egypt by Octavian (Augustus) in 30 B.C., the Roman emperors maintained that tradition.

While protecting the “Greeks” (i.e., both native Greeks and those [Egyptians](#) who had joined their ranks through marriage and Hellenization) and their institutions, Roman authorities refrained from creating new *poleis*, with the one exception of the philhellene emperor

Hadrian. He founded the Greek city of ANTINOOPOLIS in Upper Egypt to honor the memory of his youthful companion Antinous, who had drowned in the Nile in A.D. 130. Except for these four *poleis* and for Paraetonium (but the latter's status is dubious; see below), there were no other Greek towns in Egypt.

This picture changed completely when, at the beginning of the third century, the emperor Septimius Severus accorded the privilege of the town council not only to Alexandria but also to the metropoles (nome capitals). In the past, the latter had gradually developed several features typical of Greek towns, such as magistracies and *gymnasia* (schools). In 200 they became *poleis* in the Hellenic sense, complete with a set of town institutions, but without proper autonomy. This evolution was taken one step further when the reforms of DIOCLETIAN, beginning about 296, transformed the metropoles into *poleis (civitates)* and established the nomes as the *enoria (territorium)* of these new cities. These measures definitively blurred the distinction between the old Greek towns of Egypt (which had long protected their privileged status, exerting a careful control on the bestowal of citizen rights) and the metropoles.

In the past, the latter had been considered as mere villages (*komai*), technically speaking, notwithstanding the central functions of the nome capitals in religious, administrative, and economic respects. At the same time, the overall establishment of *civitates* and *territoria* in Egypt by Diocletian contributed to the leveling of differences between that country and the other provinces of the later Roman Empire. But [perhaps](#) the most important conclusion to be drawn from the evolution of the Greek towns in Egypt is the gradual dissolution of "pure" Hellenism in Roman Egypt, paralleled by the fading away of the old traditions of native Egypt and the rise of a new, late antique Egyptian civilization with its typical blend of Christian and pagan, of Greek and Egyptian elements.

## **Naucratis Ναύκρατις (modern Kom Gu'aif)**

A colony of Ionian Miletus, founded [perhaps](#) in the mid seventh century in the Saite nome on the Canopic Branch, Naucratis was a flourishing center in the [archaic](#) and classical periods. It lived on as a Greek *polis* throughout Ptolemaic and Roman times but was overshadowed by the not-so-distant Alexandria. Naucratis preserved its purely Hellenic character, intermarriage with [Egyptians](#) being still considered illegal in the second century A.D.



Seated sphinx plate, Eastern Greek Orientalizing, 6th century BC, from Naukratis

## **Alexandria**

The town was officially styled as a separate entity, Alexandria ad Aegyptum. When Alexandria was conquered by Octavian in 30 B.C., its town council was abolished (or had already been abolished under the last Ptolemies). Notwithstanding the efforts of Alexandrian Greeks to recover

that symbol of *polis* status, the Roman emperors, such as Claudius (A.D. 41-54), refused to cede on that point. But Alexandria did have a wide range of municipal institutions and magistracies, among which were the *exegetes*, *gymnasiarchos*, *kosmetes*, *eutheniarchos*, and *agoranomos*. A distinctive feature of polis organization was the subdivision of Alexandria's citizen corps into tribes (*phylai*) and demes (*demoi*). As a privilege, the Alexandrians were exempted from the [poll](#) tax (*laographia*) and from [liturgies](#) in the Egyptian chora (on the Alexandrian *chora*, cf. Jähne, 1981). Besides its citizen population, Alexandria was inhabited by people of very different provenance.



Alexander The Great

Apart from the native Egyptians, whose influx into the town was checked,

sometimes brutally, by the Roman authorities, the largest segment of the non-Greek population was made up of [Jews](#) who had come, or had been brought, to Alexandria since the beginning of Ptolemaic times. Like other nationalities, the Alexandrian Jews had their own civic community (*politeuma*), complete with a council of elders (*gerousia*), presided over by an *ethnarch*, with tribunals and archives. The Jewish drive to obtain full parity with the Alexandrian Greeks led to severe tensions and occasionally to savage killing during the first and second centuries A.D. During his visit to Egypt in A.D. 200, the emperor Septimius Severus conceded a town council to the Alexandrians, thus satisfying their perennial request. Excavators have discovered a building with ranges of well-preserved seats (the so-called small theater), which may [perhaps](#) be identified as the hall of the town council (cf. Balty, 1983; see also ALEXANDRIA IN LATE ANTIQUITY).



Roman Amphitheater of Alexandria

## **Paraetonium (modern Marsa Matruh)**

In the nome of Libya, Paraetonium was first mentioned in the period of Alexander the Great, and it ranked in Roman times as a privileged, [perhaps](#) Greek town (cf. Jones, 1971, pp. 305f.). One of the few harbors between Cyrenaica and Alexandria, Paraetonium served as the obvious starting place for the journey to the desert oracle of Zeus Ammonios in the oasis of Siwa, which was much frequented by Greeks from Greece and the Aegean.

Hence the name of Ammonia equally can be attested for Paraetonium. The place had an important garrison, blocking the access to Egypt from the west. As a consequence of Diocletian's reforms, Paraetonium belonged to the newly created province of Libya Inferior and served as its capital. Under Justinian it was the residence of the *dux limitis Libyci* (general of the Libyan border). In 325, Paraetonium is mentioned as the see of a bishop (Roques, 1987, pp. 110f.).



Marsa Matruh old watch tower

### **Ptolemais he Hermeiou (modern al-Mansah)**

Ptolemais was founded by Ptolemy I Soter, and as the southernmost Greek city in Egypt, it established Greek presence and Ptolemaic control (by way of the *strategos* [general] and other royal officials) in Upper Egypt, where native traditions and opposition to Alexandria and foreign domination were especially strong. Ptolemais had a town council, a board of *prytaneis* (leaders of tribes), and the usual set of municipal magistrates, but it stood, like the other Greek towns, under overall Roman supervision. There are some Greek inscriptions illustrating civic life and Hellenic culture at Ptolemais during the Ptolemaic period (Dittenberger, 1903, nos. 47-52), but the source material for Roman

Ptolemais is rather meager, compared with that of Antinoopolis.

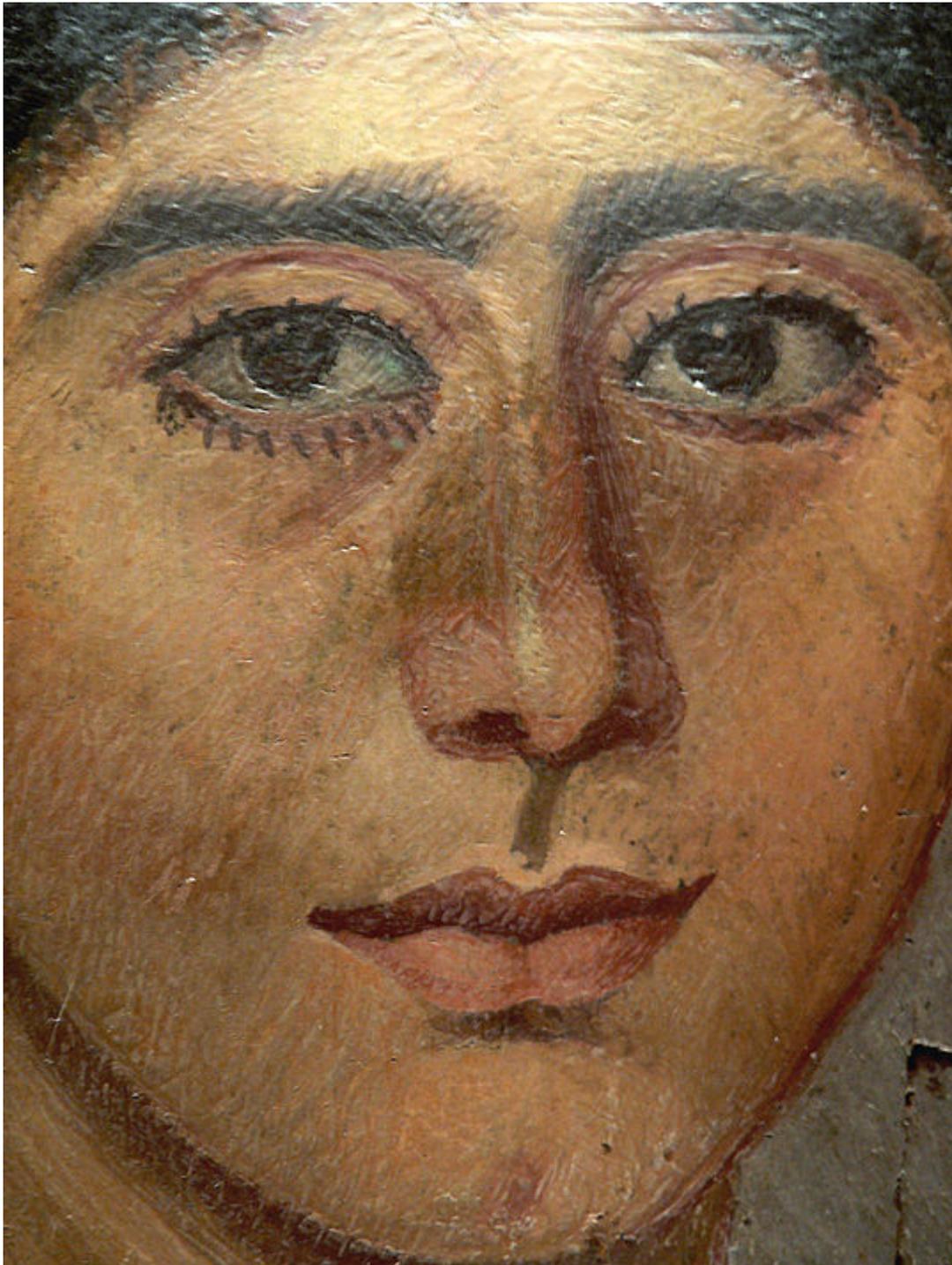
We learn about the maintenance of civic and religious institutions, even detectable in the fact that in Roman times many people still gave their sons the name Ptolemaios or Soter, thus commemorating the Ptolemaic founder of their town. The carefully nurtured traditions of Greek paganism were certainly responsible for the resistance to Christianity in later Roman Ptolemais. The town thus did not become the see of a bishop, this role being assumed by neighboring This. Ptolemais seems to have been destroyed in the course of the Arab conquest.

### **Antinoopolis (modern Ansina) Ἀντινόου, Ⲁⲛⲧⲓⲛⲟⲟⲓⲥ**

In A.D. 130 Hadrian founded Antinoopolis on the east side of the Nile, facing Hermopolis Magna (modern al-Ashmunayn), in Upper Egypt. The city was in most respects a purely Greek town. Antinoopolis had a Hellenistic layout, with streets intersecting at right angles, the main streets being adorned with colonnades still visible in the days of Napoleon's Egyptian expedition. The constitution was framed on that of Naucratis, a stark reminder of the longevity and strength of Greek civic institutions in the midst of the very different patterns of Egyptian traditions and of both Ptolemaic and Roman monarchic rule. The colonists were attracted from Ptolemais, but also from the Greek or Hellenized classes in the Arsinoites and from veterans of the Roman army.

Many of these had long since mingled with the Egyptian population. It was easier to defend and spread Greek civilization than to preserve racial purity. As a consequence, and contrary to the laws of Naucratis, the citizens of Antinoopolis were given the right to marry Egyptians (*epigamia*), many of whom lived in that town without being part of the citizen corps. The Greek community of Antinoopolis was divided into tribes and demes, and from their ranks were recruited the members of the town council and the municipal magistrates. As a consequence of Diocletian's reforms, the special status of Antinoopolis as a Greek town

lost much of its significance, but the city [perhaps](#) increased its importance by becoming the seat of the *dux* of the Thebaid. The sixth-century advocate and poet DIOSCORUS OF APHRODITO, fluent in Greek and Coptic as well as Latin, was a remarkable exponent of the Greco-Coptic society of late antique Egypt.



## Mummy portrait in encaustic from Antinoopolis

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