

The Hellenistic Era

There is an agreement among historians to name the period which spans four centuries before the birth of Christ, the Hellenistic Era. It was a time when the cultures of Greece and the ancient Near East intermingled.

The word “hellenistic” has its root in the ancient Greek word *hellen*, which means “Greek”, and *esti*, which means “of the east”. The Hellenistic Era starts with the defeat of the Persian ruler Darius III at the Battle of Issus in October 333 BCE at the hands of Alexander of Macedon. Alexander arrived at the border-fortress Pelusium (currently Baluza or Tell el-Farama, in Northwest Sinai, 30 km southeast of modern Port Said, and from there he marched to Memphis (currently Mit Rahina). There, he was well-received by the people thanks to his reputation of being a man of ethics, who showed due respect to the gods of ancient Egypt and their rituals. He was declared pharaoh at the oracle temple of Amun in Siwa, and thus became a son of the god Amun.

On his way to Siwa, while on the coast of the Mediterranean, he noticed a piece of land which enticed him to build a capital for his empire in the east. Alexander died in 323 CE, yet his short life was a turning point in history. The Persian Empire collapsed and capitulated to the Macedonian generals. Following the death of their leader, they endeavored to spread the Greek language and culture in his honor, in order to unite the various peoples in the vast territories they invaded. They soon started to build cities based on Greek architectural lines and invite various scholars, scientists, thinkers, administrators, economists, and artists as well as craftsmen to settle in the new territories, particularly Alexandria.

Thus, starts the commixture between the different civilizations and cultures. The new settlers in Egypt looked upon it as an extension of Mother Greece, while they admired the Egyptian civilization and its beliefs. They merged their thoughts and images, sometimes portraying themselves as Egyptians and at other times as Greeks.

Alexandria became the mother city and the beacon of the Hellenistic world. It attracted the scientists and philosophers of Athens and the scholars from the Nile Valley where the temples and Egyptian priests were the repository of learning in that country. The Greeks endeavored to integrate aesthetics with everyday life. Their architecture is functional in its structure. In sculpture, the image has to convey a sportive form. Engineering is not divorced from beauty, and beauty is a form of wisdom which is philosophy. Life and knowledge were precisely defined by the Greeks.

Away from Alexandria and on the shore of one of the greatest rivers in the world, another civilization flourished, namely the ancient Egyptian civilization. Here, death was sanctified instead of life. Life was venerated for the sake of death, as death was the only way which led to the hereafter or the eternal life in the other world. The thought of eternity was the axis around which life in all its myriad details revolved and the intellectual and artistic heritage as evidenced in the major and minor arts.

The Greek and Egyptian civilizations complemented each other, and that integration took form on the new spot on the Mediterranean which Alexander of



Macedon had chosen to be perhaps the capital of his new empire, but which fate did not permit him to set its boundaries as he was hoping.

It fell upon Ptolemy, one of the most intelligent generals of Alexander, to realize the dream of his leader of setting up rule in Egypt. The Ptolemaic Era commences with that ruler who was called the Savior (Soter). Alexandria was built by the hands of the best Greek architects, and it was he who conceived and founded the Library of Alexandria. Demetrius of Phaleron (Aristotle's student) was its organizer and it was patronized by Ptolemy's successors.

The Ptolemaic rule was strongest during the reign of its first kings. However, it gradually weakened until it fell into the hands of the Romans after more than three centuries which saw Egypt flourish in the fields of science, economics, commerce, industry and learning.

A conflict arose between Ptolemy XIII and his sister Cleopatra VII which led to the demise of the dynasty. The conflict incited a civil war, which was mediated and brought to an end by Julius Caesar in Rome. The ambitious Cleopatra seduced Julius Caesar to ensure her grip on the throne. However, following his assassination, Rome looked at her askance, particularly when she aligned herself with Mark Antony, when Octavian was the legal heir to the throne. Octavian ensured the elimination of his rivals by using the famous Roman motto "divide and conquer". He managed to grow the rift between the Roman Senate and Queen Cleopatra by claiming that she wanted to rule Rome from Egypt evidenced by her alliance with Mark Antony who no longer won the respect of the Senate.

In order to bring matters to a close, Octavian led a naval battle against Mark Antony and Cleopatra at Actium in 31 BCE, which he won. The defeat led Mark Antony to commit suicide, and soon after, Cleopatra followed his footsteps, as she abhorred the idea of being dragged to Rome and displayed to the mob in humiliation.

