EGYT 1550
Ethnic Identity in Graeco-Roman Egypt

Instructor: Dr. Rachel Mairs
Tu Th 9am – 10.20am
Sayles Hall 012
EGYT1550 Ethnic Identity in Graeco-Roman Egypt

Egypt under Greek and Roman rule was the original ‘multicultural society’, with communities of Egyptians, Greeks, Jews, Romans, Nubians, Arabs and even Indians. This course will explore the sometimes controversial subject of ethnic identity in Egypt ‘after the Pharaohs’, through a focus on the everyday lives of individual people and communities. Topics will include:

- multilingualism;
- ethnic conflict and discrimination;
- gender and intermarriage;

Evidence will be drawn from ancient texts on papyrus as well as recent archaeological excavations.

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Week 1: History and Geography

- In-class quiz, 7 Feb (map exercise and multiple choice history questions).
- Read an outline of the history of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt (see syllabus for suggestions).
Egypt ‘after the Pharaohs’:

Conquests by Alexander the Great (322 BC), the Romans (30 BC) and the Arabs (AD 641)
‘Pharaoh Alexander’
‘Pharaoh Alexander’
The Oracle of Ammon, Siwa, 331 BC
Alexander at the temple of Karnak (Thebes)
‘Pharaoh Alexander’

Full, traditional Egyptian list of royal titles (stp n Ra ‘chosen one of Ra’, mry Imn ‘beloved of Ammon’, etc.), but with ‘Alexandros’ transliterated from Greek alphabet into hieroglyphs.
The Decree of Memphis (‘Rosetta Stone’): Ptolemy IV, 218 BC
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Ptolemy IV, 218 BC
CLEOPATRA, daughter of Nectanebo II of Egypt, mother of Ptolemy Auletes, and sister of Ptolemy the Younger, was a Macedonian princess. She is best known for her role in the Battle of Actium and her long-standing relationship with Julius Caesar.

CLAUDIA, daughter of Cleopatra Phila, was a Greek princess from the Nile Delta.
Callimachus (c. 310-240 BC)

- Greek critic and poet, from Cyrene on the Mediterranean coast of Libya, which at that time was under Ptolemaic rule.
- Lived in Alexandria during the reigns of Ptolemy II Philadelphos (‘sibling-loving’) and Ptolemy III Euergetes (‘the benefactor’).
- Wrote a survey of the books contained in the Library of Alexandria (now lost).
- Favoured short, epigrammatic verses and coined the famous Greek saying ‘mega biblion, mega kakon’ (‘big book, big evil’).
Theocritus (early-mid third century BC)

- Greek poet from Sicily.
- Lived in Alexandria for a time in the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphos.
- Wrote longer verses: hymns, dialogues, etc.
- Was very, very complimentary about the Ptolemies.
Theocritus and the Ptolemies

*Theogony* ll. 79-88, “From Zeus come kings; nothing is more divine than the lords of Zeus. And so you chose them as your own portion. You gave them cities to guard, and you seat yourself in the high point of cities, overseer of those who rule their people with crooked judgements, and those who rule otherwise. You have given flowing wealth to them and abundant prosperity. It is reasonable to judge by our king; for he has far exceeded the rest. At evening he accomplishes what he thinks of in the morning. At evening the greatest things, the lesser as soon as he thinks of them.”

*Hymn to Zeus* ll. 1-8, “From Zeus let us being, and at Zeus, best of the immortals, let us cease, Muses, whenever we hold forth in song; but of men let Ptolemy be spoken of first and last and in etween, for he is the most distinguished of men. Heroes, who of old came from demigods, when they accomplished fair deeds hit upon skilled songsters, but I know how to praise and would sing of Ptolemy.”

*Encomium of Ptolemy Philadelphos* ll. 13-15, “In lineage such a man to accomplish a great deed was Ptolemy, son of Lagos, when he stored up in his heart a plan that no other man could have devised.”
Sotades (early-mid third century BC)

- Greek poet from Maroneia (could be either Thrace or Crete).
- Lived in Alexandria during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphos.
- Wrote obscene satirical poems.
- Made the mistake of lampooning Philadelphos’ marriage to his sister, Arsinoe: “You’re sticking your prick in an unholy hole.”
- He was imprisoned, escaped, was tracked down by Ptolemy’s admiral, shut up in a chest made of lead, and thrown into the sea.
- For obvious reasons, few quotations from his work survive.
The Ptolemies and Rome

- Egypt was the last of the Hellenistic kingdoms to fall to Rome (leaving out the Hellenistic states in Bactria and India…).

- But Rome had long exercised great control over the external and internal affairs of the Ptolemaic kingdom:

  - Diplomatic contacts went back as far as the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphos.

  - Ptolemaic Egypt stayed friendly with Rome during the Roman wars with Carthage.

  - But a patron-client relationship begins to develop in the second century BC, with Rome as the most powerful party.

  - Rome got involved in Ptolemaic dynastic struggles; Ptolemaic kings (e.g. Ptol. VI Philometor) might even go to Rome to solicit Roman help.

  - Rome protected Egypt from Seleucid Syria in the Sixth Syrian War (ended 168 BC).

  - Cleopatra VII Philopator (reigned 69-30 BC) maintained some degree of Egyptian independence throughout her relationships with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, but following the Battle of Actium in 30 BC, Egypt became a Roman province.
For centuries they hadn’t seen gifts at Delphi as wonderful as those sent by the two brothers, the rival Ptolemaic kings. But now that they have them, the priests are nervous about the oracle. They’ll need all their experience to decide how to express it tactfully, which of the two—of two brothers like these—will have to be offended. And so they meet secretly at night to discuss the family affairs of the Lagids.

But suddenly the envoys are back. They’re taking their leave. Returning to Alexandria, they say. And they don’t ask for an oracle at all. The priests are delighted to hear it (they’re to keep the marvelous gifts, that goes without saying) but they’re also completely bewildered, having no idea what this sudden indifference means. They do not know that yesterday the envoys heard serious news: the “oracle” was pronounced in Rome; the partition was decided there.
The Roman Empire under Augustus
Pharaoh Augustus
27 BC – AD 14

Temple of Kalabsha, Lower Nubia
Pharaoh Augustus

Temple of Dendur, Lower Nubia, now in Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Roman Aegyptus
Roman Egypt: Some key dates

- 30 BC, Battle of Actium, Egypt becomes a Roman province.
- AD 212, Emperor Caracalla extends Roman citizenship to all inhabitants of the empire.
- Reign of Constantine (AD 306-337): end of official persecution of Christianity, division of Roman Empire into East and West (‘Byzantine Egypt’).
- AD 641, Arab conquest.
Equestrian officials, Roman government appointments.

Graeco-Egyptians, government appointments.

Local executive magistrates, 'elected' or co-opted.

Officials appointed to compulsory public services.

Figures showing executive structure of Roman Graeco-Egyptian metropolises, the Government of Roman Egypt.
Roman Mining

Mons Claudianus (building stone)
Roman Mining

Mons Porphyrites (porphyry)

Porphyry dish, Begram, Afghanistan (first century AD)
El Kanais
Trade with India
Communities in the Oases

Kellis, Dakhla Oasis
Further Reading


Wiki:

http://proteus.brown.edu/ethnicidentity12/Home

(pwd: ethnicity12)

Office hours:

Rhode Island Hall 202, Tues 2-3pm, Thurs 11am-12pm, or by appointment.

Questions?

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